

# **The Role and Effectiveness of Parish Councils in Gloucestershire:**

Adapting to New Modes of  
Rural Community Governance

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines the changing roles of rural parish councils in the context of the Government White Paper on Rural England (DEFRA, November 2000). This suggested that new responsibilities should be given to Parish Councils within rural policy and planning frameworks. Concepts such as 'Partnership', 'Parish Plans' and 'Quality Parish Councils' were mooted as possible vehicles to promote greater community participation and increased local 'empowerment' in the governance of rural communities. The proposals for parish councils are part of a new 'integrated approach' to rural planning which seeks to combine the state and voluntary sectors through the ideals of partnership.

The research examines the appropriateness and willingness of parish councils in Gloucestershire to fulfill the new responsibilities set down in the Rural White Paper and the key they have as 'agents' of government. It explores and assesses how far they have adjusted to the new forms of governance set out by the White Paper, and considers how they have adapted alongside greater voluntary and community activity, focussing in particular on the new forms of partnership distributed across the countryside.

The research found that the effectiveness of parish councils in Gloucestershire is extremely varied and often piecemeal in nature, influenced by a wide variety of social, economic and geographical factors. Both individual decisions and wider structural

factors, including the opportunities provided by self-interest, influence the variations in the type and level of participation in community leadership.

In Gloucestershire, the emergence of new organisations and actors in rural community governance has generated only a *moderate* shift in the way parish councils operate. Parish councils consider that they have very little influence in the broader sphere of rural governance structures. Recent government legislation regarding community involvement, partnership and participation has been slow to filter down to a large number of parish councils in the county.

The geography of partnership initiatives across the UK has emerged as a very uneven map of rural governance. This “map” is mirrored in the incidence of effective partnerships within rural politics in Gloucestershire. Indeed the complex nature of participation in community governance and leadership revealed by the research confirms the need for further examination of the shift from “joined up” to “joining up” partnerships, and the incidence of partnership marginalisation felt across many parish councils in the county.

Some signposts for future research are also identified.

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 - Research Context

English parish councils have long been established in the process of local rural decision making. Although members are accountable at a local level, it has been suggested that the withdrawal of state services and the promotion of active-citizenship and community participation (Kearns 1992) have encouraged elite groups to colonize local politics and to pursue their own ideas of rural community life (Clope & Goodwin 1992; Philips 1994). Since it has been suggested that parish councils should be given greater powers of local governance it is timely to examine them in the light of these concerns.

Little is actually known about the role and effectiveness of parish councils. To date, studies of rural planning have mainly focussed on either state-led initiatives ('top down') or voluntary action ('bottom up'). Whilst state led initiatives have been criticized for their inflexibility (Clope, 2003), voluntary action is widely perceived as piecemeal and ineffective (McLaughlin, 1987). Both approaches have been shown to favour the interests of local and national elite's (Clope & Little, 1997).

This thesis examines the changing roles of rural parish councils in the context of the Government White Paper on Rural England (DEFRA, November 2000). This suggested that new responsibilities should be given to parish councils within rural policy and planning frameworks. Concepts such as 'Partnership', 'Parish Plans' and 'Quality Parish Councils' were mooted as possible vehicles to promote greater community participation and increased local 'empowerment' in the governance of

rural communities. The proposals for parish councils are part of a new 'integrated approach' to rural planning which seeks to combine the state and voluntary sectors through the ideals of partnership.

## **1.2 - Research Aims**

The aims of the research are as follows:

1. To examine the appropriateness and willingness of parish councils in Gloucestershire to fulfill the new responsibilities set down in the Rural White Paper.
2. To examine the key role that parish councils have as 'agents' of government and explore and assess how far they have adjusted to the new forms of governance set out by the White Paper.
3. Consider how councils have adapted alongside greater voluntary and community activity, focussing in particular on the new forms of partnership distributed across the countryside.
4. More specifically the study examines:
  - the changing perception of roles for Parish Councils.
  - the issues facing councils in today's countryside
  - levels of community participation, partnership and involvement
  - attitudes to current rural governance legislation and the differing tiers of the rural governance structure
  - the future for parish councils as seen through the eyes of the council members themselves.

The thesis explores these within a conceptual framework informed by theories of partnership and local actor network theory. In doing so, the research contributes to our understanding of the changing nature of governance in rural areas and provides signposts for future research.

### **1.3 - Structure of Thesis**

#### *Context*

During the last 15 years or so the concept of rural governance has gained widespread currency within contemporary rural geography. Traditionally conceptualised as one facet of Philo's (1992:193) "neglected rural geographies", the issues of integration, participation and empowerment within rural politics have now been resurrected from the "quiet backwater" (Woods 1997) of empirical geographical academia.

#### *Literature Review*

Chapters 2 and 3 set out to explore the *relatively* recent profusion of governance literature in geography and related disciplines and evaluates the relative successes and shortcomings of the application of theories of rural governance to twenty-first century parish politics. Particular emphasis will be placed on partnership and Local Actor modes of rural governance. Chapter 3 also explores current policy issues in rural planning and development, the current role of parish councils, and a range of relevant concepts associated with rural governance in order to develop a suitable conceptual framework to inform the research.

An extensive examination of the issues surrounding this relatively new discourse helps to identify and delineate some key frameworks within which to place a study of the role and effectiveness of Parish Councils in Gloucestershire. The study uses the 2000 Government White Paper as its benchmark.

### *Parish Councils in England*

Chapter 4 serves two purposes. Firstly it examines the historical evolution of parish councils in England and their changing roles over time. Secondly it introduces the study area of Gloucestershire and provides the rationale for choosing the county as the case study.

### *Methodology*

An extensive survey was made of parish councils within Gloucestershire. This county was deemed suitable for study because it allowed a wide range of rural environments, cultures and socio-economic circumstances to be examined. All 262 rural parishes were surveyed using a postal questionnaire (see Appendix 1). The survey was sent to the Parish Clerk of each council who would canvass the opinion of the entire parish council. There were several parts to the survey. It sought factual background information about the Councils (demography, composition, locality etc.) and examined perceptions and opinions of the role of parish councils as seen from the councils' viewpoint. It attempted to canvass opinion and attitudes (amongst other things) toward the Rural White Paper, opinions concerning the training of councillors, the changing function of parish councils in their locality, attitudes toward funding, the shifting power structures and domination of councils.

The research then proceeded to a more in-depth analysis of selected parish councils. The aim of this stage was to yield the information necessary to analyse local actor networks and regulatory mechanisms operating through and on parish councils. The data gathered at the survey stage were used to provide a sample framework to choose ten contrasting parishes to provide more detailed information to help supplement survey results. When making this choice, consideration was given to a range of factors, including, the parish's geographic location and size, its social make up, the social and political composition of the parish council; and the attitudes expressed by the councils at the survey stage. In these case studies, increased emphasis was placed on examining the daily running of the parish council. Qualitative methods and analyses were used in this stage, including semi structured interviews with councillors and other parish residents and non-participant observations of selected parish meetings. Details of the methods employed are presented in Chapter 5.

### *Analysis & Interpretation*

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 explore in detail the main findings from the parish survey and from the parish clerk interviews.

Following a brief exploration of the demography and social composition of the parish councils, the main body of the interpretation develops and explores the following themes: the changing perception of roles for parish councils; the issues facing councils in today's countryside; an assessment of how well parish councils in Gloucestershire have adapted to changing modes of rural governance, levels of community participation and involvement; attitudes to current rural governance legislation and the differing tiers of the rural governance structure, and the future for

parish councils through the eyes of the council members themselves. It attempts to place a conceptual framework around the empirical evidence, focussing in particular on Partnership and Local Actor Network modes of governance. Finally, the chapter draws some defining conclusions from the survey and suggestions for areas of further research.

### *Conclusions*

Chapter 9 draws together the findings from the two phases of investigation (structured survey and parish clerk interview/observations at meetings) alongside other supplementary data. A number of conclusions about contemporary community participation within the parish councils of Gloucestershire, and their role and effectiveness against the backdrop of current rural governance legislation, are presented. Possible signposts for future research avenues into aspects of rural governance are provided.



## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW I: RURAL GOVERNANCE

### *Introduction*

This chapter explores the recent profusion of governance literature within Geography and cognate disciplines, and evaluates the relative successes and shortcomings of the application of theories of rural governance to the real world. An examination of the issues surrounding this relatively new discourse helps to identify and delineate some key frameworks within which to place a study of the role and effectiveness of Parish Councils in Gloucestershire.

**Section 2.1** first provides a backdrop to the exploration of the theories behind rural planning and decision making by examining the definition of governance as opposed to government. It then goes on to explore the evolution and development of rural governance research, placing it firmly within a defined historical chronology. **Section 2.2** critically evaluates the changing paradigms in which theories of rural governance have been placed.

### **2.1 – Definition & Chronology**

#### *Defining Governance*

Before exploring the historical chronology behind the development of the theoretical paradigms that shaped geographic thinking regarding rural governance, it is perhaps useful first to discuss what is meant by the term 'governance'. Academics such as Newby (1985), Philo (1992), Cloke *et al* (1995), Jessop (1995), Marsden (1998),

Goodwin (1998), Little (2001) and Woods *et al* (2005) have all discussed the pitfalls of determining such a definition. Perhaps the most concise perspective is that given by Stoker (1996) and subsequently advocated by Goodwin (1998) in his overview of emerging research issues and agendas surrounding the governance of rural society.

Stoker believes that in order for a governance perspective to be effective in modern rural society there is a need to identify “important questions” about different aspects of rural governance. Stoker neatly conceptualises five major propositions, which casts light on the differing aspects of rural governance. Firstly Stoker claims that governance refers to a complex set of institutions and ‘actors’ that are drawn from but also beyond government. This perspective has obvious limitations which are explored in more detail in Tewdwr Jones’ (1997) analysis of community councils in mid Wales and by Woods (1997) study of the opposition surrounding the ban on stag hunting in the Somerset village of Taunton Deane. This first definition openly challenges the spatial distribution of power within modern local governance. It recognises the complexities or as Goodwin (1998) terms it the “messiness” of legitimacy and power. This lies at the centre of the current debate surrounding devolved and central government. With so many agencies, partnerships and hierarchical quasi-governmental bodies dominating the British countryside, it becomes very difficult to determine any ordered elected system of governance. Issues of legitimacy and accountability are called into question as what Central Government can be seen to be giving with one hand it is taking away with the other. These aspects of governance, according to Philo (1992:200) will “always provide an effective cloak of legitimacy”.

The second of Stoker's propositions identifies the blurring of boundaries and responsibilities for tackling social and economic issues in the countryside. It recognises the shifting distribution of power away from the public sector toward the private concern or civil society (Marsden and Murdoch, 1996). The mushrooming of 'responsible corporations' in the guise of third sector agencies and voluntary partnerships now provides a wide range of services such as housing, social and community care, emptying dustbins, environmental planning and an emerging 'social economy'. What was once the domain of state provision is now being performed by a tangled hierarchy of private sector concerns and voluntary non-profit making organisations. Studies concerning the effectiveness of this medium of public provision have been carried out by such academics as Philo (1992), Marsden *et al* (1996) and Little (2001). Tricker (1993) draws on a series of evaluations of experimental initiatives such as LEADER II, Rural Action and the Peak District Integrated Rural Development Project. Such apparently low risk, low cost initiatives have, however, considerable scope for blame and scapegoating according to Stoker. The situation can sometimes break down, as an 'endless circle' of responsibility can never quite be closed. Consequently, no one really knows who to apportion blame to if things start going wrong. This raises questions over the effectiveness of delivery of these services to the public arena and more importantly how rural areas should react to these new systems of governance.

Stoker's third perspective emphasises the power dependency in the relationship between institutions and the requirement for effective collective action. Inevitably, with such a myriad of vested concerns involved in the processes of governance, decision making can often lack co-ordination or direction. No single actor, public or

private, has the casting vote or sufficient knowledge and experience to take ultimate responsibility. Stoker emphasises the inherent interactivity of governance and the dangers of too much dependency between institutions. Shared goals and agendas are often difficult to achieve in the absence of coherent collective action. This invariably leads to disillusionment and fragmentation as vested interests realise the difficulties of achieving their agendas (Marsden and Murdoch 1996; Woods 1997).

The fourth proposition sees governance as an autonomous self-governing network of 'actors'. This aspect of local governance is closely tailored to the urban-based Regime Theory advocated by academics such as Boyer (1990) and Ward and McNicholas (1998). The emphasis here lies with the collusion and coalition of a variety of local interests and elite's who have a common social, economic or political agenda. The network is driven by self-interest, almost like a monopoly or in its more societal manifestation, a co-operative. These relationships are often characterised by informal partnerships which "surround and support" the official workings of local government. These local 'actors' seek "collective arrangements that will promote their locality in an increasingly competitive global economy" (Goodwin 1998:21)

Much literature has been formulated regarding the legitimacy and accountability surrounding these collusive elitist bodies. Ostrum (1990) examines their impact on the control of small-scale agrarian and fishing communities in Scandinavia, whilst Jessop (1997) prefers a macro-structural approach to the mechanisms of urban regimes. All these studies have a commonality though – all are concerned with the glaring paradox between the self-interest of a local elite and the broader overarching structures, which should be in place to deliver services for the public.

Stoker's final perspective concentrates on the 'steer and guide' capacity of central government. This approach recognises that centralised bureaucracy is not the most expeditious vehicle to 'get things done', and in essence should only be used to guide local government in the right direction. Murdoch and Abram (1997:82) have called this the "dominant strategic line" and have highlighted some of the obvious shortcomings of such an approach. They examine the construction of such a 'line' in the realms of the housing field and show that calculations of housing demand flow from central to local government. In the process they tend to sideline local views of development. This approach recognises the capacity of central government to reinvent itself and to develop a role deemed for management and steerage – often commentators have referred to this as the emergence of an "enabling government" (Jessop 1995). The job of the state is to identify stakeholders and local interest lobbies/elite's and to develop effective 'linkages' between state and local government in order to seek out new opportunities. Moreover, as Stoker makes clear, even where government successfully identifies partnerships between these two realms, an effective system of governance can still fragment when tensions and differences manifest amongst vested interest groups.

The questions posed by Stoker's attempts at defining what constitutes "governance" clearly offers a useful framework from which to conduct a closer examination of the various theories of governance contained within the literature, and offers a strong foundation on which to develop further rural research.

The complex nature of contemporary rural governance is inextricably linked to the widespread social, political and economic forces that had reshaped the late twentieth century British countryside. It represents a marked shift away from issues of government to issues of governance which have completely redefined 'the institutional map of rural government'. Until relatively recently there has been an "increasingly noticeable silence" at the centre of contemporary studies into the ways in which rural areas are governed – a juxtaposition completely at odds with other realms of the social sciences. The study of rural power has been traditionally rooted in an analysis of class politics; in the middle class newcomer/local conflict or the gentrification colonization processes. The analysis of community governance is in effect the next tier up and represents a shift away from the concept of rural government (the concern of formal institutions and structures of state) to the wider consideration of the ways in which governmental and non-governmental organisations work together, and the ways in which political power and authority is distributed.

With a research agenda so typically urban specific in the past, it is hardly surprising that most literature written up until the early 1980's focussed its theoretical framework squarely at the tradition of 'top down-bottom up' philosophies of community empowerment; each with it's plethora of initiatives, agencies, schemes, partnerships and coalitions which acted rather like prevention than cure in most cases. As with any burgeoning geographic discourse, the historiography of rural community governance has a chequered paradigmatic life span – "a shifting focus through modernism, post-modernism to the 'post rural'" (Murdoch and Pratt 1993:411). Theoretical frameworks have emphasized the regulationist tendencies of Fordism

(Aglietta 1979, Boyer 1990 *et al.*), the partnerships and coalitions of QUANGOS, the political suasions of 'new right' Thatcherism (Cochrane 1993), the pluralistic democracies of rural politics and the vested motives of a Local Actor Network of rural elite's (Murdoch & Marsden 1995; Woods, 1997). Each paradigm, in turn, has imposed a macrostructural 'blanket' (i.e. class, politics, social constructions of rurality) over what essentially is a complex web of rural microstructures. Each in their own way suggests a new structure for rural polity. Thus, rural governance has become concerned not only with advocating local interests but also with advocating particular discourses of rurality (e.g. issues of housing, environmental policy).

### *The evolution of Rural Governance*

The changing regime of local governance has witnessed a wholesale restructuring of local politics in recent years and much has been written about this shift (Cochrane 1993; Newby 1985; Stoker 1996; Marsden *et al* 1998). In order to examine the history of these changes to local government it is perhaps best to view them through a theoretical framework. Probably the most widely advocated paradigms used by rural commentators include the Regulationist, New Right governance and Local Actor Network approaches. These frameworks have emerged in response to a marked "changed meaning" (Goodwin 1998:26) to the concept of governance. According to Jessop (1995) this shift in definition was largely brought about by a struggle by all disciplines of the social sciences to analyse broad sets of changes in the hitherto established relationships between state, market and civil society:

"...the conceptual trinity which has tended to dominate mainstream analysis of modern society"  
(Jessop 1995: 310)

These interconnections emerge from a growing recognition that society (especially rural society) consists of a wide ranging 'network of actors' that impact on the formal structures of government. The changing nature of governance has, according to Stoker (1996) and Jessop (1997) emerged as a reaction to the traditions of central government. Rural academics, social scientists and politicians began to question the 'established ways of governing society and collectively began to rethink the 'tools' used to administer public provision (Newby 1985; Philo 1992; Tricker 1993; Cloke & Little 1997; Murdoch and Abram 1997; Marsden 1998).

As a backdrop to this new resurgence in political theorising was a myriad of socio-economic and political histories that had shaped late twentieth century Britain. Both Stoker *et al* (1996) and Jessop (1995) summarise these processes well. According to them, the established way of government was changing largely due to three interconnected processes that, at the time, were re-shaping civil society. First Jessop theorises about what he terms "tri-partite macrocorporatism" (Jessop 1995:312). He believes there has been an acute crisis in the post war Keynesian welfare state. The bipartisan politics of post war Britain had, by the late 1970s become outmoded. Fiscal and political pressures had led to a decline in the post war welfare state. In the countryside this decline manifested itself in shrinkage in the agrarian based economy. Areas of production and consumption became blurred as new forms of central government support served to bolster a declining agricultural sector. The established "ordered rule" (Murdoch & Marsden, 1995) of the landed elites had been called into question as a new set of social, economic and cultural ideals were superimposed onto rural communities (via amongst other things, counterurbanisation). These were accompanied by buzzwords including 'conservation', 'lifestyle' and 'rural Idyll' (Philips



1991). By the end of the 1970s the local government structure of Britain had come under increasing political, cultural and economic pressure. This first phase can be loosely categorised as the Regulationist school of thought

The second strand of Jessop's argument has its epicentre within the rise of Thatcherism and in the late 1970s, 'new right' political ideology. This era of local governance is dominated by what Milbourne (1997:43) has acutely summarised as a "tangled set of centralised hierarchies". The mushrooming of new civil service agencies, QUANGOs and non governmental organisations signalled new forms of intervention and control which in turn largely contradicted the *laisse faire* ideologies with which the Conservatives had swept to power. Goodwin & Painter (1996:636) has termed this period as representing "government at a distance". Suddenly, agencies, partnerships and schemes sprung up to intervene in all manner of socio-economic spheres from employment (e.g. TECs), higher education, health (e.g. NHS Trusts) housing (selling off of council housing stock) and rural development. This intervention had been estimated at costing some £40 billion and according to Goodwin (2003:26) has transformed the 'institutional map of local government "beyond recognition".

The final phase of Jessop's chronology of changing local governance has emphasised the complexities of Local Actor Networks formed through a series of institutional partnerships and coalitions. Much has been written about this phase (Woods 1997; Goodwin 1998) and detailed case study analysis has been conducted on the relative merits of LEADER groups, Rural Challenge schemes, two tier rural agencies and community appraisals (Goodwin 1998; Tewdwr-Jones 1997; in mid

Wales and Woods (1997) analysis of opposition to stag hunting in a west Somerset village). This area of political governance can be drawn together under the umbrella of Local Actor Network theories and will be returned to in more detail later in this review. These debates, then, centred firstly on paternalism, property and power, and secondly between local and incomer.

A stage beyond Jessop's chronology is, of course defined by the Rural White Paper itself, and gravitates around the central theme of partnerships, where some if not all of the trends mentioned above can be displayed. Chapter 3 charts the emergence of this "tripartite ideal" (Goodwin 2003:9) in the rural governance decision making process.

## 2.2 – Theories of Rural Governance

Having explored what is understood by the term “rural governance”, this section examines in more detail the literature surrounding the *specific paradigms* of rural governance before focussing on the role of the parish and community councils in contemporary rural society. Specific reference is made to the distinct lack of empirical research available in the rural literature, before examining what has been written about the new conceptual possibilities, which are likely to inform the research agenda for the foreseeable future.

### *Regulation Theory*

Although outmoded and outdated to any application to *current* rural governance issues and priorities, a brief exploration of Regulation Theory is, however, necessary in order to comprehensively chart the historical chronology of governance theory over the past 20 years or so. For the purposes of this research though, the application of such a theory to the empirical evidence gleaned for Gloucestershire was not deemed appropriate.

Regulation theory contends that in order to understand the restructuring of the local state in Britain, it is first necessary to consider it in the broader context of global social and economic change. Moreover, it has been argued by Harper (1988), Stoker (1996) and Goodwin *et al.* (1998), that the new form of ‘ideal’ government which had emerged in the late twentieth century is as a direct response to the Fordist ‘mode of regulation’ and what Woods (1995:21) calls a need for a new “post Fordist regulatory structure” for local economic activity.

The entire emphasis of this paradigm draws from the French and German Schools of Regulation Theory, of which Aglietta, Lizch and Hirsch are its greatest exponents. Not entirely removed from Marxist ideology, regulation theory concerns itself with how the inherent contradictions of capitalism are resolved through prolonged temporary periods of stability or “regimes of accumulation” regulated by particular “ensembles” of structural forms (e.g. Central government) known as “modes of regulation”. Aglietta and others believed that this reciprocal relationship was not just confined to the economic sphere, but also extended beyond this to the social and political sphere – hence the interest amongst rural governance analysts such as Goodwin and Painter (1996). According to Aglietta, the twentieth century had been characterised by this Fordist regulationism where mass consumption was underpinned by a state interventionist mode of social regulation (not too dissimilar to that of Marxist theorising). However, during the last 30 years, Fordism has begun to fragment as this regime has been replaced by a new system of accumulation based on economic strategies such as flexible accumulation and the demand for new structures of social regulation. This period, Aglietta had termed a “new post fordism” and is in direct response to the crisis of old style regulationism.

The application of urban based Fordist Regulation theory to local governance in late twentieth century Britain was perhaps highly dubious though – indeed Goodwin & Painter (1996) highlight how as an explanation of local governance, this theory does not centre on state or local state institutions. Whilst local state may play a dominant role, in say, the provision of local housing where a mass consumption exists or where planning regulations and public utility provision required central regulation, it is a

more complex set of interrelationships that faces the post fordist structures of governance.

The transition from Fordist to post Fordist modes of regulation is characterised by the promotion of all types of “active citizenry” (Goodwin and Painter, 1996:635) ranging from entrepreneurship, devolved management and privatised consumption. From a rural viewpoint this transition is best illustrated by a shift from the countryside as an area of production (e.g. agrarian based activity) to an arena of consumption (e.g. tourism, farm diversification etc.) where the diversification and commodification of rurality are dominant themes. In the post Fordist domain rural community councils would act as “pressure groups” to locally elected government rather than “provider”. Whilst the traditional discourse of the Fordist mode of regulation saw local government as provider, the idea of local government as pressure group can be linked to a post fordist mode of regulation leading Murdoch and Pratt (1993:21) to refer to a “Post Rural” period.

Goodwin and Painter (1996) argued that a feature of rural economies under post fordism is the commodification of rural environments to meet the demands of contemporary consumption. Tourism, recreational and leisure projects and gentrification can be seen as the driving forces behind this. In this way, it is argued that rural localities can be regulated to remain “relatively exclusive” (i.e. in terms of housing affordability) to a particular sector of the local elite (newcomer or local) who wish to maintain a particular discourse of rurality derived from an idealised view of rural areas. Marsden and Murdoch (1996:93) developed this further by examining the creation of what they term “an exclusively middle class space” by examining the

regulation of housing in Taunton Deane, Somerset. This is also reflected in Woods' (1997) study of the opposition to stag hunting in south west Somerset.

Conversely, Woods (1997) contended that the restructuring of the local state has curtailed the ability of locally elected government to perform the role of provider in this new post fordist paradigm. He suggests this occurs in four distinct phases. First, services that have been traditionally provided by local government have now shifted to non-elected organisations or QUANGO's. Examples of where this has happened abound: the removal of local council representatives from health authorities, the creation of NHS Trusts, Schools being given the option to 'opt out' of local government control and obtaining 'grant maintained status' are just a few examples. Secondly, the contractisation and privatisation of council services (e.g. refuse collections, leisure services, the selling of council housing stock) has further served to undermine the impact of local government. Third, the increasing emphasis of central government is encouraging the role of voluntary and private partnerships (e.g. Housing Associations). Finally, the ability of elected local councils to respond to local needs has been severely restricted by tight financial constraints levied by central state.

One result of all this is that local community councils and parish councils have had to redefine their role in order to legitimise their political power and influence within localities. Just exactly how rural councils have managed to redefine their roles is a subject that has been written about widely and will be returned to later in this thesis.

Having examined in some detail the literature surrounding the Regulationist or Fordist paradigm of governance, attention is now turned to another major school of thought concerning community participation – New Right Governance.

*The rise of the 'new right' – Rolling back the state*

The rise of Thatcherism in the late 1970s marked a new perspective on the issue of rural governance. Liberal and Conservative criticisms of state intervention provided for a new political climate for Conservatism. However, the *laissez faire*, “rolling back the state” approach promised at election did not materialise. New emphasis was now placed on intervention and control. New civil service agencies emerged in all spheres of economic and social governance. QUANGO's, Partnerships and coalitions all mushroomed. In effect this provided for a paradox of interest as the local ‘ordered rule’ of political elites tried to represent local interest whilst still adhering to central state control. Many critiques have been written extolling the relative virtues and failures of this approach (Thrift 1987; Jessop 1997; Marsden 1998; Goodwin 2003)

The imposition of state intervention and tight financial constraints by central government consequently led elected local government to discover a new role for itself in order to continue to legitimise its political power and influence within localities. One forum in which the government hoped this would happen, was the concept of the ‘enabling authority’. The function of the local council was, hence minimised, with the role of the councillor being reduced to that of regulator – their powers to intervene being severely restricted by state contractors. This, at first, appeared attractive to the ideals of conservatism but very soon provided little attraction to councillors who were

unhappy at their marginalisation in this model. Goodwin and Painter (1996) suggest this marginalisation led to new forms of interpretative and responsive roles for community councils. Institutions were forced to re-define their role as being akin to that of a pressure group or 'a rallying point' lobbying central government, private corporations, the EU, local non-elected bodies and other 'actors' with power in the locality. There can be no doubt that during this period of local governance widespread resentment of the 'grip' of Whitehall manifested prevalently. This emphasis on lobbying opened up new conceptualisations of the theory of governance as a growing number of academics recognised the shortcomings of new right governance.

#### *Local Actor Network Theory*

Actor Networks within rural governance have dominated recent rural research as a consequence of the shift from government to governance. Woods (1998) explored the scope for political action in the face of new governing arrangements. Taking concerns over house building as a focus, Woods examines Local Actor Networks where local participation may not be narrowing not widening. He foresaw the role of parish councils evolving to one of pressure groups – just another lobbying organisation within the new structures of governance. In order to evaluate just how effective Local Actor Network theory is in understanding patterns of community governance it is first necessary to examine some underlying concepts, which form the basis of this approach.

Actor-network theorists such as Callon (1986), Latour (1986) and Law (1994) contended that political power is vested in organisations rather than in entities



because in order for an 'actor' to achieve any desired outcomes a network of 'entities' must first be constructed. The paradigm is encapsulated in the idea of local government as a 'pressure group' rather than a self-governing autonomous power. This manifests in three ways. Firstly, it positions the local state in the centre of a 'web' or 'network' dominated by central government policy formulation – i.e. the state can compel local authorities to follow a prescribed agenda. Secondly, the approach emphasises the important role which a particular ensemble of 'actors' can play in the political decision making process. These 'ensembles' are constantly redefined forcing local government to create "new networks orientated around new objectives" (Latour 1986) in order to redefine its power base. Finally, it stresses that in order for councils to become effective pressure groups they must embark on a coalition with other local councils and thus:

"...draw into their network particular administrative and legal resources which the council controls" (Callon 1986:28)

Academic literature has tended to almost exclusively concentrate on the potential for local councils to act as lobbyists for local interest as part of a broader network of 'actors' (see, for example, Mormont (1990), Goodwin and Painter (1996) and Milbourne (1997)). Probably the most detailed and informative study is that carried out by Woods (1997), who evaluates the potential contribution that Local Actor Network theory can have to the study of political conflicts and its possible weaknesses. His case study, which concerns the attempt by a local authority in South West England to prohibit Stag hunting on its land, describes in some detail the rural conflict that ensues and places it in an Actor-Network scenario. It provides a useful critique developed around its "observed shortcomings". According to Woods,

the potential value of Local Actor Network theory to rural studies lies in its ability to emphasise the contribution of micro scale actions to large-scale outcomes (almost a localist approach). This preoccupation with the small scale, of course, runs the risk of reductionism. To Woods, this risk stems from the:

the problem of defining complex multiple entities such as 'deer' or 'local community' and partly from the metaphor of the network itself" (Woods 1997:337)

In the case study used by Woods, the application of the Local Actor Network (LAN) theory to the stag hunting issue "produced a very different narrative". There are obvious shortcomings to actor network theories when applied to the real world, which this example had borne out. First, LAN treats both human and non-human entities as equal; it focuses on associative power and places heavy emphasis on translation and displacement. Whilst the concept's emphasis on a 'micro sociology of coalition creation' and the importance of representation would appear to offer a potential for analysis of rural political conflicts, a case study application such as that of stag hunting reveals practical shortcomings with adopting the LAN approach. According to Murdoch and Abram (1997), two more LAN commentators:

"In reducing the individuals, institutions, strategies and power relations involved to a network metaphor, and the identities and interests of actors to simplistic representations, an actor-network approach tells only part of the story" (Murdoch 1998: 86)

Woods warned that in any attempt at modifying the LAN model to render it more 'in touch' with contemporary rural politics, it must be borne in mind what the approach offers that cannot be achieved using conventional concepts. Several extensions to LAN theory have been attempted though. The importance of relations between politicians, officers and pressure groups is explored by policy network theorists (e.g.

Laffin 1986; Marsh and Rhodes 1992), whilst pluralist democratic theorists such as Dahl (1961), Gray (1994) and Stoker (1997) emphasised the role that public opinion has in influencing political decisions.

However, LAN does offer unique advantages over other well-used paradigms. It offers a 'participant eye' perspective of rural conflict on one hand and can provide a stylised 'micro sociology of locality'. Its powers of explanation are strictly limited though. As Murdoch & Pratt (1993) comment:

"...in failing to accommodate the significance of the existing social and political terrain's over which networks are constructed, a network approach alone offers at best only a partial account of political conflicts" (Murdoch & Pratt 1993: 423)

In describing rural conflicts, LAN theory risks becoming a 'subjective device'; its objectivity being dependent on the researcher's ability to see beyond the 'actor world' of the network.

### *Conclusions*

Probably the most widely advocated paradigms used by rural commentators to position the mechanism by which rural politics are played out include the regulationist, new right governance and Local Actor Network theories. These frameworks have emerged in response to a marked "changed meaning" (Goodwin 1998) to the concept of governance, representing a shift from government (the structures and bureaucracy of government) to governance (how actors participate in local rural communities). The chronology of the theories outlined above reflects the political perspective at the time. Local empowerment through partnership as a holistic mechanism to encourage ownership and participation in rural issues has become a

central theme in recent years. However, evidence suggests that many of the past paradigms can be superimposed on this new era of coalition and partnership. For instance the elitism and social exclusiveness emphasized by LAN theory can still be seen to operate across the vast majority of new partnership projects. Likewise, the complex web of governmental hierarchies as illustrated by New Right Thatcherism still plays a key role in the rural decision making process, albeit under a new guise (e.g. Local Agenda 21, Rural Development Agencies).

## **CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW II: RURAL GOVERNANCE**

**Section 3.1** drills down to the central concept contained within the Rural White Paper by examining the role and nature of partnerships; how they have evolved in the countryside; how they fit into the current structure of rural governance; the degree of equity and fairness (in terms of exclusion and inclusiveness) by which they can operate and their effectiveness in addressing the issues and concerns raised by parishioners. **Section 3.2** examines the Rural White Paper published in November 2000, and places it in the context of the changing nature of rural governance. In doing so, it explores the key concepts contained within the paper, focussing in particular on the role of partnerships. The final section (**Section 3.3**) examines contemporary debates surrounding rural governance and points towards the need for more empirical research.

### **3.1 - The Role & Nature of Partnerships**

Recent government legislation concerning rural parish councils and their role in their respective communities has been underpinned by the development of the concept of “partnership”. This chapter attempts to examine the role and nature of partnerships; how they have evolved in the countryside; how they fit into the current structure of rural governance; the degree of equity and fairness (in terms of exclusion and inclusiveness) by which they can operate and, their effectiveness in addressing the issues and concerns raised by rural residents. In conclusion, consideration will be

given to the future of partnerships the context of further research into rural governance.

The 2000 Rural White Paper took as its central theme, the concept of “partnership”:

“...strong partnerships between county, district and town and parish councils, supporting and encouraging rural communities on matters which local councils can manage themselves, and working in partnership on wider local services” (Rural White Paper 2000:145).

The recent expansion of partnership working is illustrated by the plethora of local partnerships now in operation in the UK. Examples abound from a wide spectrum of the community ranging from Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships, Early Years Development partnership and Local Agenda 21 Partnership, to mention just three.

The Government explicitly touts the virtues of such local empowerment as a holistic mechanism to encourage ownership and participation in rural issues, whilst, at the same time offering the benefits of pooled resources, funding, knowledge and expertise. The White Paper recognised, however, that such coalitions were in their infancy and had yet to find their full potential. Often such groupings can appear elitist or exclusive, morphing into what Goodwin (2003:17) terms “coalitions of interest”. However, the Government is keen to play up the democratizing potential of such coalitions, arguing that their role is far broader than service delivery, and instead offers a real opportunity for encouraging political awareness and participation.

The degree to which such partnerships are effective forums for political change in the countryside is very much determined by the socio-political and idiographic fabric of

the rural areas themselves. According to Goodwin (2003), implicit in this suggestion is the assumption that small towns and villages have a greater incidence for participation than larger, more urban settlements. The assumption that chocolate box villages are havens for the community spirited, self sufficient, “do gooders” is a dangerous one to make, but unfortunately prevails in the underlying principles set out by the White Paper. Policy discourse furthermore, assumes that the countryside is a single integrated homogenous community where people share common goals and interest and partnerships are the way things get done. Goodwin (2003:8) refers to this as an attempt to bridge the gap between “communities of place “ and “communities of interest”. In reality, this rose coloured view of the small country village seriously hampers the organisational and functional effectiveness of partnerships.

#### *The mechanisms of partnership*

The geography of partnership initiatives across the UK reveals a very uneven map of rural governance. As Goodwin (2003:34) suggests, some areas have become “partnership rich” whilst others have remained “partnership poor”. The shift to new forms of rural governance throws up several questions regarding accountability, representation and empowerment. Collective decision-making is built on trust and inclusivity but is equally dominated by vested interests, lack of expertise and arguments over accountability. This can often result in the decision making process being protracted and problematic. If the outcome of a collective decision is unfavourable, this can lead to a “blame culture” amongst key players in the partnership. Lowndes and Sullivan (2004:72) argue that this can result in a “significant accountability deficit”. When partnerships are an amalgamation of several

government agencies, local landowners and parishioners, this often results in a lack of clarity over the key mechanisms of the project – audit reporting, corporate governance, project management etc. Woods (2005) suggests that one way to circumnavigate this deficit is to make the governance of the partnerships themselves a policy issue.

Partnerships are not all negative though and one of the key advantages emphasized by the literature is the degree to which they can integrate the public, private and voluntary sectors, in what Goodwin *et al* (2003:9) term a “tripartite ideal”. Research by Edwards *et al* and others though suggests that few meet this ideal. In their study of partnerships in mid Wales and Shropshire, Edwards and Woods (2000) found that less than one third of projects had representation from all three sectors. Furthermore, less than half of all projects were represented by the voluntary sector. In terms of community involvement, only 2 of the 154 partnerships surveyed listed “the community” as one of its partners. It is clear then that there is an inequality between the three apexes of the partnership triangle and contributions from each can vary considerably. Typically, most projects were funded by the public sector and since these organisations held the purse strings of the project, local government influenced most of the underlying decision making processes. Many other similar studies (Yarwood and Edwards (1995), Mackinnon (2002), Yarwood (2002) and Cloke *et al* (2003)), provide similar conclusions in that rural partnerships are characterized by limited local empowerment, dominated by public sector bodies and ‘selected local actors’ and governed by unfair rules of engagement (Goodwin 2003).



The level and ease at which community participation can take place in rural areas, has recently provided a focus for a flurry of research (Taylor (1997); Ward & McNicholas (1998); Shucksmith (2000); Yarwood (2002); Goodwin & Whitehead (2003); Woods (2004)). Many begin by dispelling the assumption that partnerships (particularly rural ones) are all inclusive. In turn, each examines the mesh of interrelated factors, which potentially govern the incidence of involvement with such projects. Scale, geography, gender, mobility, expertise, the dichotomy between public “participation” and public “consultation”, funding, and age can all impact of this propensity to participate. Edwards & Woods (2004) research examining the effectiveness of the Market Towns Initiative (MTI) in rural Wales suggested that a significant process of “hand picked elite representation” was almost necessary in order to get the job done. The number of stakeholders they must involve in the consultation process – farming unions, parish clerks, TECs, county councils often bemuses parish and town councils. It can simply come down to the availability of each representative on the day as to whether a sector of the community was involved. This, suggests Edwards *et al*, means that the “final boundaries” of inclusiveness are rather more arbitrary and purely instrumental, and more often than not, governed by the distance needed to travel, availability or simply whether someone of the project board remembered to contact that particular stakeholder.

Edwards *et al* (2000) and Edwards and Woods(2004) underlines this by examining the impact of bidding timetables for funding programs on the level and scope for community involvement. He argues, using the case study of the Rural Challenge initiative, that often the time between preparation for applications and final bidding deadlines can be very short (often only a couple of weeks). This gives little time to

mobilize all stakeholders and as a consequence the lead role for the funding bid is often taken by organizations such as local authorities that have a ready pool of existing contacts. This inevitably leads to the same stakeholders being involved with project after project, thus potentially shutting out new players in the process. Whilst this state of affairs exists, the membership and operation of partnerships will remain dominated by public sector bodies.

### *The future for partnerships*

The Rural White Paper firmly identified partnerships as the most effective means of empowering local communities, however, Goodwin (2003), Edwards and Woods (2004) and Woods (2005) argue that more research needs to be done regarding the relative effectiveness of such initiatives. As Goodwin argues:

“..at present we lack the baseline knowledge to identify what distinguishes good partnership practice from that which is less effective.” (Goodwin 2003: 20)

A great deal of research has already focussed on the mechanisms and structures by which partnerships operate. These structures are often dominated by powerful vested interests but exclude key elements of society on the grounds of expertise, financial power or vested interest. There thus remains a shortfall in the research examining how excluded and powerless groups (the elderly, young, poor, disabled) within society could impact on the effectiveness of partnerships.

The incidence and nature of inclusiveness is one area of research where more could be done. More detailed research is required to examine the effectiveness of relationships between partnerships and how they work together. Goodwin (2003:12)

calls for more research into the processes behind this “partnership marginalisation”. More widely, examination of geographical differences in the workings of partnerships (in terms of county or region) is greatly needed. How can the best practice of one partnership be used across a wider area or at a different scale?

The dearth of contextual analysis of partnerships also prevails in the degree to which they become integrated with delivering policies *across* rural communities, in terms of healthcare, education, housing and transportation. According to Goodwin (2003), and Woods (2005), Whitehall departments have long developed policy for town and country within “policy silos” (2003: 21) and as a result a policy delivery is rigidly demarcated along disciplinary and research lines. An antidote to this compartmentalized perspective is offered up by Goodwin (2003):

“One way to investigate this might be to examine the ways in which the sectoral (policy sectors covered), social (communities of interest covered) and spatial (territories and places covered) elements of rural partnerships intersect and overlap. In this manner we can begin to explore the mechanisms through which holistic and participatory rural development can be facilitated by partnership working.” (Goodwin 2003: 21)

Goodwin (2003) therefore conclude that the future research agenda for rural governance must focus on the shift from “joined up” partnerships to “joining up” partnerships across the realms of government departments, to form an integrated approach to policy delivery in a wide variety of sectors (health, crime, transportation). The delivery of rural policy therefore, can no longer be allowed to remain in splendid isolation.

## *Conclusions*

Recent government legislation concerning rural parish councils and their role in their respective communities has been underpinned by the development of the concept of “partnership”. Such local empowerment has been viewed as a holistic mechanism to encourage ownership and participation in rural issues, whilst, at the same time offering the benefits of pooled resources, funding, knowledge and expertise. However, the degree to which such partnerships are effective forums for political change in the countryside is very much determined by the socio-political and idiographic fabric of the rural areas themselves. These factors can govern the degree of inclusiveness (particularly in terms of involvement by local communities themselves) prevalent in partnership decision making processes and can impact greatly on the cohesiveness of a project. The geographical map of partnerships in rural communities is, at best uneven – some areas are “partnership rich”, but a great many more are “partnership poor”. If such projects are to become more successful, key stakeholders in the decision making process need to refocus their perspectives and begin to look at “joining up” partnerships across time, scale and geographic space. This would involve ‘meshing together’ rural policy with other areas of government policy such as transportation, healthcare and education in order to attain the “tripartite ideal” of public, private and voluntary sector working effectively together.

### 3.2 - Exploring the Rural White Paper

This section examines the Rural White Paper "*Our Countryside: The Future - A Fair Deal for Rural England*" published in November 2000, and places it in the context of the changing nature of rural governance. The White paper suggested that new responsibilities should be given to parish councils within the rural planning framework, emphasizing the importance of community partnership and voluntary action. This terminology is rooted in the 'bottom up' approach to rural development. The intention here is to outline and evaluate the key themes and concepts embodied in the Government's vision for rural politics for the future, and provide an important framework for analysing these reforms at the local research level.

The formulation of the White Paper provided for a necessary and long overdue reaction to the misplaced perception of rural affairs within Central Government. Whitehall recognised that a 'fair deal' was needed to help reinvigorate a countryside, which had been, at times, overlooked by the government decision making process. Many of the measures set out in the paper marked the start of a process, which would take time, partnership and initiative to realise. A pivotal theme was recognition that the countryside was 'vital' - vital to those who live and work in it, vital to those who use and value what it provides, vital for everyone as a precious national asset. The government's vision encompassed a set of reforms, which would make the countryside a working, living, protected and above all vibrant entity. An integrated approach based on partnership, community participation and voluntary action would provide a stronger linkage between all tiers of governance. The recognition that rural

and urban areas are interdependent became a driving force behind the proposed reforms.

### *Local Power*

Chapter 12 of the White Paper examined the issues surrounding local power in county towns and villages. It called for a better partnership between all types of authorities and a greater willingness to work together to deliver locally managed services. The emphasis was placed on building upon established local voluntary networks and promoting stronger partnerships through all tiers of local governance:

"It is our firm belief that the strengthening of town and parish councils, the most local tier of local government, is key to promoting greater community involvement in rural affairs" (Rural White Paper, DEFRA, 2000:145)

The government believed greater community involvement and responsibility for developing rural communities could be achieved through a variety of measures. However, it also recognised the idiographic nature of the countryside: that each town or village has its own set of priorities, local strengths and distinctive features, which are special and unique to that locality. To achieve a more effective management of rural affairs a variety of mechanisms have been proposed. These include the concept of the 'Quality Parish' and 'Quality Testing', the preparation of town and village plans, training and support for parish councillors, an improved consultation process between county, district, town and parish councils, increased support for the established local voluntary network and the encouragement of stronger partnerships between all tiers of government.

The next section examines each of these mechanisms in more detail.

*The level of “community vibrancy”*

As the basic unit of local government the parish council is the mouthpiece for the rural community. The standard of parish councils though, varies considerably with often a large variation in size, role and vigour of local councils. The government accepted that to seek the same role for all would be unachievable and unfair. In recognition of this diversity, parish and town councils have been assigned to four categories depending on their 'level of vibrancy'.

According to Edwards and Woods (2004:191), the 2000 Rural White Paper laid the foundations of an “audit culture”. Through a set of rural headline indicators (fifteen in all), the performance of a rural community in terms of their vibrancy and level of community participation could be monitored. These indicators would be used to construct an index of “community vibrancy”. This index could be used to construct a league table of rural communities in terms of their level of performance in community participation and local politics. Government would reward high performing communities. But as Edwards and Woods (2004) argue, although the idea of community participation and involvement is not new, this measurement of vibrancy sends out a message that Government expected communities to help themselves and lead from the bottom up. Local and national government as beacons of good practice would reward good performance, in turn; hence the concept of the “quality parish” was born.

How were the rural indicators to work though? It was proposed that an indicator would be constructed based on the numbers of meeting places, the number of locally based voluntary and cultural activities and participation in parish elections (e.g. turnout, contested seats etc.). This would provide what the White Paper described as a “community vibrancy” measurement. At the next level down, the communities assessed against these measurements were grouped into four “parish categories” – vibrant, active, barely active and sleeping.

The (soon to be disbanded) Countryside Agency conducted a preliminary assessment of rural communities similar to the vibrancy index in 2001. Using data already published in the Rural Services Survey, it scored communities, weighting the assessment according to the presence of a village hall, the results of contested parish council elections and whether co-opted members served on the parish councils. This analysis threw up one obvious major conclusion – that the level of community vibrancy is directly linked to the population size of the community. The bigger the village, the higher up the vibrancy index. Typically, the majority of parishes with over 5,000 people fell into the “vibrant” category, with less than 25% of parishes with less than 1000 people doing so. Over a fifth of parishes with less than 1,000 people were classified as “barely active”.

As an indication as to how successful this is, one would expect to see an upward movement in the balance of parishes moving from the “sleeping” category to the vibrant. Not surprisingly, the study found that larger settlements were more vibrant than smaller ones. This then, may lead one to question the criteria adopted to construct this measure of vibrancy. It may be argued that the set of indicators put



forward in the White Paper is too narrow. Indeed the Countryside Agency proposed the incorporation of participation in Village Plans and Appraisals to widen the scope of measuring levels of community participation. Unfortunately, most of the current activities are voluntary in nature and attempting to measure data based on voluntary participation is inherently difficult.

Measuring the level of community vibrancy through measures of participation or involvement is no easy task. Each measure is likely to be dogged by a “series of conceptual questions” (Edwards & Woods (2004):24) relating to the type and nature of participation, how the measurement should be achieved, how the series of given indicators should be weighted and at what geographical scale the survey should be conducted. Above all else though, these questions become secondary, when addressing what exactly is being measured. Community involvement is inevitably voluntary in nature. Defining the ‘voluntaryness’ of a particular activity is ambiguous to say the least. Just because a village has a well attended yoga class once a week in the village hall, does that make that village ‘vibrant’ in terms of community participation or in terms of civil society? The number and nature of voluntary activities and fora is surely not the only measure of community spirit. Such things as village pub quizzes or indeed the village pub itself might be considered. Edwards and Woods (2004) note that the role of chapels and churches is noticeably absent from this measure of community vibrancy.

They argue that the current set of indicators is too process orientated and too biased on asking what is or is not present in a village. They argue that the measures should really be concentrating on what local people are doing, and who is doing what to

improve the circumstances in particular communities. In essence, government should be asking how the concept of “community” is being “performed” and not simply measuring what is or is not present in a place. It is the degree of mobilization, allied to participation and engagement that should be measured – the capacity to become involved and shape ones owns future community: a measure of community self-governance. As Edwards & Woods (2004) conclude:

“At its essence community vibrancy is about ‘capacity to act or power to’, ‘not power over’ or ‘power through’. Exploring these issues will constitute an interesting and challenging future research agenda” (Edwards & Woods 2004: 192)

The significant challenge remains of how to empirically measure this mobilization and how best to develop the set of indicators required to make meaningful geographical and statistical comparisons.

### *The Quality Parish*

In order to promote a stronger role for parish councils and to set an attainable benchmark for performance, the concept of the 'Quality Parish' was introduced. A 'quality' parish council would be representative of all parts of the community. It would promote an 'inclusive community' and be effectively managed with audited accounts and a trained clerk. To gain 'Quality Parish' status a parish council would need to undergo a quality test, which would assess the performance of the council against a pre-defined set of criteria. This might include evidence that suggests a commitment to working in and fostering partnerships with principle authorities and voluntary groups, taking a lead role in the formulation of a Village Plan and acting as a focal point of delivery for local services.

Exactly how a 'Quality Parish' would work and how attainable in reality it is, is still a subject of debate. In order for a 'quality test' to operate effectively a series of simple criteria would need to be set and be easily evaluated. This benchmark might include an electoral mandate, a minimum number of meetings per year, a trained parish clerk, published annual accounts and a minimum income threshold. Indeed after lengthy public consultation and during the life span of this research, the concept was abandoned and unfortunately nothing has replaced it.

### *Partnership Projects*

The promotion of partnerships is central to the efficient delivery of local services. An efficient parish council would take a key role in the consultation, co-ordination and management of local services and act as a central information point. The government accepts that in most rural areas, strong links already exist between parish and town councils and the principle tiers of government. Many already have agreed 'local level concordats' with local councils, which help foster more effective local governance. The idea is to build on these established mechanisms and hold them up as examples to other less developed councils.

To help parish councils to meet the quality standard the government set aside £2 million over 3 years from 2002 to provide support and assistance. This included a national strategy to provide training and support to parish clerks and a 'best practice toolkit' (administered by the soon to be disbanded Countryside Agency) to help provide simple guidance to make councils more effective, representational and accountable.

Another focus for the reform of parish councils involves the levels of funding currently available to them. Several initiatives have reached the consultation stage. These include increasing or removing the limit on the amount that parish councils raise for expenditure, strengthening the prevention of 'double taxation' of parish residents and reducing the auditing requirement for smaller parishes. Emphasis would be placed on ethical financial accounting using the legal and financial framework laid out in the Local Government Act 2000.

Partnerships between public, private and voluntary sectors have been highlighted as an all-encompassing strategy to aid the broadening of effective policy delivery. They are intended to improve the relations between the power structures operating in the countryside. In reality though, research has raised doubts over their inclusiveness and effectiveness (Yarwood, 2002). Yarwood examines “partnership projects” established to build affordable housing for local people in rural Worcestershire. Particular emphasis is given to the role and power of parish councils within these partnerships. It is argued that far from resulting in greater levels of community participation, such partnerships can give voice and power to those who seek to exclude particular groups of the community as vested interests overtake the needs of local residents.

### *Town & Village Plans*

Town and Village Plans were part of the 'Vital Villages' scheme run by the Countryside Agency. They were devised to give rural communities the chance to set out what their town or village should look like and to guide its future development. In this way, community ownership would be promoted. Plans are intended to identify

key facilities and services, set out problems that need to be tackled and demonstrate how distinctive character and features can be preserved. The government asked the Countryside Agency to take forward the concept of village plans and made additional funding available to help parish councils prepare for them. It was hoped, that by 2004, 1000 new parishes would have produced a parish plan.

According to the Countryside Agency, plans needed to be holistic and comprehensive in scope. They should be inclusive and provide for extensive community interaction at all levels and embody a long-term vision for the parish. All recommendations would need to be underpinned by evidence based techniques.

At present, there is no standard format for a village plan and no prescriptive list of issues to be addressed. The ideal of the village plan is not a new one though. Village Appraisals and Village Design Statements are both forerunners, which have met with mixed reaction. In fact, overall, less than 2% of rural communities have a plan or appraisal, which is specific to their community.

Community leadership is central to the role of modern local government and according to Whitehall, counties and districts are well place to provide:

".....a clear, coordinated view of a community's need across a wide range of services and to ensure that action is taken to respond to them" (Rural White Paper, DEFRA, 2000: 152)

Village plans will provide the mechanism by which rural communities can galvanize their contribution to the wider local governance network. They also emphasise the

benefit of the community planning approach to issues of rural governance. Typically rural areas have 3 layers of local government. Encouraging joint working and service co-location between these authorities can be particularly fruitful. Village Plans can also help dispel the perception that more urban dominated local authorities often overlook the need of rural communities. As one parish councillor puts it:

".....I just think they need to stop lumping people together and think about places as individual rather than looking at one thing overall and saying 'well that's good for everybody', it doesn't work like that, 'cos it's quite unique here....." (Rural White Paper 2000, DEFRA: 152)

In regions where rural communities are widely dispersed within the local authority area, villages can have widely different access to services and different needs and aspirations. The community planning process via the Parish Plan can help target and identify these needs more efficiently. They also help to alleviate the problems of social exclusion and isolation often experienced by remoter settlements.

The adoption of Parish/Village Plans has been slow but success stories are already emerging. In Herefordshire, the Parish Plan has strengthened the commitment to local partnerships (Marsden & Murdoch, 1995). The 'New Commitment to Regeneration' approach developed by the Local Government Association provides an effective model of how local partnerships can work in practice. Twenty-two local authority led strategic partnerships have been formed in the county in recent years. These include coalitions of public, private, voluntary and community partners covering a number of rural areas. The partnerships established in Herefordshire are committed to the concept of 'One Partnership, One Plan' to provide an overarching framework to link the needs of local people to specific policy agendas. As a rural

area, Herefordshires main need is for the plan to provide for a widely scattered population where poverty and relative prosperity exist in close proximity.

### *The Local Voluntary Network*

The role of the local voluntary network has become increasingly important to the functioning of urban and rural society. The voluntary sector often steps in to meet local needs and 'plugs' the gap in service provision. These networks (for example, rural community councils, EU LEADER programs, rural development council's etc.) also provide an important linkage with local residents. A key part of the voluntary infrastructure is an adequate community centre and village hall. These centres become important access points for a variety of services and activities ranging from WI meetings, film screenings and needlecraft to Fen Shui classes. Around 70 percent of parishes in the UK have access to some kind of facility although the size and quality is very variable (DEFRA 2000).

To strengthen the rural volunteer network, the government has proposed a 2 pronged approach. Firstly, extra funding will be made available for community development work and projects. Maintenance grants will also be available for the upkeep of rural village halls and community centres. Secondly, it will support the burgeoning of the community sector by making such initiatives more widely available in all rural communities. For example, Home Office funding for small community projects such as the Community Learning Fund, which for years had been available in urban areas will, in the future, be piloted in the countryside.

Just how effective the local volunteer network can be in rural areas has not as yet been fully explored. However, some interesting empirical research has been conducted by Yarwood and Edwards (1995) who examine the effectiveness of voluntary action in terms of the operation of Neighbourhood Watch Schemes in Hereford & Worcester. The area had witnessed an increase in crime in the previous 10 years mainly stemming from social problems in the area. The research focuses on the effectiveness of such neighbourhood watch schemes in helping to reduce the fear of crime and its role in improving police relations. It confirms that such schemes operate with a “considerable social bias” which is recognised as a problem associated with voluntary action. Those who are willing to volunteer their services to run such schemes are likely to be the retired, middle classes. Consequently, their experience of impact of petty crime is often limited and as a result they tend to bring a rather “blinkered” attitude to the solutions. The study concludes by calling for more systematic studies of the problem of rural crime and the voluntary schemes currently in place to deal with them.

For a partnership to be successful, the level of participation amongst sectors in the rural community needs to strike the right balance. And for people to be willing to participate, they need to feel empowered to do so. Empowerment suggests a greater degree of influence being wielded by local residents and thus, some shift in the power balance between centre and periphery. However, in order for a partnership to work, there needs to be an effective integration across the sectors of rural governance structures as well. The plethora of initiatives which espouse the idea of a more locally attuned “bottom up” approach is thus seen as a more appropriate mechanism than traditional “top down” strategies.



## *Conclusions*

The Rural White Paper recognised the diversity that exists between different areas and wanted rural communities to play a bigger part in running their own affairs. As the most local tier of government, parish councils were the focus of this and measures were put in place to strengthen their role and to act as the voice of their communities. However, a partnership working approach for parish councils was advocated and a number of wider local government issues impacted on their effectiveness. The White Paper reinforced an “audit culture” (Edwards & Woods 2004:191) within local rural governance structures, dominated by performance appraisal and target setting. The challenge for parish councils (the most local tier of government) is how best to translate this “layer of bureaucracy” into workable, practical solutions.

### 3.3 - The Future Discourse for Rural Governance Research

There can be little doubt that over the past five years or so the economic and social restructuring of the countryside has produced increasing demands for the state to intervene in support of political discourses of rurality. To meet these challenges, local government has assumed different facades to suit different local climates – outlined by the detailed analysis of the changing nature of theoretical frameworks earlier in this thesis. These new challenges facing local governance need coherent solutions (Tricker 1993; Halfacree 1995; Woods 1998). As Marsden and Murdoch (1996) makes clear:

“In order for an elected local government to maintain its discursive power it must create an impression of coherent legitimacy. Repositioning local government as an advocate of local people and local opinions is one strategy for creating such an impression; exploiting the tensions that exist within the chaotic state and ensuring that local rural governance remains in an atmosphere of dynamic discursive competition is quite a challenge” (Marsden and Murdoch, 1996: 92)

The final section of this chapter examines the contemporary discourse of rural governance, and highlights some emerging research agendas.

#### *The current and future research agenda*

Rural geographers have written widely concerning these ‘challenges’ that face community governance – each to differing degrees, offering practicable solutions from an empowerment, participation or integration perspective (Newby 1986; Tricker 1993; Stoker 1996; Marsden & Murdoch 1996; Jessop 1997; Woods 1997) Mark Tewdr Jones (1997; 2000) offered new insight into the problems surrounding a shift toward more coherent legitimacy in his analysis of the planning role of community councils in rural Wales. He examined two issues central to local

governance. In a detailed survey of senior planners in Wales, he first gauges their opinions of community councils being awarded planning powers in the Brecon Beacons District Council in South Wales. He then takes his research a step further by analysing the differing perceptions that these planners have toward their roles in local communities to generate public involvement in rural policy making.

This research indicated that the perception of the higher tiered authorities toward increasing the advisory and consultative role of community councils had widespread support amongst planning professionals. However, Jones found that there lacked the support for devolving specific projects to this lower tier of government principally due to the lack of skill and expertise in the planning field. His research concludes that community and parish councils will continue to play a central role in rural governance but largely within the confines of an actor-network scenario where councils at this level are very much seen as a lobbying force. He concluded:

“The new governance of rural Wales has generated new pressures and opportunities for local councils to deal with rural concerns: officers within unitary authorities could well find local government reorganisation has been the stimulus to deal with community development matters on a more strategic basis and recognise the importance of forming better working partnerships with their local community council colleagues.” (Tewdr-Jones 2000: 61)

Jones, then, clearly sees a defined role for parish and community councils in the future— a role though, that is inextricably bound up in the actor-network school of community governance.

Murdoch and Abram (1997) attempted to define the limits of community governance. Using the housing sphere to illustrate their thesis, both conclude that although there has almost certainly been a shift to governance in rural areas, that the scope for

greater community involvement in certain areas has remained severely restricted with central government still required to take a “dominant strategic line” (1997:82). They insist that the “hierarchical relations between centre and locality (core-periphery) still exist and will always inhibit greater community empowerment” (1997: 83). Others, most notably Callon (1986), Latour (1986), Milbourne (1997) and Marsden (1998) share this view. Murdoch and Abrams (1997) mark out the limits of community governance very succinctly. They concluded that:

“Citizens and communities cannot simply be allowed to go their own way within the partnership agreements which comprise governance institutions: they must be linked into some form of co-ordination and mediation otherwise these partnerships will fall apart” . (Murdoch & Abrams 1997: 84)

According to Goodwin (1998), rural geography of the twenty-first century needs to look afresh at the old distinctions between the ‘trinity’ of market, state and civil society. These will provide the guide for examining new dependencies and relationships within rural governance. He warns of the dangers of becoming too descriptive with new research. It is not enough, he contends, to simply “record and chart” the emergence of new mechanisms and structures of governance like Rural Challenge schemes or LEADER initiatives. Marsden (1998) builds on the thrust of this argument by contending that as traditional mechanisms of governance decline in use, there is a need to re-evaluate the motives and roles of parish and community councils. Critical questions need to address the reasoning behind “what, how and whom” provides the focus for these newly emerging ‘forms’ of control which have sprung up to replace state initiatives. Goodwin (1998) summarises this position well when he contends that:

“In rural studies we have recently seen debates over the influence of the new service classes and over the political and cultural effects of the gentrifying middle classes. The governance perspective takes this a stage further by asking about the rationales and interests of the agencies and institutions on which these new groups might serve” (Goodwin 1998:10)

For far too long, according to Murdoch and Abram (1997), studies of rural politics have been focussed on the social control of landed elite's and paternalistic gentry. There is a need to 're-conceptualize' issues of power as a medium of social production rather than social control. Rural research should now address “the capacity to act” that embodies so many community councils:

“In other words we are concerned with power to, not power over” (Goodwin 1998:10)

As new actor-networks of institutions, partnerships and agencies emerge to blend skills and expertise, rural geographers need to evaluate the ways in which diverse social groupings come together to 'gain a capacity to act'. According to Callon (1986: 23), “rural areas often provide excellent sites for the study of long established political elite's”.

Much literature has concerned itself with how local governance responds to and augments the unevenness of rural development (Mormont 1990; Halfacree 1995; Lowndes & Sullivan 2004). According to Mormont research needs to examine the differently tailored mixes of economic and social development, which are currently deemed appropriate in different places in rural Britain.

New research also needs to address the roles and responsibilities, and in some case, the hidden agendas of locally elected politicians and councillors in rural areas (Harper

1988, Cloke *et al*, 1994; Marsden 1997; Jessop 1997 ;Edwards *et al* 2000; Goodwin 2004). Issues of democracy and accountability come to the fore as a “new magistracy” begins to dominate local governance. There is a danger of marginalising the wider community as only key actors involve themselves in these new structures of government. The current ‘political speak’ which emphasises the importance of inclusion and empowerment may well come to contradict a rural malaise which has long had a history of paternalistic, non-political traditions dominated by a landed elite.

This point is further emphasised by Marsden (1998), who highlighted the extent to which the changes taking place in rural areas further complicate an already complex governmental scene. In his research, Marsden takes four ‘ideal types’ of rurality – the preserved, contested, paternalistic and clientistic countryside. He combined these arenas with the traditional four spheres of rural development – mass food markets, quality food markets, agriculturally related change and rural restructuring. Each combination, Marsden argued, highlights the innate intricacies of integrated rural governance. It is far too simplistic he contends, to follow a dominant line of community governance in an arena, which throws up such a multitude of socio-economic and political agendas. These ‘agendas’ are linked into a local non local network configuration” where differing sets of power relations exist. He concludes by warning of the need to remain very sensitive to this elaborate topography of power within the British countryside.

Murdoch and Pratt (1993:413) argued that the “subtle differences of rural governance” have been omitted from contemporary academia, but that they cannot be just ‘added in’ like some additional ingredients to a cake recipe. Moreover, what is

called for is a “completely new recipe” (1993:414) for the study of rural governance – a study of otherness, of difference, of the post rural.

### *The functional role of rural governance*

Attention is now given to the literature written concerning the functional roles of parish and community councils within rural governance. The academic research is wide ranging on this area of rural polity with case study analysis having been conducted in regions as diverse as North Wales, South West Cornwall, Somerset, Ireland and the Cotswolds.

in her research concerning community governance in rural South Devon, Sue Blackburn (1998) focused on the process of local participation within the boundaries of the UK Town and Country Planning system. Blackburn identifies three factors concerning the changing nature of local governance. First, that officers expressed a willingness to allow individuals in the rural community to ‘have their say’ in the preliminary stages of policy formulation. Second, that a multi agency partnership led by the local authority had emerged aimed at co-ordinating implementation and public provision. And thirdly, the backcloth of impending external reorganisation of the local authority politics in south Devon had redefined the very function of what governance had to deliver. Using both quantitative and qualitative responses to questionnaires conducted with parish and town councillors, Blackburn is able to convey a very vivid ‘snapshot’ of actor-networks in practice.

### *The use of discourses of rurality*

A great deal of rural research has used particular discourses of rurality to illustrate the complex mechanism behind the processes of rural governance- often with much success. Edwards *et al* (2000) examined local plans and policy frameworks concerning the debates between locally elected representatives and planners, highlighting the continuing tensions and conflicts which occur in the politics of local housing provision in remoter rural areas. Similar studies have been conducted by Emerson (1999) concerning policy formulation on agri-environmental development in southwest Ireland and by Harrington (1998) concerning the rationalisation of Primary Education in rural areas. Jones and Little (2000) provide an interesting perspective on the mechanism behind Rural Partnerships and Coalitions. They consider the practice of creating partnerships as a means of delivering regeneration in rural areas focusing on Rural Development Commission's initiative "Rural Challenge". Ward & McNicholas (1998) highlighted the innate tensions between local and central control over decision making, the role of the rural communities in their own governance and the future prospects for European controlled governance within EU Policy. Woods (1998) argues for a change in perspective to the study of rural governance.

Reflecting the paradigm shift in rural studies away from an understanding of the 'rural' as a functionally defined category to a focus on rurality as a socially constructed and experienced identity, rural politics, he argues, can no longer be defined as the politics of rural areas. The social and economic restructuring of the British countryside has laid rise to the emergence of new forms of governance which have become dominated by political elite's and institutions who have manipulated discourses of rurality to gain accountability and legitimacy. As such, Woods argued that we should



think less in terms of a “rural politics” and more in terms of a “politics of the rural” (1998:23).

By providing this overview to the literature surrounding the issue of rural governance, it is my intention to illustrate the wide and varied concerns that have preoccupied many researchers in other fields in the past few years. The changing regime of local governance has redefined the ‘institutional map of the countryside’ beyond recognition. This shift from government to governance has presented fresh challenges for the ways in which rural areas are governed. There is now a need to redefine the limits of community participation, integration and empowerment to be able to address the problems, which face rural politics in this new century. These problems are no less compounded by the recent shift in political ideology. New structures of local governance have emerged which emphasise the importance of partnerships, coalitions and multi party agencies. The challenge for academics is to establish sufficient empirical research as to the relative shortcomings and successes of these projects and to provide solutions where none are forthcoming. It is hoped this thesis will cast light on these issues.

### *Main Conclusions*

This literature review has attempted to draw out the overriding themes that have dominated contemporary research on rural governance over the last 15 years or so. Local government has sought to redefine its role and confirm its political legitimacy in the context of a revised rural politic. It has had to respond to many challenges posed by the Thatcherite restructuring of the state, which had undermined the traditional role of state as ‘provider’. This restructuring has placed greater demands on the

state to intervene to support “particular discourses of rurality” (Callon 1986; Woods 1998). To meet these challenges, local government has assumed different facades to suit different local climates.

In contemporary society, the two paradigms, which now prevail to the greatest extent in modern rural research, are that of the Local Actor Network theory and the concept of Partnership. Local Actor Network Theory is the Latourian perspective, which suggests the local state does not possess any power but must achieve power through acting as part of a much wider network. Rural governance is comprised of a multitude of ‘actors’ who interact within a complex hierarchical network of institutions, partnerships and agencies (Goodwin 2003; Woods 2005). Parish councils now been forced to redefine their role as a local pressure group aiming to influence state intervention from the ‘outside’. Recent literature, however, has emphasised the relative paradox with this status quo. The ‘actors’, whilst representing the interests of local people suffer from ‘governance inertia’ as they are still bound to implement the policy of local and ultimately state government. In short, there remains no consistency in local governance in rural areas. The outcome of this ‘tangled set of hierarchies’ is continuing conflict and contradictions placed on the British countryside. (Thrift 1987; Ward & McNicholas 1998; Cloke & Little 1997; Edwards and Woods 2004; Woods 2005).

The institutional landscape of rural governance has become a ‘hot bed’ of differing and varied research agendas. These agendas are marked by one overriding commonality – the need to recognise the idiographic and localist nature of rural areas; what might work well in one rural parish may not in another. The Government

White Paper emphasised the need for more community empowerment via a central theme of “partnership”, and many academics take this as their null hypothesis, trying desperately to ‘fit’ what is essentially a complex scenario into a neat theoretical framework. Research has concentrated on the roles and motives of political ‘actors’ in the rural scene, the effectiveness of different mechanisms of local governance (e.g. Partnerships, Coalitions, LEADER groups), the social construction of rurality or the political-economic pattern of consumption and production in the countryside.

Political elite’s superimpose their value and belief systems on the rural power structure and provide for contested representations of individuals, institutions and geographical entities. Both communities and the ‘actors’ who populate them will find any kind of negotiation with structures of rural governance compromised by discourses, relationships and agencies of change which “determine the trajectories” of rural development. It is hoped that whilst recognising the intricacies of local government, this research concerning the role and effectiveness of parish councils in Gloucestershire can provide a valuable insight into a realm of academic discourse which remains *relatively* new and uncharted territory.

## **CHAPTER 4: PARISH COUNCILS IN ENGLAND**

This chapter examines the historical evolution of parish councils and provides an overview of their changing and current roles. It then proceeds to introduce the study area and provides a rationale for its selection.

### **4.1 - Historical Evolution of Parish Councils in England**

#### *What is a Parish?*

In England a civil parish (usually just parish) is the lowest unit of local government, lower than districts or counties. Civil parishes are different from ecclesiastic parishes, and have nothing to do with the Church. Parishes do not cover the whole of England, and mostly exist in rural areas, and small urban areas (Turner, 2001). Civil parishes vary greatly in size, many cover tiny hamlets with populations of less than 100, whereas some large ones such as Hereford cover towns with populations of tens of thousands.

Large urban areas are mostly unparished, but there is usually nothing to stop their establishment. For example, Birmingham has a parish, New Frankley. In Greater London, however, the current legislative framework for local government forbids the establishment of civil parishes.

### *The History of the Parish Council*

Civil Parishes arose out of the ecclesiastical parish system, their purpose was to administer the Poor Law. England was divided into parishes, each responsible for the maintenance of the poor people born in the parish. A rate (property tax) was levied in each parish.

The origin of the parish council division or boundary can be difficult to ascertain.

Tranham (2003) maintains that England was divided into parishes by Archbishop Honorius, in about the year 630. Sir Henry Hobart suggests that parishes were first erected by the Council of Lateran, which was held in A.D. 1179. Each widely differs from the other, and both of them perhaps from the truth, which will probably be found somewhere between the two dates. There are, however, references to the distinction of parishes, often referred to as “mother churches” in the historical literature, as early as in the laws of King Edgar, in about the year 970 (Tranham, 2003).

The current civil division of England into counties, of counties into “hundreds”, of hundreds into “tithings”, or towns, seems to owe its origin to King Alfred (871-899); who, to prevent the civil disorders which formerly prevailed in England, instituted tithings; so called, from the Saxon, because ten freeholders with their families composed one. As ten families of freeholders made up a tithing, so ten tithings composed a superior division, called a hundred.

Freeholders were offered as “sureties”, or “free-pledges” to the king for the good behaviour of each other; and if any offence was committed in their district, they were bound to hand over the offender:

“.....and therefore, no man was suffered to abide in England above forty days, unless he were enrolled in some tithing or decenary. “ (Parish law records, Winchester, 1032, anonymous)

In parts of northern England these hundreds were called “wapentakes”. The subdivision of hundreds into tithings seems to be most peculiarly the invention of King Alfred; the institution of hundreds themselves he rather introduced than invented, as they seem to have originated in Denmark; and it is known that in France a regulation of this sort was made about 200 years before; set in train by Clotharicus and Childebert, with a view of obliging each district to answer for the robberies committed in its own division (Tranham, 2003). In some counties there is an intermediate division between the shire and the hundred, known as “lathes” in Kent, and “rapes” in Sussex, each of them containing about three or four hundreds a-piece. Where a county is divided into three of these intermediate jurisdictions, they are called “trithings”, which still exists in the large county of York, where, by corruption of the original English, are denominated “ridings”; the north, the east, and the west.

As Local Government was restructured in the 19th Century, some parishes were designated Urban Sanitary Districts and had their powers greatly increased. Smaller parishes were grouped together as Rural Districts but still retained some responsibilities. However the Poor Law obligations were now given to "Poor Law Unions" of a number of parishes, in order to have sufficient resources to establish and administer workhouses and "outdoor relief". In 1929 the old Poor Law system

was abolished, central government now assuming responsibility for welfare payments (Tranham, 2003). In 1974 rural parishes were retained but most urban areas became "unparished".

Civil parishes are usually administered by parish councils, (sometimes called a town council or occasionally a 'City Council') which have various local responsibilities.

Typical activities undertaken by a parish council include the provision and upkeep of certain local facilities such as allotments, parks, playgrounds, footpaths, village halls and public clocks. They also have responsibility for litter collection, and entering Britain in Bloom. Recently parish councils have been given new powers to provide traffic calming, community transport, and crime prevention measures.

Parish councils are supposed to act as a channel of local opinion to larger local government bodies, and as such have the right to be consulted on any planning decisions affecting the parish. Parish councils receive funding from their district council, taken from the council tax paid by the residents of the parish.

The role played by parish councils varies. Some play only a minor role whereas some larger parish councils have a role similar to that of a small district council. Parish councils are run by volunteer councillors who are elected to serve for 4 years.

Different councils have different numbers of councillors. Most parish councillors are elected to represent the entire parish. Only if there are more candidates standing for election than there are seats on the council will an election be held. Some parishes

are deemed too small to have a parish council and instead have a parish meeting; an example of direct democracy. Parishes can be grouped with other parishes and share a common parish council. In 2005, there were 10,376 parish and town councils in England, and about 1,500 parish meetings (Office for National Statistics, 2006). Since 1997 around 100 new civil parishes have been created (Tranham, 2003).

A parish council can also be called a Town Council or a City Council (but not all city or town councils are parish councils). It can become a Town Council unilaterally, simply by making a resolution to do so. Only the Crown though, can grant City Status. In England, there are currently six parishes with city status : Chichester, Ely, Hereford, Lichfield, Ripon, and Wells (Office for National Statistics, 2002). The Chair of a Town council or City council will usually have the title Mayor.

Sometimes a city or town is abolished as a district, and it is considered desirable to maintain continuity of the charter until a parish council can be set up to replace it. In this case Charter Trustees perform some of the functions of a parish council, and maintain traditions such as mayoralty.

The policy of the present government is to encourage the creation of town and parish councils in unparished areas. Recently established councils include those for Daventry (2003), and Folkestone (2004).



### *Parish councils in the wider United Kingdom*

In Wales the equivalent body to a Parish council is termed a Community council. There are currently 867 community councils in Wales (Welsh Assembly, 2002). The administrative counties of Scotland were sub-divided into parishes, but these lacked their own councils. Scotland has now bodies called Community councils (around 1,200), but these are not equivalent to and have fewer powers than the English parishes and Welsh communities (Scottish Executive, 2002).

In Ireland, counties are divided into civil parishes. Irish civil parishes are divided into townlands. Counties are also divided into larger subdivisions called “baronies”, which are made up of a number of parishes or parts of parishes. Both civil parishes and baronies are now largely obsolete (except for some purposes such as legal transactions involving land) and are no longer used for local government purposes.

### *Recent re-organisation: Post 1973*

The set-up of UK Local Government is extremely confusing. This is the result of a complete re-organisation in 1973 and further partial re-organisations in 1986 and in the 1990s. Up until the last set of changes made between 1995-1998 there were two models of service provision. Outside the major urban areas, services were provided by two tiers of councils in England: County Councils each covering a population in a rough range of 500,000 - 1,500,000: and District Councils, between 4 and 14 within each County Council area, each covering a population of about 100,000 (Office for National Statistics, 2003). Local District functions were divided between the two tiers as indicated (Table 1):

<b>County Councils</b>	<b>District Councils</b>	<b>Divided</b>
Education Social services Transport Strategic planning Fire services Consumer protection Refuse disposal Smallholdings Libraries	Local planning Housing Local highways Building regulation Environmental health Refuse collection	Recreation Cultural matters

Table 1: Roles and Functions: County and District Councils

As a result of the partial reorganisation in 1986, in the major urban areas: London, West Midlands, Greater Manchester, Merseyside, South Yorkshire, West Yorkshire) and Tyne & Wear, there was (and still is) a single tier of councils responsible for all the services listed above. These are called London Borough Councils in London and Metropolitan District Councils in the other areas. In order to avoid total chaos, some functions: Fire, Police, Public Transport: were exercised through Joint Boards to which all the Local Authorities in an area appointed members.

In the 1990s central government's view was that the two tier model of service provision was inefficient and confusing, and that County Councils were too remote from those they served; and therefore that County Councils should be abolished and their functions transferred to District Councils, with some of the smaller Districts being merged (Tranham, 2003). In Scotland and Wales this is exactly what was done. In England there was a process of local consultation which led to the single tier model being supported, and implemented, in some places and rejected in rather more.

Where single-tier councils have been implemented these are called Unitary Authorities. In the cases of Avon, Berkshire, Cleveland and Humberside all the Districts became Unitaries (with some mergers) and the County Councils were abolished. As in the Metropolitan Areas, joint boards appointed by County Councils and the Unitaries, which were formerly within their jurisdiction, now exercise some functions.

#### **4.2 - The Roles & Responsibilities of Parish & Town Councils in England**

Parish and town councils are local authorities and have a limited number of duties. They do, however, have wide powers, should they decide to use them and they might, with agreement of the district or county council, exercise certain functions normally carried out by those councils.

By their very nature, parish and town councils should maintain a close relationship with the local community. They encourage the public to attend council meetings as observers and they are obliged to organise at least one town or parish meeting each year which all local electors may attend and may raise issues of local concern.

Some of the more important powers of parish and town councils are listed alphabetically in Table 2 overleaf. **Where a power is marked with an asterisk** a parish or town council may, in addition to exercising the power itself, help another body to act by giving financial assistance.

FUNCTION	POWERS
<b>Allotments</b>	Power to provide and maintain allotments for cultivation
<b>Borrowing</b>	Parish and Town Councils can borrow money for up to a maximum of 25 years, provided official consent has been obtained.
<b>Burial Grounds, Cemeteries and Crematoria</b> - see also Churchyards *	Powers to provide and maintain and power to agree to maintain monuments and memorials.
<b>Bus Shelters</b> *	Power to provide and maintain bus shelters
<b>Bye Laws</b>	Power to make bye-laws in regard to:  Pleasure grounds Cycle parks Baths and Washhouses Open spaces and burial grounds Mortuaries and post-mortem rooms
<b>Charities</b>	Duty to receive accounts of parochial charities
<b>Churchyards</b> - see also Burial Grounds, Cemeteries and Crematoria	Power to contribute to the costs of a churchyard in use
<b>Clocks</b> *	Provision and maintenance of public clocks, on churches or elsewhere.
<b>Community Centres</b> - see also Halls, Public Buildings and Village Halls	Power to provide and equip buildings for use of clubs having athletic, social or educational objectives
<b>Conference Facilities</b>	Power to provide and encourage the use of conference facilities
<b>Crime Prevention</b> *	Powers to spend money on various crime prevention measures
<b>Drainage</b>	Power to deal with ponds and ditches
<b>Entertainments and the Arts</b> *	Provision of entertainment and support of the arts
<b>Footpaths</b> - see also rights of way	Power to repair and maintain public footpaths and bridleways
<b>Gifts</b> - see also land	Power to accept
<b>Halls</b> - see also Community Centres, Public Buildings and Village Halls *	Provision of buildings for public meetings and functions, for indoor sports or physical recreation, or for the use of clubs or societies having recreational, social or athletic objects.
<b>Highways</b>	Power to light roads and public places  Power to provide parking places for vehicles, bicycles and motor-cycles  Power to enter into agreement as to dedication and widening  Consent of parish council required for ending maintenance of highway at public expense, or for stopping up or diversion of highway  Power to provide traffic signs and other notices

	Power to plant trees, etc and to maintain roadside verges
<b>Land</b>	Power to acquire by agreement, to appropriate, to dispose of  Power to accept gifts of land
<b>Legal Proceedings</b>	Power to prosecute and defend any legal proceedings in the interests of the inhabitants. Power to take part in any public local inquiry.
<b>Lighting</b>	Provision and maintenance of any footway lighting which lights roads or pavements provided the columns are not above specified heights.
<b>Litter *</b>	Provision of litter-bins in streets and support for anti-litter campaigns.
<b>Open Spaces</b> - see also Parks, Playing Fields, Recreation and Village Greens	Power to acquire land and maintain open spaces for the benefit of the public
<b>Parking Places</b>	Provision and management of car and cycle parks.
<b>Parks</b> - see also Open Spaces, Playing Fields and Recreation	Provision and maintenance of public parks and appropriate facilities.
<b>Planning</b>	Local councils have a right to be notified of any planning application affecting their area and to make comments which the planning authority must take into account.
<b>Playing Fields</b> - see also Open Spaces, Parks and Recreation *	Provision and maintenance of land for any kind of outdoor recreation, including boating pools.
<b>Postal and Telecommunication Facilities</b>	Power to pay a public telecommunications operator any loss sustained in providing post or telegraph office or telecommunications facilities
<b>Public Buildings and Village Halls</b>	Power to provide buildings for offices and for public meetings and assemblies
<b>Public Conveniences</b>	Provision and maintenance of public lavatories.
<b>Recreation</b>	Power to acquire land for or to provide recreation grounds, public walks, pleasure grounds and open spaces and to manage and control them  Power to provide gymnasiums, playing fields, holiday camps  Provision of boating pools
<b>Rights of Way</b>	Maintenance of public footpaths and bridleways.
<b>Roadside Verges</b>	Power to plant and maintain roadside verges.
<b>Seats *</b>	Provision and maintenance of public seats
<b>Signs</b>	Power to erect signs which warn of dangers or announce a place name, or indicate a bus stop.

<b>Swimming *</b>	Provision of indoor or outdoor swimming pool or bathing places.
<b>Tourism *</b>	Power to contribute to organisations encouraging
<b>Traffic Calming</b>	Powers to contribute financially to traffic calming schemes
<b>Transport *</b>	Powers to spend money on community transport schemes
<b>Village Greens - see also Open Spaces *</b>	Power to maintain the village or town green
<b>War Memorials</b>	Power to maintain, repair, protect and adapt war memorials.
<b>General Expenditure Power</b>	In any situation not covered by one of the specific powers described above a council may spend a limited amount of money on any purpose, which in its opinion is of direct benefit to its area or to the inhabitants.

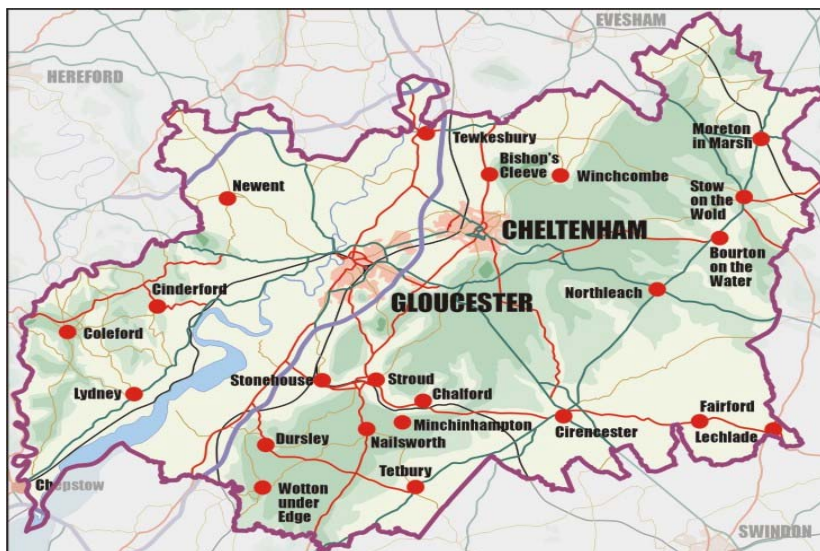
Source: Gloucestershire County Council (2005)

Table 2: Functions & Powers of Parish Councils in England

### 4.3 - Introduction to the study region: Gloucestershire

Gloucestershire is an English county situated at the northern edge of the south west region of the United Kingdom. It covers an area of 2,653 km<sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup> including the largest Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty in the country (Office for National Statistics Neighbourhood Statistics, 2006). Essentially a rural county, it has been known since Roman times for farming, forestry and horticulture with an industrial history featuring the wool trade.

Gloucester and Cheltenham lie at the heart of the county, linked by the A40 and either side of the M5 (see Map 1). There are good connections to the rest of the south west via the M5, to the north via the M5/M6 and M42, Wales using the A40 and the M4 and to London and the south -east using the A40 and the M4. The Fosse Way runs through the county north to south taking travellers from Cirencester to Stow on the Wold and Moreton in Marsh whilst the Ermin Way crosses east to west from Cirencester to Ross-on-Wye.



Map 1: The Administrative County of Gloucestershire

<sup>1</sup> excludes that area of "South Gloucestershire" which is incorporated into the county of Gloucestershire for ceremonial purposes only

Geographically, it splits into three areas, the Cotswolds (Map 2,3 & 4), the Royal Forest of Dean and the Severn Vale (Map 5) with a total population of about 572,800 (2004 Estimated – Gloucestershire County Council)<sup>1</sup> and a population density of approximately 216 people / km<sup>2</sup> (ONS, 2006).

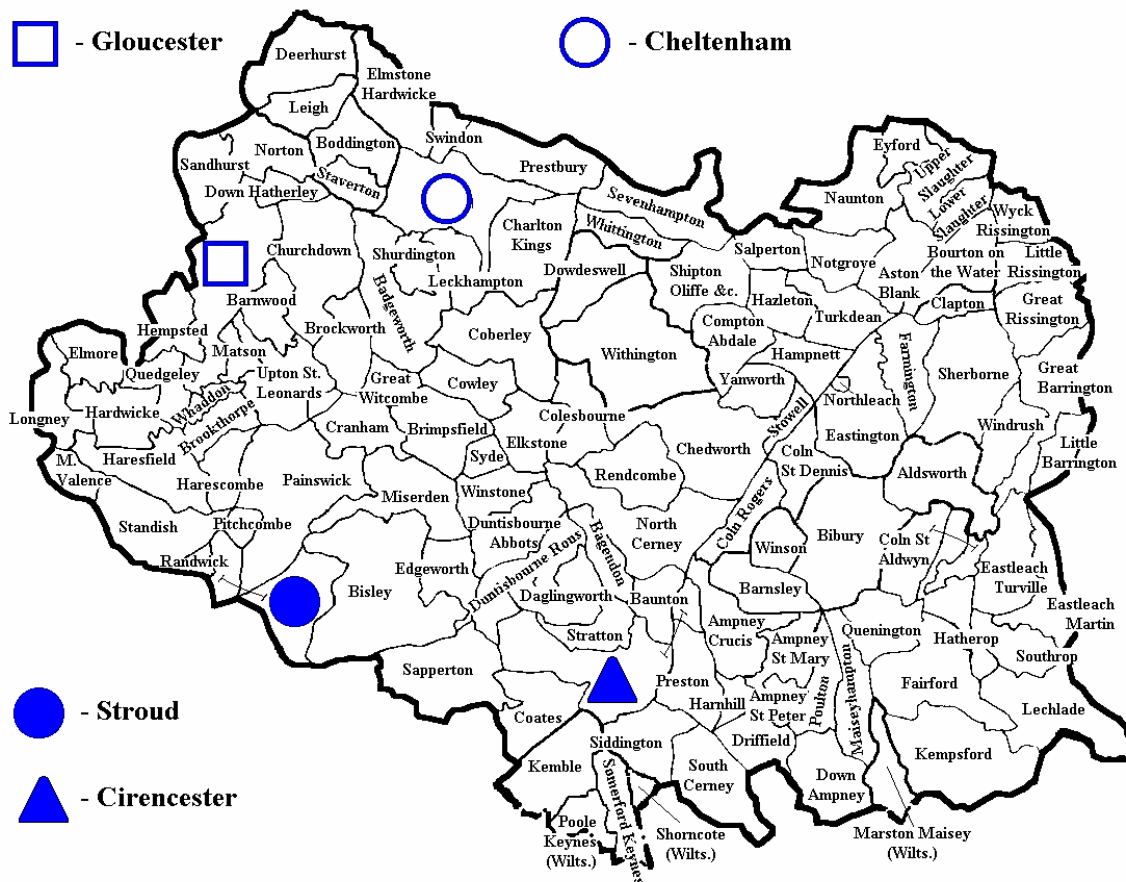


Map 2: Parishes of the North Cotswolds

Note: Map shows parishes in the region of the North Cotswolds and not exclusively those of the county of Gloucestershire. The boundaries of the map include those parishes in Gloucestershire but also those parishes in Warwickshire and Worcestershire, which fall within the region of the North Cotswolds.

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Map 3: Parishes of the Central Cotswolds

Note: Map shows parishes in the region of the Central Cotswolds and not exclusively those of the county of Gloucestershire. The boundaries of the map include those parishes in Gloucestershire but also those parishes in Wiltshire and Oxfordshire, which fall within the region of the Central Cotswolds.

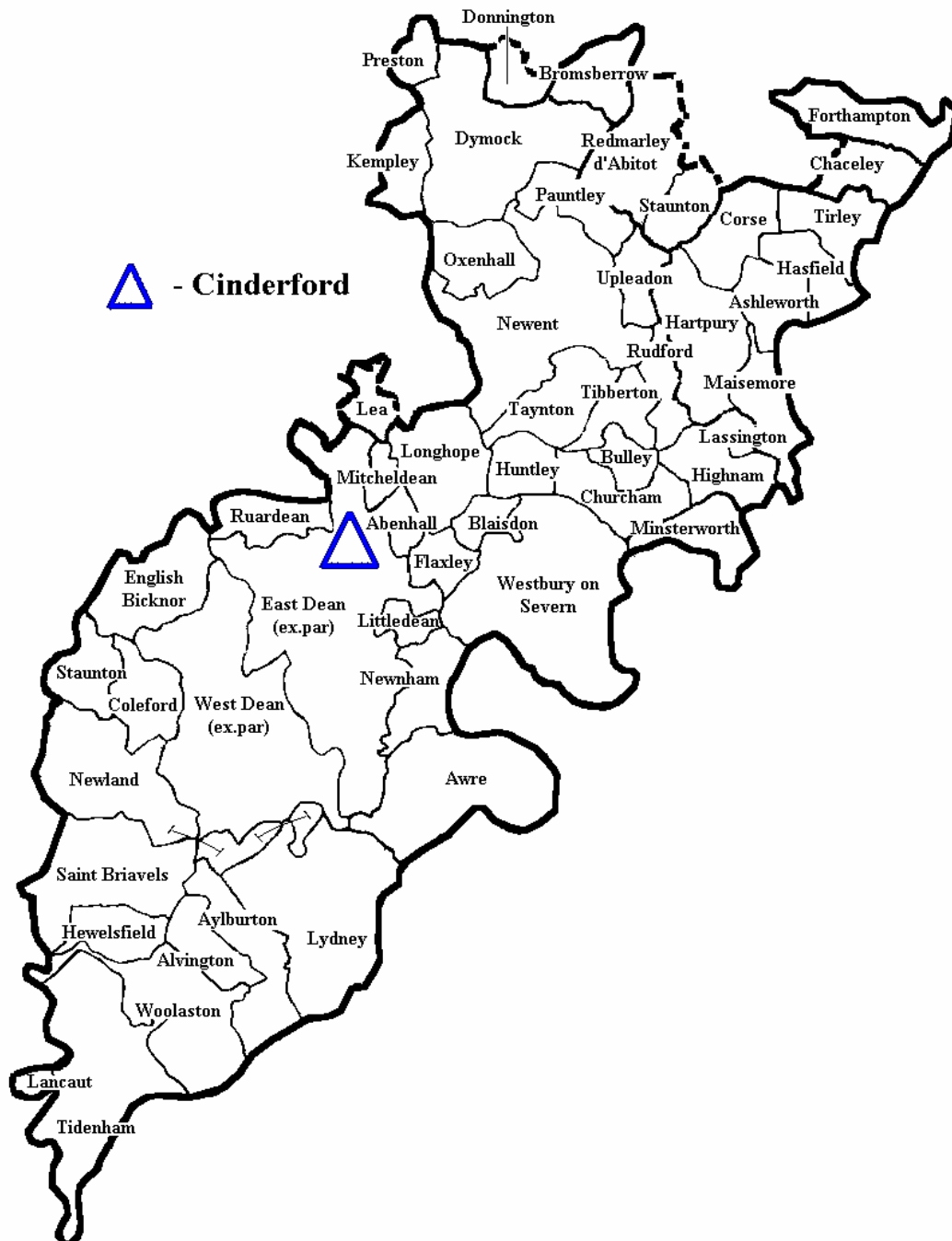
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Map 4: Parishes of the South Cotswolds

Note: Map shows parishes in the region of the South Cotswolds and not exclusively those of the county of Gloucestershire. The boundaries of the map include those parishes in Gloucestershire but also those parishes in South Gloucestershire, which fall within the region of the Central Cotswolds.

*Map reproduced by kind permission of Genuki Limited. Copyright 2006 reserved.*



Map 5: Parishes of the Forest of Dean & Severn Vale

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When considered as a ceremonial county, Gloucestershire borders the preserved county of Gwent in Wales, and in England the ceremonial counties of Herefordshire, Oxfordshire, Worcestershire, Warwickshire, and Wiltshire (including Swindon). Historically, Gloucestershire has also included Bristol, but this has not been considered part of Gloucestershire since Bristol became a county corporate in 1373 (Turner, 2001). Today the city is a county both ceremonially and administratively. The area of South Gloucestershire was made part of the administrative County of Avon in 1974. Upon the abolition of Avon in 1996, it became a unitary authority, and returned to Gloucestershire for ceremonial purposes only. For the purposes of this research, the county has been demarcated by its administrative boundaries only and therefore excludes the parishes of South Gloucestershire.

In all, there are 262 parish councils in the administrative county of Gloucestershire (Gloucestershire County Council, 2005).

#### **4.4 - Rationale for selecting Gloucestershire as the study region**

This section briefly presents a rationale for the selection of the county of Gloucestershire for assessing the role and effectiveness of parish councils. Gloucestershire was selected for study because of the wide range of environments evident within the county. By examining a variety of social, economic and demographic data for the county, it will indicate this diversity and provide a justification for this selection. These data will be placed within the context of national and regional statistics, as well as comparing the data for Gloucestershire with the two neighbouring counties of Wiltshire and Somerset. The purpose here is not to explore the factors which have influenced or can explain certain data but, more

importantly, to provide statistical evidence for the wide variation in key indicators at the county level and thus justify the case study selection.

## Demographic Characteristics

### *Population Change, composition and structure*

Table 3 presents data at national, regional, county and intra-county level for a variety of key population indicators. The first point to make is that the incidence of population change in Gloucestershire (between 1981-2004) is more than twice the national rate but is significantly lower than the neighbouring counties of Wiltshire and Somerset. Drilling down to intra-county level (i.e. areas within the county) there is though, fairly wide spatial variation. The largest population increase is recorded in the Cotswolds (17.5%) and Tewkesbury (23.1%) areas of the county.

County/Region/Area	Population (1000s)	Population % change (1981-2004)	Population age under 5 years %	Population of pension age or over %
<b>United Kingdom</b>	<b>59 835</b>	<b>6.2</b>	<b>5.7</b>	<b>18.6</b>
<b>South West</b>	<b>5 038</b>	<b>14.9</b>	<b>5.1</b>	<b>21.7</b>
<b>Somerset</b>	<b>513</b>	<b>19.0</b>	<b>5.1</b>	<b>22.7</b>
<b>Wiltshire</b>	<b>445</b>	<b>18.5</b>	<b>5.8</b>	<b>19.6</b>
<b>Gloucestershire</b>	<b>573</b>	<b>13.1</b>	<b>5.4</b>	<b>20.4</b>
<i>Of Which:</i>				
Cheltenham	111	7.9	5.1	19.6
Cotswold	83	17.5	5.0	23.0
Forest of Dean	81	10.2	5.3	21.1
Gloucester	111	10.5	6.1	17.7
Stroud	110	13.9	5.4	20.8
Tewkesbury	78	23.1	5.3	21.4

Table 3: Comparison of population statistics by region and selected counties

In terms of age structure, the proportion of the Gloucestershire population who are over 60 years is slightly higher than the national incidence at 20.4%. At county level, there is little variation with the proportion of Somerset's population over 60 year being slightly higher at 22.7%. As expected, the county as a whole demonstrates a trend towards an ageing population, with a fifth of populations in Stroud and Tewkesbury recorded as 60 year or over and nearly a quarter of the Cotswold populace falling into this age range.

The incidence of population change between 1991 and 2001 at the county level is illustrated at Table 4 and provides some interesting evidence of the nature of population change by age cohort. The key point to note here is the downward trend in population size amongst the 25-29 year cohort (-20.7%) as young professional people move away from the area in search of employment. Conversely, the table provides more evidence of the incidence of an ageing population in the county. In the 45-59 year and 85+ year cohorts there has been a 23.7% and 39.8% growth in population in the county respectively.

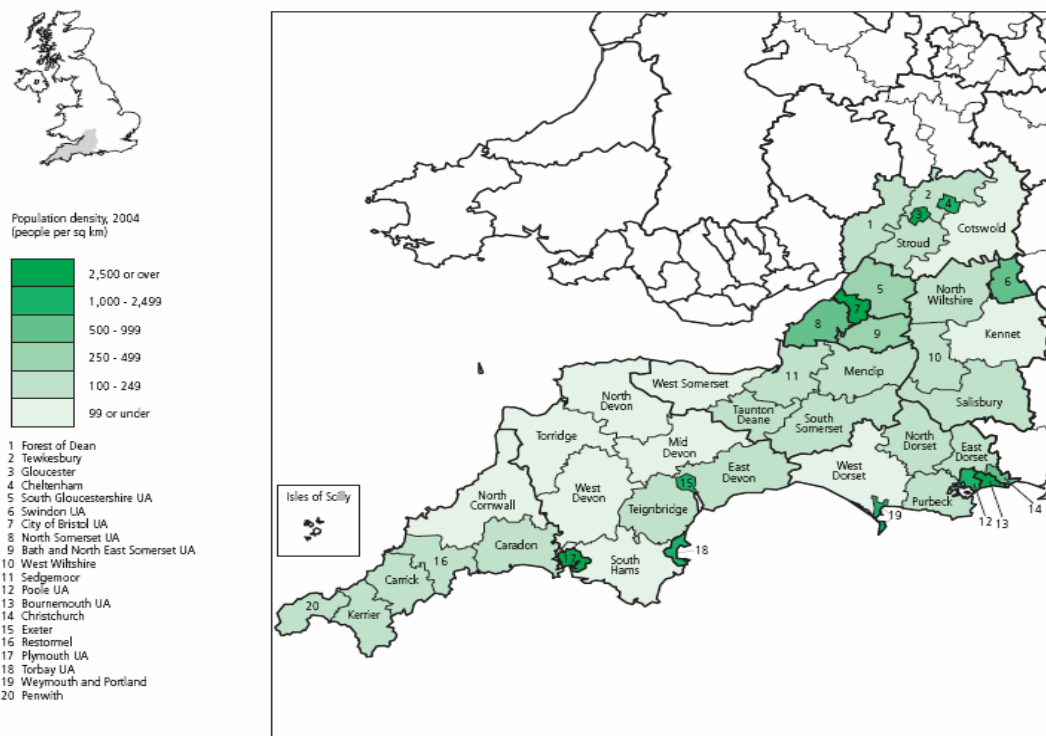
Age	1991		2001		% Change 1991-2001
	Population	% of Total	Population	% of Total	
0-4	34,400	6.42	32,458	5.75	-5.6
5-9	32,700	6.1	34,778	6.16	6.4
10-14	31,900	5.95	37,149	6.58	16.5
15-19	34,200	6.38	33,132	5.87	-3.1
20-24	38,300	7.15	29,121	5.16	-24
25-29	40,500	7.56	32,104	5.89	-20.7
30-44	112,600	21.01	125,607	22.25	11.6
45-59	91,800	17.13	113,580	20.12	23.7
60-64	27,700	5.17	28,613	5.07	3.3
65-74	51,200	9.55	49,611	8.79	-3.1
75-84	31,500	5.88	35,827	6.35	13.7
85+	9,000	1.68	12,579	2.23	39.8

Table 4: Relative Population Change by Age Cohort: 1991-2001 – Gloucestershire *Source: Office for National Statistics*

## Population Density

Another reason for choosing Gloucestershire as a study region was the wide spatial variation of parishes in terms of the distribution of rural versus urban locations. Map 6 below illustrates the relative population density of wards in Gloucestershire both in the context of neighbouring counties but also on a regional scale.

As expected, the large urban centres of Gloucester and Cheltenham have high population densities whilst more rural areas such as the Forest of Dean and the Cotswold demonstrate low densities. Moreover, the relative densities of parishes within these areas also display a wide variation. For example, although the Cotswold area as a whole has a fairly low population density, higher densities will exist amongst the market towns in this area, whilst the rural or very rural parishes will have densities which fall below the aggregated Cotswolds level.



Map 6: Population densities by ward in South West England 2004. *Source: Office for National Statistics*

## Socio-economic characteristics

### *Economic Activity, Unemployment & Households*

County/Region/Area	Economic Activity Rate 2004-05 (%)	Claimant Unemployment (March 2005) (Thousands)	Lone parents as % of all households	Average dwelling price 2004 (£000s)
<b>United Kingdom</b>	<b>78.2</b>	<b>882.3</b>	<b>7.2</b>	-
<b>South West</b>	<b>81.7</b>	<b>45.2</b>	<b>5.8</b>	<b>192</b>
<b>Somerset</b>	<b>83.7</b>	<b>3.7</b>	<b>4.6</b>	<b>184</b>
<b>Wiltshire</b>	<b>86.8</b>	<b>2.2</b>	<b>5.9</b>	<b>207</b>
<b>Gloucestershire</b>	<b>84.0</b>	<b>5.4</b>	<b>5.8</b>	<b>194</b>
<i>Of Which:</i>				
<i>Cheltenham</i>	<i>81.2</i>	<i>1.3</i>	<i>7.2</i>	<i>200</i>
<i>Cotswold</i>	<i>86.7</i>	<i>0.4</i>	<i>4.3</i>	<i>269</i>
<i>Forest of Dean</i>	<i>82.0</i>	<i>0.7</i>	-	<i>175</i>
<i>Gloucester</i>	<i>82.6</i>	<i>1.6</i>	<i>5.9</i>	<i>142</i>
<i>Stroud</i>	<i>87.2</i>	<i>0.9</i>	<i>9.2</i>	<i>206</i>
<i>Tewkesbury</i>	<i>85.0</i>	<i>0.5</i>	<i>5.1</i>	<i>195</i>

Table 5: Local Authority Housing, Households & Labour Markets *Source: Office for National Statistics*

The Economic activity rate (EAR) is the percentage of the population in a given age group which is in the labour force. It is based on the population of working age in private households, student halls of residence and NHS accommodation. In terms of Gloucestershire, the EAR is higher (84%) than both the national and regional rate but very similar to the neighbouring counties of Wiltshire and Somerset. There is slight variation in the EAR at intra county level with the Forest of Dean, Gloucester and surprisingly, Cheltenham falling below the county rate (Table 5).

Claimant Unemployment in Gloucestershire is recorded to be higher than its neighbouring counties, with the highest levels in the urban centres such as



Cheltenham and Gloucester, as would be expected. The lowest unemployment levels were recorded in the Cotswolds and obviously reflect the relative distribution of wealth in this area as perhaps reflected by the spatial variation in average house prices illustrated in Table 5.

One interesting piece of evidence from Table 5 explores the incidence of lone parent households. A point to note here is that whilst the proportion of households which fall into this category is lower in Gloucestershire than at national levels, there is variation at intra county level, with Stroud, Gloucester and Cheltenham displaying higher rates that at the national, regional and inter county level.

### Occupations & Travel to Work

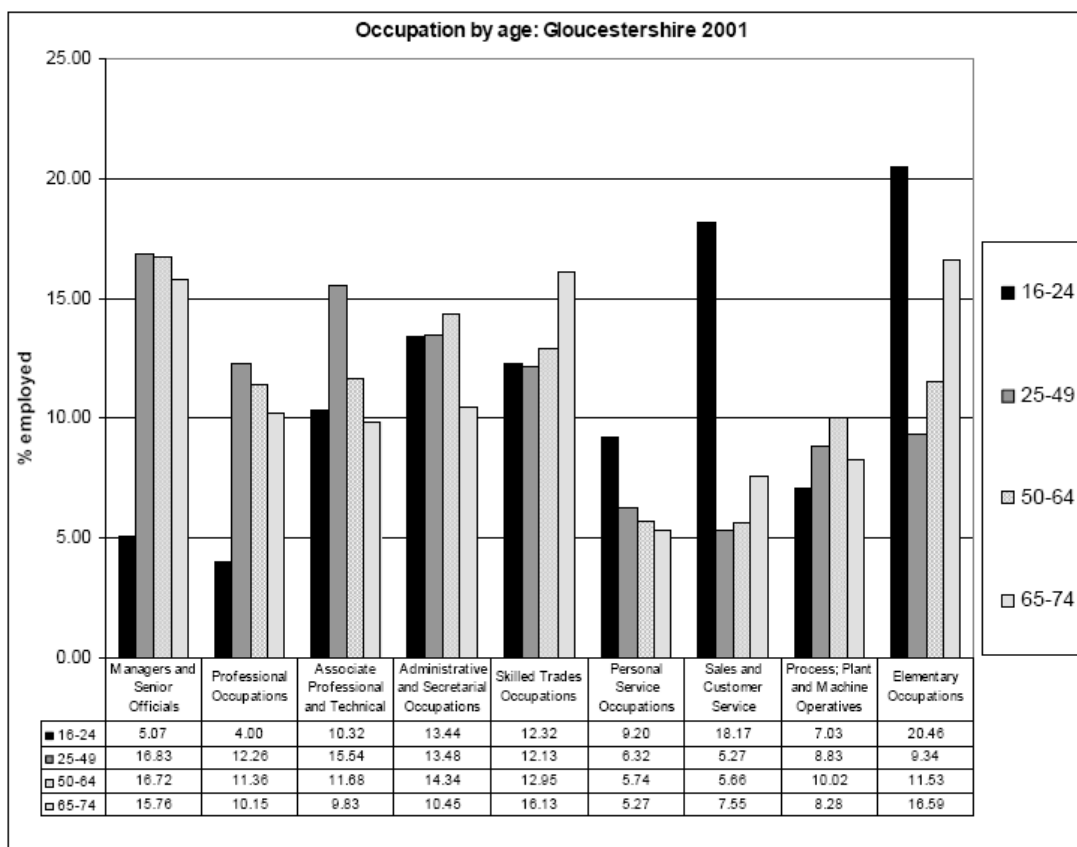


Table 6: Occupation groupings by Age: Gloucestershire 2001 *Source: Office for National Statistics*

The relative occupational grouping of the population in Gloucestershire in terms of its age structure is explored in Table 6. The data serves to confirm the dominance of professional and service sector occupations across all age groups but also the relatively high proportion of the population who are 65 years or older and that are still engaged in these sectors. Process based or elementary occupations (which may be broadly terms *unskilled labour*) occupy approximately 17-27% of those employed depending on the age cohort.

There is a large spatial variation in parishes in the county in terms of their *rurality* or *urbaness* in relation to the distances involved in travelling to areas of employment or economic activity (Table 7). Over 40% of those who reside in the Cotswolds area, for instance, travel between 5-29 km daily to work. This seems to reflect the nature of employment opportunities in these areas, the composition of the population and their relative socio- economic status. It could also point to the spatial variation in terms of geography whereby the Cotswolds is located in a rural part of the county and necessitates greater travel to work distances as a trade off for a rural lifestyle.

Similarly, around 35% of those who reside in the Forest of Dean area travel similar distances to work. Given the very different socio-economic status of the area, the reasoning for this is much more likely to be due to the relative remoteness of this area of the county which necessitates residents to travel longer distances to reach main centres of employment (e.g. Gloucester, Cheltenham).

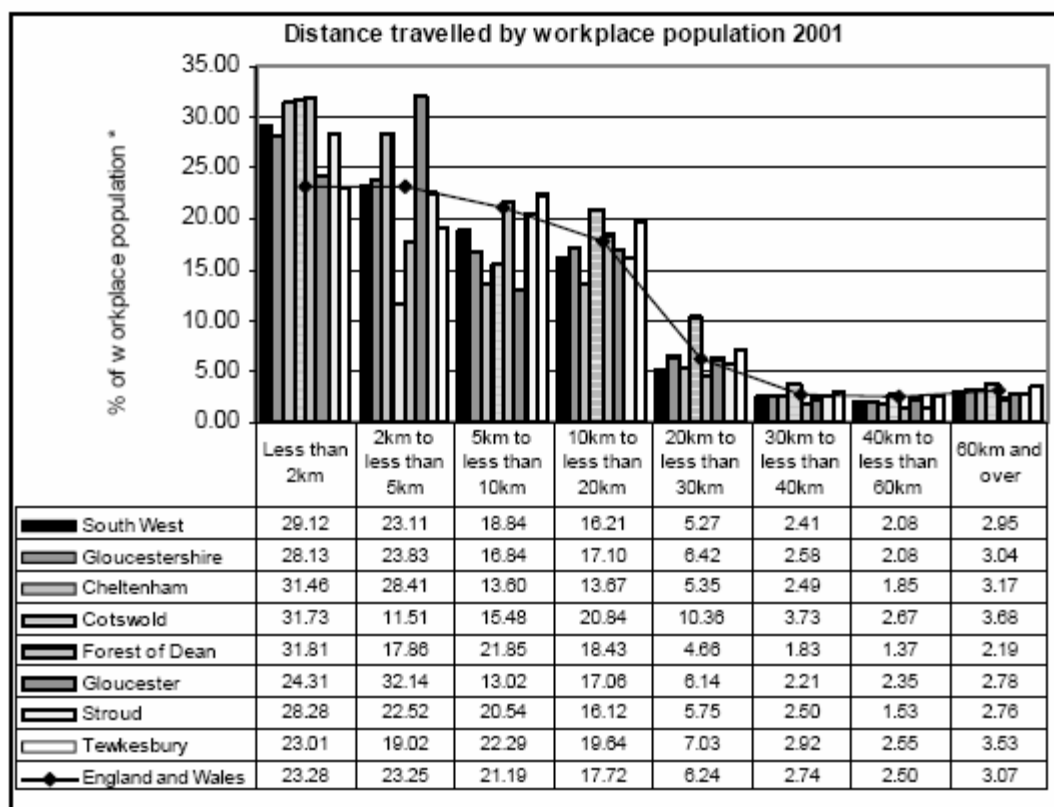


Table 7: Distances travelled to workplace: Gloucestershire 2001 *Source: Office for National Statistics*

### Conclusions

This chapter has examined and discussed two areas. Firstly it examined the historical evolution of parish councils in England and their changing roles over time. Secondly it introduced the study area of Gloucestershire. By providing an historical chronology of the development of parish politics in England, the research relating to modern day parish councils can be placed in context. Describing the characteristics of the study region (in terms of locality, population, socio economic composition and historical context) helps to build up picture of the unique qualities of the area and lends support to the research relating to the effectiveness of parish councils in Gloucestershire.

This, it is suggested, is extremely varied and often piecemeal in nature, influenced by a wide variety of social, economic and geographical factors.

The county of Gloucestershire is wholly suitable for study because it allows for a wide range of rural environments, populations, cultures and socio-economic circumstances to be examined. Moreover, the neighbouring counties of Wiltshire and Somerset display similar socio-economic characteristics but have a fairly narrow spatial variation within the county. From the evidence presented, it is suggested that Gloucestershire presents a varied case study region to enable a more meaningful study of parish councils operating at a variety of scales (particularly at intra county level) and geographies. Additionally, the logistics of the research process meant that the selection of the county was highly suitable for the mode of data collection employed.

## **CHAPTER 5: METHODOLOGY**

This chapter briefly outlines the methods selected in order to achieve the aims of the research (see chapter 1). There are four main elements to the processes involved with collecting the field data: (a) a structured parish council questionnaire, (b) in-depth semi structured interviews with parish clerks from 10 contrasting parish councils (c) participant observations made by the researcher via attendance at a number of parish council meetings during the summer 2003 and (d) the use of supplementary data derived from a variety of primary and secondary sources.

For each strand of the data collection process, the method employed will be explained, before being critically evaluated for its fitness for purpose. Brief reference will be made as to how each method contributed to the specific research aims. Reference is made to relevant literature related to current geographical research where appropriate.

### **5.1 - Parish Council Questionnaire**

Survey research has been an important tool in geography for several decades (McLafferty in Clifford & Valentine (eds), 2003). The goal of survey research is to acquire information about the characteristics, behaviours and attitudes of a population by administering a standardized questionnaire or survey, to a sample of individuals. According to Painter & Philo (2004), there are several basic principles, which should be considered in order to ensure an optimum survey tool. Keep the questions and structure simple, avoid open ended and unnecessarily long questions,

define technical terms clearly, avoid jargon, use plain English wherever possible and avoid negative words like “not” or none”. When designing the postal survey for parish councils in Gloucestershire, these basic principles were adhered to wherever practicable.

An extensive survey was made of parish councils within the county of Gloucestershire. This county was deemed suitable for study because it allowed a wide range of rural environments, cultures and socio-economic circumstances to be examined. All 262 rural parishes were surveyed using a postal questionnaire (see Annex 1). The survey was sent to the Parish Clerk of each council who was asked to canvass the opinion of the entire parish council. There were two parts to the survey. The first part was directed at Parish Clerks in order to provide some factual background information about the Councils (demography, composition, locality etc.). The second part examined perceptions and opinions of the role of parish councils as seen from the councils' viewpoint. It attempted to canvass opinion and attitudes (amongst other things) toward the Rural White Paper, opinions concerning the training of councillors, the changing function of parish councils in their locality, attitudes toward funding, the shifting power structures and domination of councils. It also asked for a record of successes and failures attributed to the council. The key purpose of the survey was to help fulfil research aims 1 & 2: To examine the appropriateness and willingness of parish councils in Gloucestershire to fulfill the new responsibilities set down in the Rural White Paper; and to examine the key role that parish councils have as ‘agents’ of government and explore and assess how far they have adjusted to the new forms of governance set out by the White Paper.

A covering page outlining the motives for the survey and the research context with which the results would be placed accompanied each survey form (See Appendix 1). The importance of confidentiality and disclosure of information relating to individual parish clerks was stressed throughout. Implicit in this was to ensure as high a response rate as possible. Flowerdew & Martin (1997) emphasise just how important the content and structure of such a covering note is when attempting to ensure an optimal response rate. A carefully worded letter establishing the purpose of the survey, what will be done with the results, the safeguards for confidentiality and the anonymity of the respondent, and the hope for a returned, completed questionnaire by a specified date should usually accompany the survey form itself, along of course with a stamped, self addressed envelope.

In the case of the Gloucestershire survey efforts were made to secure an adequate return of schedules by using back up letters, phone calls, where practicable personal visits to clerks, advance publicity and above all, the support of Gloucestershire Association of Town & Parish Councils (GAPTC). This survey allowed for the garnering of extensive information on the social composition of parish councils and the extent to which they feel equipped to deal with the recommendations made in the Rural White Paper. Questionnaires were analysed using appropriate statistical tests techniques.

## **5.2 - Management of the Parish Council Survey**

This section briefly outlines the processes employed in the management of the Parish Clerks Questionnaire. Particular consideration is given to: (a) selecting the sample,

(b) inception and seeking approval, (c) questionnaire design (d) piloting the survey, (e) distribution and response, (f) managing the response and non-response, and (g) the methods of analysis results.

### *Selecting a Sample*

It was decided that the sampling frame for the survey should equate to all 262 parishes in the administrative county boundaries of Gloucestershire. (See appendix 3). Given the well-documented nature of the response rates with postal surveys (McLafferty 2003; Painter and Philo, 2004), it was decided to survey all councils to obtain the optimum number of replies.

### *Inception & Seeking Approval*

A great deal of consideration was given to the management of the research exercise. A postal survey was deemed suitable to provide maximum scope for useable results and timely handling of anticipated follow up work. According to McLafferty (2003), for postal questionnaires, it is important to remember that paperwork which is sent out is effectively a “research encounter by proxy”. Just as the researcher will be looking to interpret aspects of the respondent through the medium of his or her replies, so the respondent will be interpreting the researcher through the medium of the survey instrument. Even though the researcher and respondent are unlikely to meet, a socially constructed relationship will have been formed. It is therefore imperative that the impressions formed by the survey form are of an efficient, professional researcher who is concerned with the issues of ethics bound up in disclosure and data protection.



The scope and content of the survey, and more generally the research proposal was endorsed by the Gloucestershire Association of Town & Parish Councils (GAPTC) while the Rural Community Council for Gloucestershire was consulted and provided assistance.

### *Questionnaire Design*

The questionnaire was devised to obtain as much information as required. There were several parts to the survey. The first part was directed at Parish Clerks to provide some factual background information about the Councils (demography, composition, geographic location etc.). The second part examined perceptions and opinions of the role of parish councils as seen from the councils' viewpoint. It attempted to canvass opinion and attitudes (amongst other things) toward the Rural White Paper, opinions concerning the training of councillors, the changing function of parish councils in their locality, attitudes toward funding, the shifting power structures and domination of councils. It also asked for a record of successes and failures attributed to the council. A copy of the survey is contained at Annex 1.

The structure of the survey questions took on a variety of fixed and open ended response forms ranging from the straightforward recording of names, ages and genders to more complex attitudinal scales to assess opinions and attitudes about certain issues or concerns. According to Graham (in Clifford & Valentine (eds), 2003) fixed response questions have several advantages. First, the fixed alternatives act as guides for respondents, making it easier for them to answer questions. Secondly, the responses are easier to analyse and interpret because they fall into a limited set

of categories. The downside is that such responses lack the detail, richness and personal viewpoints that can be gained from more opened ended questions.

In terms of the fixed response questions, the survey opted for a mix of numerical and checklist categories. The important aspect was to make sure that the widest scope for responses was catered for, including the obligatory “don’t know” or “other option”. Some questions required respondents to select a response which best described their strength of opinion or attitude to a particular issue. For instance, one question asked them to assess if they felt that parish councils had more or less power today than in the past. For such questions a fixed Likert Scale of possible responses (Robinson 1998) was presented ranging from the two extremes – “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. In most cases the range of fixed responses was limited to 4 or 5 points. There are distinct advantages to having more than 3 fixed points on an attitudinal question but there is a danger that as the number of categories increases, so respondents lose their ability to discriminate amongst categories and the responses lose meaning (Fink, 1998; Fowler, 2002).

To complement the fixed response questions and to draw out more in the way of personal opinions and expression, the survey also employed a number of open-ended questions. These were used to particular effect to gauge opinion relating to the variety of initiatives and programs set down in the rural White Paper.

### *Piloting the Questionnaire*

A critically important step in questionnaire construction is pre-testing or pilot-testing (Fowler, 2002). In this phase, the questionnaire is tested on a small group of people

to check the questions, responses, layout and instructions. Piloting often reveals flaws in the questionnaire that are not immediately obvious to the researcher (Fowler, 2002).

The draft survey was piloted between July - September 2001. In order not to prejudice future results from the 'live' survey, it was decided to select a small sample of parish councils *outside* the study region. In all ten parishes were selected as recipients of the draft survey. These were chosen on a random basis and not because of any particular characteristics. These were located in North Wiltshire and Worcestershire (See Appendix 4). Covering letters were sent explaining the purposes of the exercise and a copy of the research proposal was included for information. Parish councils were asked to provide comments on the content and format of the form as well as actually providing answers to questions contained in the survey itself. Eight out of ten respondents completed and returned the survey forms. Following the pilot exercise, consideration was given to the comments made and the ease with which respondents were able to understand the questions posed. Three more drafts followed before agreement was reached on a final 'live' version.

#### *Distribution and response*

Printing and distribution of the postal questionnaire took place in October 2001. They were distributed in two stages, with the Graduate Research School at University of Worcester acting as a central postal point for returned forms. A list of addresses of Parish Clerks was obtained from Gloucestershire County Council's Environment Division for all 262 parish councils in Gloucestershire. The survey was administered

between November 2001 to January 2002 with a deadline of four weeks from receipt of the questionnaire. The option of an electronic survey form was also provided. Around 15% of survey forms were distributed in this manner.

### *Managing the response rate and dealing with non-response*

Questionnaires suffer because they rely on the willingness of the people involved to complete them properly. A biased sample may result depending on those who choose to respond; it might be only those who have a particular complaint which they wish to air (Fowler, 2002; McLafferty, 2003; Painter & Philo, 2004). In this case, however, the support of GAPTC and the Centre for Rural Research at University of Worcester added weight to the survey. However, consideration was given that a lack of thought in the response or the provision of answers in which those replying seek to anticipate the results or to avoid criticism of their replies. In the event not all those invited to reply did so: this is indicated in Annex 3. Those who did reply, though, do appear to have considered many of the questions carefully and often wrote additional, helpful comments on the forms. However, some clarification and teasing out of the responses was required, in some cases. Anticipating the results would have been difficult because they were not told how the data were to be analysed. It is recognised that in most cases, the parish clerk completed the form on behalf of the parish council. There is, however, ample evidence to suggest that the survey was widely discussed at parish meetings before completion by the clerk. To remedy the possibility of the certain survey forms reflecting the sole views of the clerk, a field on the form asks respondents to indicate who actually completed the survey.

Additionally, follow up interviews with selected parish councils, as part of the case study stage of the research ensured a balanced perspective.

Following the closing date, the response rate stood at 39%. This increased to the current 49.6% (or 130 out of 262 respondents) following the issue of reminder letters to outstanding respondents during February and March 2002. The final response rate of 49.6% was very respectable given that most current research methods literature (Fowler, 2002; Longhurst, 2003 McLafferty, 2003) suggest that typically, less than 30% of postal questionnaires will be completed and returned.

#### *Methods to analyse results*

Results from the survey were analysed using the software package, *MS Excel*. A multi page spreadsheet was constructed to enable efficient management of the data. Data was cross tabulated by parish and by question field. The package was set up to automatically generate graphical representations of the results. Verbal responses were input *verbatim*. Further statistical tests were employed (via the functions of Excel) as appropriate.

### **5.3 - Semi Structured Parish Clerk Interviews**

The research then proceeded to a more in-depth analysis of selected parish councils. The aim of this stage was be to yield the information necessary to analyse local actor networks, regulatory mechanisms and the incidence of community participation operating through and on parish councils. It also helped to reinforce the findings from the postal survey and proved a useful validation check to opinions expressed at the

survey stage. This was particularly useful for “drilling down” on comments made in response to the open ended questions relating to specific issues facing councils in today's countryside, levels of community participation, partnership and involvement, attitudes to current rural governance legislation and the differing tiers of the rural governance structure, and the future for parish councils as seen through the eyes of the council members themselves. These were key issues pertaining to research aim 4.

The data gathered at the survey stage was used to provide a sample framework to choose ten contrasting parishes to provide more detailed information to help supplement survey results. When making this choice, consideration was given to a range of factors, including, the parish's locality and size, its social make up; the social and political composition of the parish council; and the attitudes expressed by the councils at the survey stage. In these case studies (see Annex 5 for the 10 Parishes Councils selected), increased emphasis was placed on examining the daily running of the parish council. Qualitative methods and analyses were used in this stage, including semi-structured interviews with councillors and other parish residents, and observations of parish meetings. Annex 2 provides an example of an interview capture sheet used. This was a record of (a) an interview with the parish clerk or similar representative of the parish selected for further research and (b) observations made by my myself during attendance at a parish council meeting at the selected parish. For part (a), the interview responses were grouped by theme. The same themes/questions were explored in each interview and observation session for each parish council selected. As a result it was hoped that the information could be used on a comparative basis. All interviews and observer sessions were conducted during

June – September 2003. Where practicable, both parish clerk interview and attendance at a parish council meeting took place on the same date. Interviews usually took place in the hour or so before the formal parish council meeting. Each semi-structured interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes.

According to Clifford & Valentine (2003), a semi structured interview is a verbal exchange where one person, the interviewer, attempts to elicit information from another person by asking questions. Although the interviewer prepares a list of predetermined questions, semi structured interviews unfold in a conversational manner offering participants the chance to explore issues they feel are important. They are particularly effective for facilitating open responses or for use in clarifying responses made in a more structured survey environment (Fink, 1998). These methods are also useful for investigating complex behaviours (particularly important, in this case, for assessing the behaviours which may be conducive to local actor network activities), opinions and emotions, and for collecting a diversity of experiences (Cameron, 2000). According to Valentine (2002) and Fowler (2002) semi-structured interviews make a significant contribution to geographic research, especially now that discussions about meaning, identity, subjectivity, politics, knowledge, power and representation are high on many geographers' agendas.

#### **5.4 - Participant Observations made at selected Parish Meetings**

Participant observation involves spending time being, living or working with people or communities in order to understand them. In other words, it is, as the name implies, a method based on participating and observing in which field notes or video notes are

used as a method of data collection. (Laurier & Philo, 2003). According to Fowler (2002) it is as important to participate as well as just be observing. As described above an interview/observation capture form was devised (Annex 2) with the dual purpose of recording observations during attendance at a variety of parish councils and notes taken from parish clerk interviews which usually preceded the meetings.

There were of course, obvious limitations to this approach. In a few cases, the presence of a researcher (who to all intents and purposes was a stranger to the council members) at meetings did inhibit some members and as a result discussions on more sensitive issues were restricted or curtailed for fear that the subject matter might be reported as part of the research. Apart from the usual assurances made relating to the disclosure and confidentiality issues surrounding the release of such data (see covering note to survey for more details), there was very little else that could be done. In most cases though, parish council members welcomed the interest shown by the researcher and appreciated the value of such an exercise.

### **5.5 - Other Supplementary Data**

The textual analysis and de-construction of appropriate records and other written texts was used to supplement this data. This analysis allowed a critical evaluation to be made of the appropriateness of parish councils to implement the ideas contained in the Rural White Paper and will contribute to our understanding of rural governance. These included primary data such as electoral registers, local census data and Neighbourhood Statistics from the Office for National Statistics, details of election statistics sourced from the county councils, various iterations of the Rural White Paper, the internet sites of the Countryside Agency, Rural Development Agency,



Gloucestershire Parish & Town Councils association (GAPTC), ACRE, DEFRA and a variety of parish council websites. A variety of other secondary sources (maps of the local parishes, planning documents etc) were also employed.

These were used to supplement the postal survey, semi-structured interviews and participant observations made by the researcher, and to provide a contextual background for the work.

## **5.6 - Conclusions**

There were four main elements to the processes involved with collecting the field data used to underpin this research: (a) a structured parish council questionnaire, (b) in-depth semi structured interviews with parish clerks from 10 contrasting parish councils, (c) participant observations made by the researcher via attendance at a number of parish council meetings during the summer 2003 and (d) the use of supplementary data derived from a variety of primary and secondary sources. Each approach has its relative advantages and limitations but taken together, provide a framework for the collection of comprehensive empirical evidence related to coverage and measurement of the role and effectiveness of parish councils in Gloucestershire. In turn, the methods used to collect this empirical data enable the fulfillment of the stated research aims of the thesis. This chapter has outlined in detail, each method and critically evaluated its fitness for purpose. Extensive reference has been made to relevant literature related to current geographical research methods, focussing on the application of such techniques to the research undertaken and the idiography of the study region concerned.

## **CHAPTER 6: COMPOSITION and VIBRANCY OF PARISH COUNCILS IN GLOUCESTERSHIRE**

### *Introduction to the field research analysis*

The main body of the analysis and interpretation of the field based research carried out in Gloucestershire (divided over 3 Chapters) attempts to develop and explore a variety of themes. The changing perceptions of roles for parish councils are examined and an assessment is made on how well parish councils in Gloucestershire have adapted to changing modes of rural governance. The issues facing councils in today's countryside and the levels of community participation, partnership and involvement are then discussed. The wide ranging attitudes toward current rural governance legislation and the differing tiers of the rural governance structure are explored before the future for parish councils (as seen through the eyes of the council members themselves) are discussed. Finally, some defining conclusions are drawn from the survey and suggestions for areas of further research signposted.

Chapter 6, 7 and 8 explore the main findings from the Parish Survey and from the parish clerk interviews carried out with selected case study parishes during the summer of 2003. Nearly two-thirds of the returned survey forms were completed by the Parish Clerks (see Figure 1).

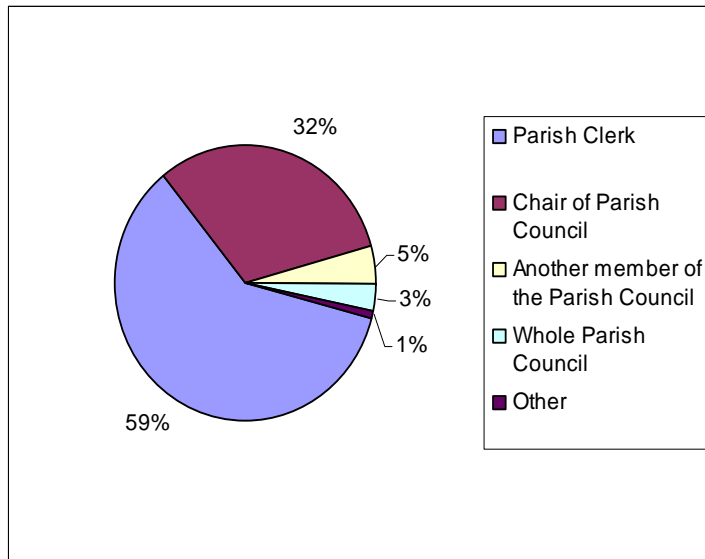


Figure1: Respondents to Parish Council Survey

This chapter firstly examines the social and demographic composition of parish councils in Gloucestershire. In the second part of the chapter, levels of involvement and participation in parish council activity are assessed. It casts light on the extent to which ideas of partnership have filtered down to individual parishes. It explores questions of inclusion and exclusion in the local governance hierarchy, and explores the motives behind such exclusion.

### 6.1 - Social composition & Demography

Despite often incomplete and eligible returns (poor handwriting, incomplete questions etc.), around 67% of the respondents completed this section of the questionnaire fully enough to derive some meaningful results.

As expected, people with professional backgrounds dominated the majority of parish councils. Occupations ranged from civil servants, lawyers, doctors, teachers, engineers and consultants. Not surprisingly, very few returns highlighted individuals with a farming or agricultural-related background. Overall, though, 46% of the members were retired. From the interviews carried out with ten parish clerks across the county, whether now retired or in full-time employment, 8 out of ten were or had been involved with careers, which fell into this professional category. Many considered this to be something of an advantage when dealing with parish business. Professional skills and expertise such as project management; financial accounting, planning and countryside management were all represented at the parish council meetings attended. This socio-economic fabric to Gloucestershire's parish councils is not atypical and very closely mirrors recent research (Lowdes & Sullivan 2004; Woods 2005).

Despite the obvious drawbacks to such approximations, length of time served on the parish council varied from as little as 6 months to a remarkable, 31 years. As expected, with a range so varied, the length of service can only ever provide an illustration. Taking this into consideration, the modal length of service (LOS) can be calculated at 5.5 years. This time period broadly equates to the cycle of parish/local elections in the study region.

With such a wide range of LOS, one would also expect that the length of time that each parish member had lived in the parish to vary considerably. Again, responses ranged from just 11 months to "all my life". Identical limitations apply with the degree of approximation with this question as well. Despite this though, the average period spent living in the parish (excluding those responses where approximations were too

vague to attach a time period to, for instance “all my life”) came out at 5.6 years. One perhaps can conclude then that there is a tendency towards a positive correlation between the length of time spent serving as a parish councillor and the time spent actually living in the village. Evidence from the parish clerk interviews seems to reinforce this relationship. Most clerks (70%) had taken up membership of their local parish councils within 12-18 months of moving to the parish.

The gender mix of the parish council highlighted a significantly male dominated environment, where 37% of members were female and 63% male. This is borne out by the incidence of what might be seen as traditionally male-dominated occupations among council members. This may be considered evidence for a distinct “coalition of interest” as described by Goodwin (2003). Observations taken at a variety of parish council meetings during the summer of 2003 seem to confirm this gender divide. Of those women who attended these meetings, many were the spouses or partners of parish council officials, simply there to provide informal support and often attending in a non-official capacity.

## **6.2 - Levels of community involvement**

As was expected, levels of involvement in the running and organization of Parish councils across Gloucestershire varied considerably. Regular attendance by a core group of members was the norm, whilst the discussion of emotive issues relating to planning and the environmental fabric of the locality typically brought out the crowds. Remoter, smaller parishes tended to have smaller attendance levels, often with no more than one or two members turning up at a time. Larger councils closer to urban areas fared better. Across the county the average number of contested seats was 6

and around 60% of these were filled by local election, whilst the remainder were often co-opted with other parish councils. This trend in co-option seems to support the recent research literature regarding the electoral structure of rural parish councils (Goodwin and Whitehead 2003).

Whilst co-option between parish councils in the county was fairly common place, the incidence of contested or disputed parish elections was very low (around 10%) and according to observational evidence gleaned from parish clerks in the smaller more rural villages, had fallen to this level over the last 10 years or so. Of course, high levels of participation in a parish council election may indicate a divided and fractionalized population rather than a functioning, inclusive community. This has implications in terms of the criteria suggested to designate “Quality Parish Councils”, namely active interest and electoral competition for places on parish councils. This evidence alone suggests a considerable apathy and disinterest with this type of participation and reflects the findings of Woods *et al* (2005) in England and Wales. They found that contested elections were the “exception rather than the norm”, occurring in only 28% of wards. They also found that the sharpest decline in contested elections and the greatest increase in wards with insufficient candidates have both been for wards with less than 1000 electors. The present research suggests a similar trend. However, when examining electoral turnout data from county-wide parish records, one finds that although competition for seats at parish elections is low, turnout by the electorate remains relatively high in the more rural, smaller parishes (on average around 50-65%) and is lower in more urban based wards. This again reflects national trends (Lowndes and Sullivan, 2004; Edwards and Woods, 2004).

The survey addressed the issue of attendance and participation with a series of questions which attempted to gauge views on which sectors of the community were actively involved in parish matters and which were not. Seventy-five percent of respondents felt that there were large parts of the community that did not get involved with parish council matters (figure 2). This finding suggests that the incidence of exclusion as described by Edwards *et al* (2000), Goodwin (2003) and Woods (2005), is also typical of parishes in Gloucestershire. Most respondents to the survey cited the young and second homeowners as the most apathetic sectors of the community. Indeed Philips (1994) research into class colonization in rural communities suggests that second homeowners become apathetic to local politics. However, observational evidence from the attendance at two parish council meetings during summer 2003, suggests that these two groups of rural society are not always so indifferent. In terms of the younger population, a council in the west of the county had a very novel initiative for encouraging a more youthful attendance at meetings.

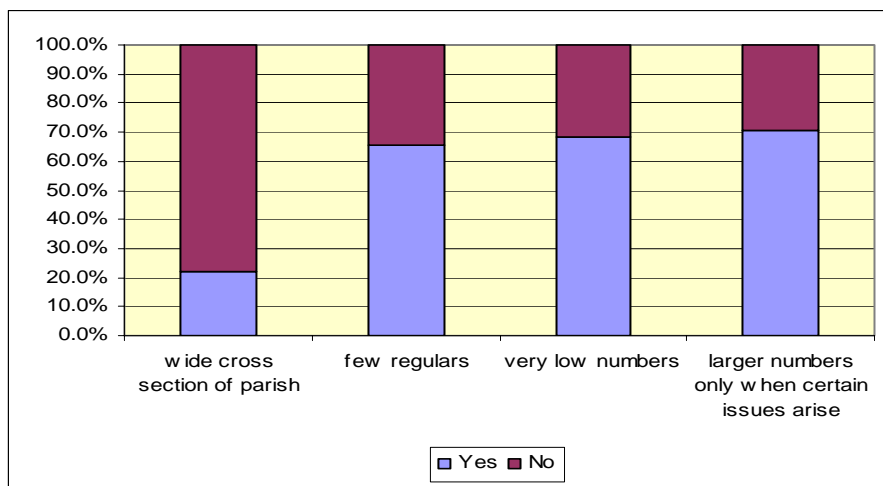


Figure 2: Representation at Parish Council meetings

Each meeting was attended by a teenager (over 16 years) from a pool of volunteers from the village. This representative was rotated at each meeting to give a chance for others to become involved in local politics. The representatives were unofficially elected by the village via a combination of self and peer nomination. In this way, the council member ensured that an important demographic in the village was fully represented. The prevalence of this unofficial youth representative at parish councils may be worthy of future research and perhaps illustrates a gradual shift in parish council compositions.

In terms of involvement by second homeowners, things seemed to be clearer cut. In most cases, this group often cited a disassociation with village life as a reason for a lack of attendance. Living away from the village during the week, importing in services (in terms of buying provisions en-route to their second home) and a general detachment from village life reflected in the comments made in response to questions put to the Parish Clerks, seemed to explain this apparent self nominated disenfranchisement. In a number of cases though, it became evident that this group did have a voice (albeit seemingly motivated by self-interest - though presumably 'locals' may also be motivated by self-interest) in their local politics. More often than not though, the issue that had forced their attendance at a meeting revolved around planning applications relating to their second home or proposed changes to the built fabric of the village which were deemed to have a direct impact on their properties. It seems then, that "NIMBYism" is still a driving force for this section of the rural population. This trend reflects similar findings made by little (2001) and Tewdwr-Jones (2000) in his studies in Wales.



Whilst participation in the statutory confines of local parish politics was found to be fairly low across Gloucestershire, community involvement at a different level was widespread. Edwards and Woods (2004:186-187) make a distinction between participation at the parish councillor level (statutory responsibilities, public accountability) and that of the “more focussed and self defining role played by the unelected co-ordinator of community development”. These are the volunteers who organised village fetes, the local fun run or woodland walk, arrange the church flowers or organise the harvest festival. Certainly from the survey results and interviews carried out throughout the county many respondents considered this role to be as important as that of the parish councillor in bringing the community together:

".... I'll tell you what – our group does a lot for the village, more than these lot [the parish council] do. Last year our group brought together the local school PTA, amateur dramatics society and ladies circle to organise our village pageant – the parish council didn't even get a look in. Good job too!" (Attendee at Undisclosed Parish Council – August 2003)

It was also found that these people often became the focal point for several community based initiatives (such as organisation of the local fete, as well as arranging the church flowers). Woods *et al* (2005) suggest that participants in this role considered that they have a “multi-faceted” role in community participation. Across Gloucestershire, this level of community participation was more readily offered up as an example of how the parish councillors mobilized their communities to become more involved in village life. It may be argued then that the elected councillors of these parishes are, perhaps, unfairly taking the credit for the galvanizing efforts of the unelected volunteer.

### **6.3 - Attitudes and perception of current rural governance legislation**

As indicated earlier, the geography of partnership initiatives across the UK has produced a very uneven map of rural governance (Goodwin 2004; Edwards *et al* 2005). This “map” is mirrored in the incidence of effective partnerships within rural politics in Gloucestershire.

Survey and observational evidence from parish clerk interviews and observations from parish council meetings suggests a very patchy level of community involvement in partnership initiatives. The research was able to identify only 11 community-based projects from those parishes surveyed. These projects (located in the southwest and north of the county) fell into three broad categories: improving the residential/environmental fabric of the parish; improving service provision (for example, in terms of local meal delivery service for the elderly); the instigation of voluntary youth activities. In all but two of these projects, the parish council (and hence the community representative) played a very minimal role, with Gloucestershire County Council taking the lead in terms of logistics and funding. In addition, public funding financed projects, which were implemented by private sector bodies. This research confirms Edwards *et al* (2000) research into partnership initiatives in Mid Wales and Shropshire where only 2 out of 154 projects directly involved the community. It also suggests that few projects in Gloucestershire meet the “tripartite ideal” (Edwards *et al* 2000) of public, private and voluntary involvement.

Central to the Rural White Paper is the assumption that small towns and villages have a greater incidence of participation than larger, more urban settlements. The assumption that ‘chocolate box’ villages are havens for the community spirited, self

sufficient, “do gooders” is a dangerous one to make, but unfortunately prevails in the underlying principles set out by the White Paper. Policy discourse furthermore, assumes that the countryside is a single integrated homogenous community where people share common goals and interests and partnerships are the way things get done. Goodwin (2003:8) refers to this as an attempt to bridge the gap between “communities of place “ and “communities of interest”. In reality, this rose coloured view of the small country village, seriously hampers the organisational and functional effectiveness of partnerships and more generally, the decision making process on parish councils in Gloucestershire.

Councils did not seem to share the Government’s vision for modernisation. Of those who responded to the question only 27% agreed that they should be reformed. The remainder either disagreed or were unsure (see Figure 3).

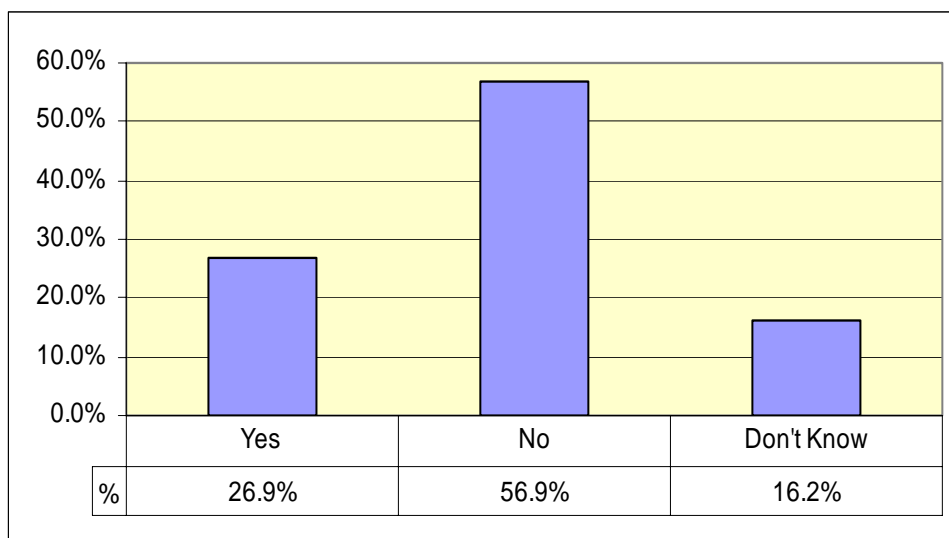


Figure 3: Need to reform parish Councils

Even though over 65% of parishes had heard of concepts such as the Quality Parish, many did not possess a full appreciation of what exactly it entailed (Figure 4). Many

viewed such initiatives as just another layer of bureaucracy or an attempt by central government to impose urban ideals on the countryside.

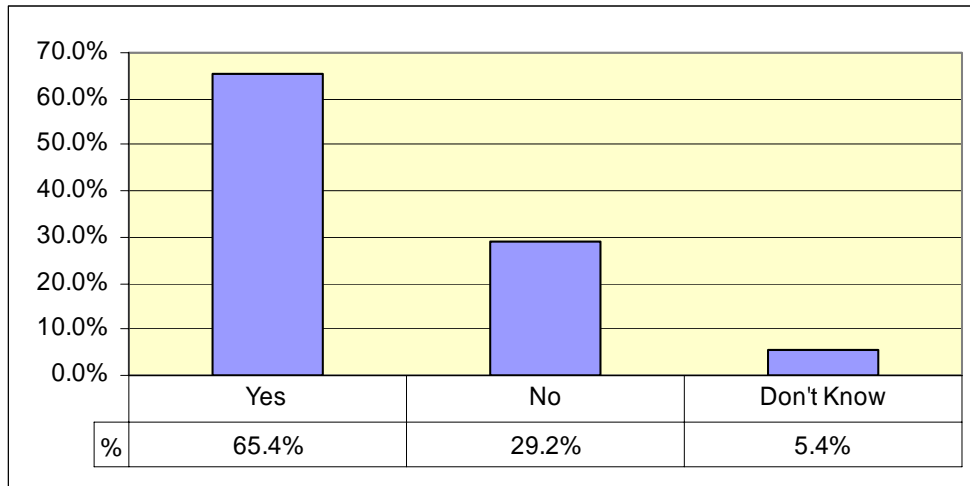


Figure 4: Awareness of the 'Quality Parish' concept

Many respondents argue that such policies are rooted in the civil service mentality of Whitehall and were formulated by officials who had very little working knowledge of the countryside itself. So, far from embracing these platforms intended to empower parishes to take more responsibility for the day to day running of their council, many viewed them with apathy.

Certainly observational evidence gleaned from attendance at selected parish council meetings, and interviews with Parish Clerks seems to reinforce this perspective. During the interviews, specific focus was given to the contents of the Rural White Paper and an exploration of the perceptions of parish clerks in terms of their understanding of the impact of such measures on their council. In all interviews, a copy of the White Paper was taken along to act as a reference point. The first point to make here is that of the 10 parish clerks interviewed, only 5 had actually seen a

copy of the White paper itself. Of those who had seen it, most were unsure, when asked to relay their understanding of certain key concepts embodied in the document:

".....Rural Sounding Boards – what the hell are they? Sounds like a pop group. What purpose, do you suppose these are meant for?" (Parish Clerk - Undisclosed Parish Council – August 2003)

It seemed from the views expressed in the interviews that misunderstanding and general apathy to the White Paper persists – and at the time this was nearly three years after its publication. The more worrying aspect is that it appears that parish councils filter parts of the legislation embodied in the paper to suit their own understanding. Consequently, initiatives can be widely misinterpreted. Take these two (typical) viewpoints on the concept of ‘Quality Parishes’ put forward by two different parish clerks:

".....is that like ‘Britain in Bloom’ or something but for parish councils? Some sort of badge of quality” (Parish Clerk - Undisclosed Parish Council – June 2003)

“Do we get a prize or something? Surely this involves yet more work for us – there’s got to be a catch....there always is”. (Parish Clerk - Undisclosed Parish Council – August 2003)

The effectiveness of the Quality Parish and Town Council scheme in England will be reliant on high levels of participation in parish and town councils alike. This research suggests that such schemes are often misinterpreted by parish councils and are slow to filter down from the national level. This could have a serious impact on their utility and potential to succeed. These findings reflect trends already identified by the likes

of Edwards *et al* (2000), Goodwin (2003) and Woods (2005) in various other regions of England and Wales.

#### **6.4 - Conclusions**

An individual's pathway to participation in parish politics is often shaped by opportunities, obstacles and personal motivation (Woods *et al* 2005). The structure of a local council in terms of age, gender, professional background and length of residence in the locality can, in turn, impact on the effectiveness of the decision making process. The research suggests that Parish council meetings across the county are characterised by low attendance, (largely characterised by apathy and a detachment from daily village life) and a very narrow cross section of the community.

Whilst participation in the statutory confines of local parish politics was found to be fairly low across Gloucestershire, community involvement at a different level was widespread. There is a definite distinction between participation at the parish councillor level (statutory responsibilities, public accountability) and that of the "more focussed and self defining role played by the unelected co-ordinator of community development". These are the volunteers who organised village fetes, the local fun run or woodland walk, arrange the church flowers or organise the harvest festival. It was also found that these people often became the focal point for several community-based initiatives. Across Gloucestershire, this level of community participation was more readily offered up as an example of how the parish councillors mobilised their communities to become more involved in village life. It may be argued then that the elected councillors of these parishes are, perhaps, unfairly taking the credit for the galvanizing efforts of the unelected volunteer. This may suggest that significant

biases remain in the characteristics of community leaders in Gloucestershire and would certainly underpin those findings made by Woods *et al* (2005) for England and Wales.

Whilst co-option between parish councils in the county was fairly common place, the incidence of contested or disputed parish elections was very low and according to observational evidence gleaned from parish clerks in the smaller more rural villages, had fallen to this level over the last 10 years or so. This has implications in terms of the criteria suggested by the Rural White Paper to designate “Quality Parish Councils” status but in turn consolidates recent findings at the national scale made by Goodwin & Whitehead (2003).

## **CHAPTER 7: ISSUES and PRIORITIES FOR PARISH COUNCILS**

### *Introduction*

This chapter examines the main issues and priorities facing parish councils in Gloucestershire and assesses the extent to which these have been moulded by the individual perceptions and motives of the parish council members themselves.

The survey posed a series of questions designed to tease out the nature of these problems and more importantly perhaps, the parish councils attitude towards and perception of them. Respondents were asked to examine the major changes that had taken place in the parish over the last 10 years and to provide examples where these changes (in their view) had resulted in a positive or negative impact on the parish.

### **7.1 - Key Issues**

Around 40% of responses highlighted the predictable and well-documented negative narrative of counter-urbanization in recent years (Philo 1992; Phillips 1994).

Examples of newcomer-local conflicts, planning and boundary disputes, decline in rural services, rows over fox hunting and badger baiting, second homeowners and the perils of “class colonization” abounded. These examples provided plenty of scope for further future research into the local mechanics of local-actor network theory.

However (and rather encouragingly) a new set of positive changes seemed to emerge from the research. The evidence suggested that in some parishes, there was resurgence of more localist attitude amongst rural communities, one where community spirit and ‘looking out for your neighbours’ seemed to be making resurgence. So, whilst community participation in terms of parish politics tended to



be on the decline, involvement in parish clubs, societies and festivals seemed to be burgeoning in some parts of the county. Examples of improved and sustained community participation included the formation of a local amateur dramatics association, the re-emergence of WI's, garden festivals, local organic farmers markets and village hall based community activities such as badminton, computer clubs and bingo. Other positive changes in the same vein reflected the encouraging embrace of IT in rural areas. Many respondents explained how their local village hall had become the "information hub" of the community where access to the Internet and e-mail were freely available. Some of the more outlying parishes were particularly pleased with this development explaining how information technology had improved links with other parish councils in the area:

"It's about time we embraced modern technology.....why should it be just for the cities. Having this access to the outside world has not only improved the administration of the council but also provides a valuable and much needed link to other parish councils in the area" (Parish Clerk - Undisclosed Parish Council - January 2002)

The growth of rural tourism (often viewed from a negative standpoint in terms of accessibility and ownership of the countryside (Halfacree (1995)) received welcome press from some parishes. The burgeoning of farm shops, B&Bs, countryside parks and even golfing ranges were viewed as important channels of investment and revenue by some, as long they were countered by a sympathetic and protectionist approach to the natural beauty of the countryside. One such example involved a local organic farm located in the east of the county, that in recent years had set up a farm shop selling locally produced meats, dairy products and vegetables. This, of course, is not a particularly trailblazing initiative but over time, the shop has grown to become a hub supporting a network of local organic producers who have now formed a co-

operative and sell their products from the shop. The expansion has continued over the last couple of years whereby the farmer now runs specially organized tours of the farm to school children. An education centre has now been set up in a disused pig barn, which offers a wide range of educational material outlining the benefits and importance of organic farming techniques. The farm shop provides a source of much needed revenue to local farmers and aims to promote the importance of organic farming techniques to the local community not only in terms of the nutritional value but also their impact on the local landscape. The addition of the Traidcraft range of products has further widened the scope of education and responsible consumerism.

Whilst parish councils recognised the employment and investment potential such rural tourism can bring to an area, many did not consider that a lack of employment opportunities in rural areas was a problem. Nearly 70% of parishes either did not consider it a problem or deemed it not relevant. Although many acknowledged that job opportunities for the young and those in the declining agricultural sector were poor, most were content that the process of seeking employment inevitably involved leaving the village or commuting to nearby urban centres. The increased car ownership afforded by growing affluence amongst the middle class newcomer further necessitated this change:

"It's a fact of life.....if you want to earn a decent wage and have some chance of a long term career, you need to be prepared to travel out of the parish to larger centres like Bristol, Bath or Cheltenham perhaps. Personally, I don't find it a problem - but then I have just retired!" (Parish member - Undisclosed Parish Council - September 2003)

## 7.2 - Positive and Negative Changes

Of the negative changes, the lack of support offered by local and central government to rural parishes joined the list of more predictable concerns. Many parishes either felt that these bodies interfered too much or not enough. Attitudes and perceptions of current rural governance legislation were also mixed and are examined in more detail later on.

The decline in rural services was cited as a major negative change in most rural parishes (Figure 5). Much has been written about this decline in a wide variety of services in the countryside (Cloke and Goodwin 1992; Goodwin 1998; Woods and Goodwin 2003). The experience in Gloucestershire parishes tended to reflect the national picture. Around 1 in 4 of those who responded to this question cited the closure of the local public house as having a detrimental impact on the local area, particularly in reducing the degree of community participation:

"...it was the last place where the village could meet together in a social gathering. We used to hold quiz nights there and the local WI women used to meet there on Wednesday evenings. That's all gone now.....most people are happy to drive to the nearest town and pay those prices....." (Parish member - Undisclosed Parish Council - January 2002)

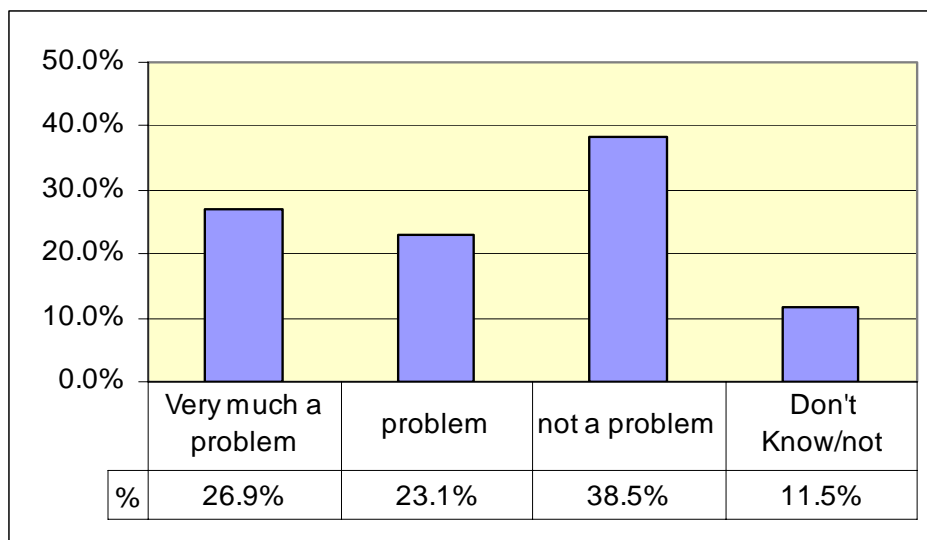


Figure 5: Declining rural services

The provision of rural housing prompted a passionate response from many parishes. Nearly 60% of parishes considered the provision, affordability and regulation of housing to be very much a problem or a problem (Figure 6). A lack of affordable housing for the young was cited by well over three-quarters of respondents as a serious problem. Class colonization, gentrification and second homeowners provided much of the ammunition for such claims. Again, the examples gleaned by the research were fairly typical of that documented in previous research (Philo 1992, Cloke and Little 1997; Woods, 1998, 2001).

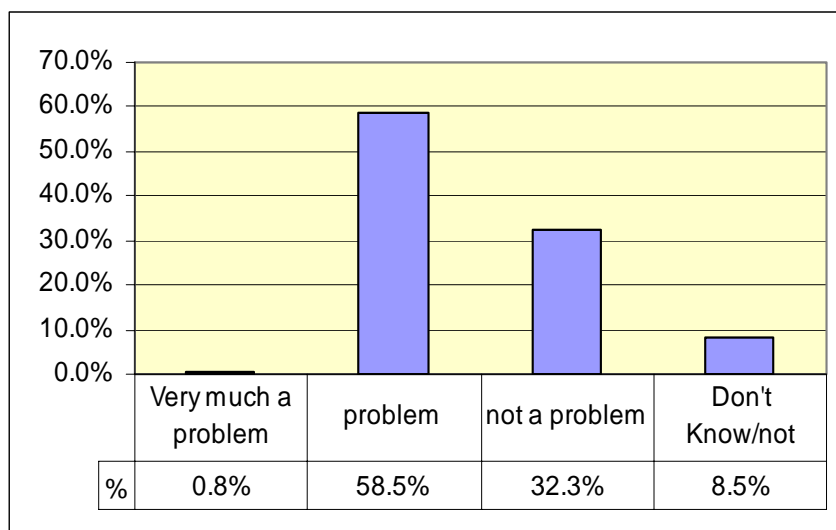


Figure 6: Lack of affordable housing

Many respondents though, more surprisingly took some of the blame for this disparity themselves, recognizing that by moving into a village and buying up local housing at inflated prices actually exacerbated the problem. They seem to reconcile this in their own mind by claiming that their ability to afford to renovate often run down rural properties actually improved the rural scene:

“...my situation probably didn’t help matters. I moved to the village on retirement, 5 years ago. I own a little cottage on the outskirts of the village that used to be a farm labourers cottage. I feel guilty that by me buying up this property I have displaced a local resident. But, on the other hand, I have been

able to afford to restore the cottage to the way it once was...surely that counts for something, "(Parish member- Undisclosed Parish Council - January 2002)

There was some evidence though, to suggest that parish councils were actively attempting to tackle the thorny issue of housing provision. Several examples of low cost housing schemes around the county were cited where derelict farm outbuildings and barns were being converted for occupation by the local population. Most recognised though that this type of initiative would barely dent the surface of a problem which would show no sign of abating for as long as the current house price inflation continues. It does, however, illustrate that in a handful of cases, partnership initiatives (in terms of housing provision in any case) where community involvement, public and private contributions have an equal role do exist and run effectively. The effective running of such partnerships has been highlighted in only a handful of examples cited by Edwards *et al* (2000) in their study of partnerships in mid Wales.

Another aspect of housing provision, which generated a strong response, was the poor residential and commercial planning in rural areas (see Figure 7).

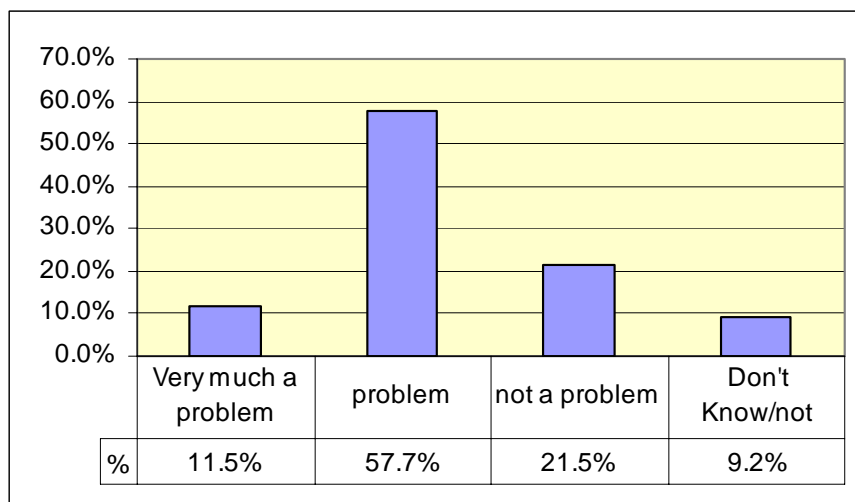


Figure 7: Poor residential planning

Many parishes admitted to often “feeling outside” this planning process. Around 69% of respondents suggested that a lack of understanding and involvement with the rural planning process represented a major problem. There was a general consensus that the parish councils involvement in planning and boundary disputes was all too often nominal and that most of the time they could only stand by and let the district and county councils take on the mediation. This often frustrated the council, who felt, given their expert local knowledge and representative role for the parish, they had an important part to play in the proceedings. One quote from a parish councillor located in the east of the county highlights this concern:

“We often feel sidelined in such affairs. We are the ones that are supposed to represent the views of our local community but all too often the likes of GCC (Gloucestershire County Council) rail road us into a situation. This can be VERY frustrating ” (Parish Clerk - Undisclosed Parish Council - January 2002)

Evidence taken from a particular parish council meeting attended in the south west of the county in July 2003 also serves to reinforce this notion of being “sidelined” in housing issues which impact on the local community. The discussion at this particular meeting centred on plans to convert some run down stable blocks sited on a derelict farm into 4 local authority owned houses. The project was one of the few partnerships identified by the research and was being spearheaded by the county council and the local housing association. Funding had been sourced from a variety of stakeholders but predominantly the financial and logistical planning was coming from the council supplemented by government grants.

The meeting was well attended by a large cross section of the community.

Representatives from the District and County Councils, and Housing Association

were in attendance. Along with the local farmer whose land the houses were to be sited, there were two representatives from the parish council. As the meeting progressed it became increasingly obvious that the perspectives and views of the local parish were being suppressed at the expense of the financial and logistical considerations. Local objections to the plans centred on the damage to the environmental fabric of the village and the perceived potential increased incidence for petty crime and vandalism. These views were based on the somewhat narrow-minded suggestion by one parish council member that housing association owned properties attract “a certain type of person”. Throughout the meeting the County Council representative was able to shout down the objections of the parish council by indirectly highlighting the relative weighting that parish council powers have in relation to those held at county level. In this case though, the sidelining of the parish council in such an issue was just as much about the ineffectualness and often unsophisticated approach of the parish representatives in formulating reasoned, well thought out arguments as it was to do with the relative power structures of the two tiers of local governance in operation at that meeting.

The evidence in Gloucestershire also reinforces similar research, which maintains that there is a dichotomy between public “participation” and public “consultation” (Woods & Goodwin 2003). The two are very different concepts. In the case study from the research carried out by Goodwin, discussions took place between the parish council and representatives from the district council and Housing Association regarding the siting of 6 new local authority houses on the outskirts of the village. Concerns were raised by the parish about the development possibly encroaching on an area deemed to be “environmentally sensitive” - a natural habitat for dormice and

hedgehogs. Although the issue was not resolved at the end of the meeting, it became clear that the villagers concerns were peripheral in the decision-making process. The official from the District Council overrode the chair of the parish council on a number of issues, citing county regulations, which superseded the somewhat nominal powers of the parish council.

The representatives at the meeting were all selected to attend by the District Councils with little consideration given to the representation provided on behalf of the county. This evidence confirms research carried out by Edwards *et al* (2000) examining the effectiveness of the Market Towns Initiative (MTI) in rural Wales which suggested that a significant process of “hand picked elite representation” is almost necessary in order to get the job done in parish politics. Often parish and town councils are bemused by the number of stakeholders they must involve in the consultation process – farming unions, parish clerks, TECs, county councils – so reluctantly leave it to the district or county council to organise.

The nature and extent of commercial planning also raised concerns amongst parish councillors. In many of the larger villages in the county (for example, Stow on the Wold, Coleford, and Painswick), the building of light industrial units and small-scale industrial parks had developed in recent years. While it was recognised, that these often provided a much needed source of local employment and inward investment but could also lead to an increase in heavy traffic through the village and provide a magnet for petty crime and vandalism which also led to “undesirables” frequenting the village amenities:

“It’s all very well building these units but we weren’t consulted by the council (DC).....and they don’t want to know when there’s an increase in vandalism and car break-ins when these youngsters on



these schemes come into our village to work" (Parish Clerk - Undisclosed Parish Council - January 2002)

This may well seem to be a slightly narrow minded and hard-line attitude to take but it is unfortunately representative of some of the responses, which were returned. In fact, of those surveyed, 46% considered crime (particularly burglaries, car break-ins, vandalism and trespassing) to be a real problem in their parishes (Figure 8).

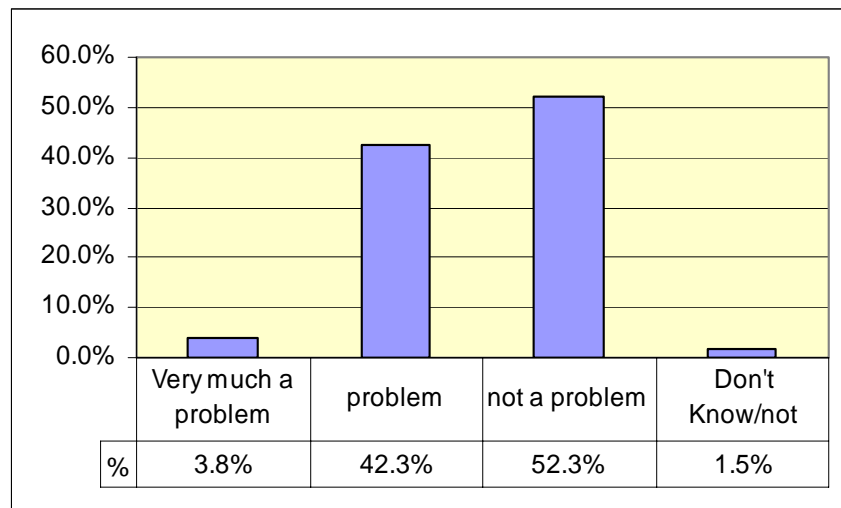


Figure 8: Incidence of crime

Furthermore, many blamed the spate of crime on the young and disenfranchised. Another group singled out for such crimes were gypsies. Many parishioners reported that the burgeoning of camps sites and semi permanent trailer sites on the outskirts of their villages provided a real melting pot of potential petty thieves and criminals. Whether one can deduce a positive correlation between those 46% who considered crime a problem with the 60% of parishes who considered that the lack of activities for the young in their village to be a problem is a matter for debate.

Traffic congestion and the associated pollution was another area where concerns were expressed (Figure 9).

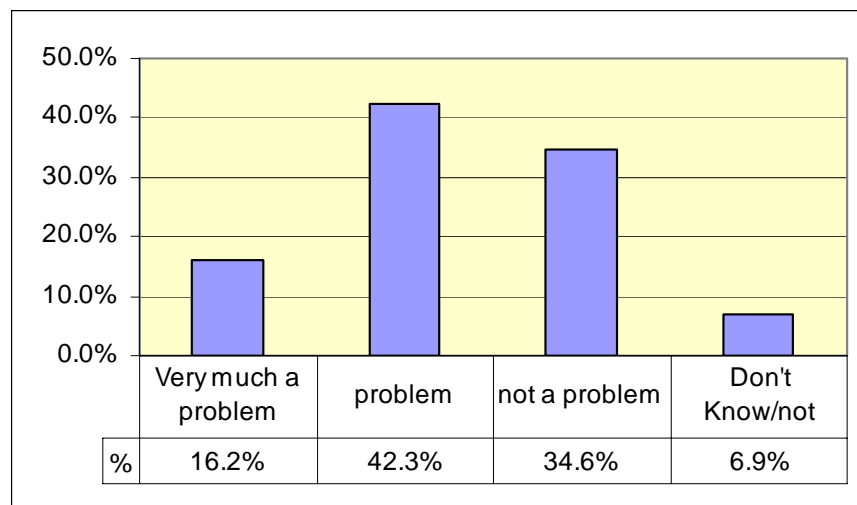


Figure 9: Traffic pollution/congestion

Fifty-eight percent of respondents considered increased volume and intensity of traffic through or around their parish to be a problem. Much of the evidence pointed towards an increase in heavy traffic (lorries, hauliers' etc,) in particular where the associated noise pollution concerned 30% of respondents. The paradox to this perspective, of course, is that many of these people contribute to the increased volume of traffic themselves as most tend to work outside the village and commute daily. Of the 40% or so of parishes who did not consider traffic issues to be a particular problem, one could conclude that these were the large part of the population who considered travelling to nearby urban areas for the attainment of their work and leisure activities as an acceptable 'trade off' for the rural idyll associated with country living. Linked to concerns over traffic congestion, are the issues surrounding the protection of the countryside from environmental damage (Figure 10).

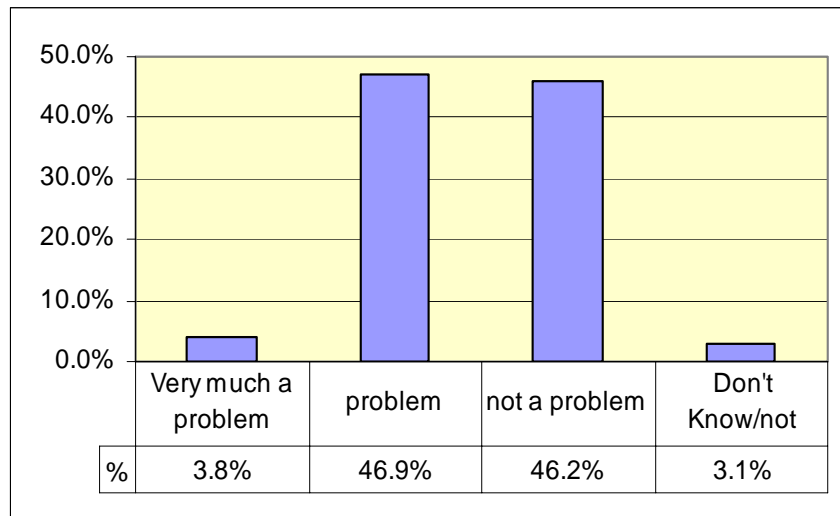


Figure 10: Environmental damage

The evidence here seems to suggest a slight degree of apathy regarding damage to the natural environment, with a little over 50% of parishes considering this to be a problem. The responses provide useful evidence for this split. Most parish councils had provided examples where damage to the built environment resulting from poor planning regulations, vandalism or road widening/traffic calming schemes were highlighted as their major concern. Often the linkage between these changes to the built fabric of the village and the inevitable impact they will have on the natural environment was not made. This is not to say that concerns weren't raised over the damage to the local countryside as well. Many parishes provided examples where agricultural practices such as the use of pesticides, the removal of hedgerows and over-ploughing of open fields had had a marked impact on their parish.

Alternatively, increases in traffic congestion, the building of new housing developments and light industrial units had left many concerned with the churning up of verges and ditches, which provided local wildlife with a natural habitat:

“People seem to forget that increased house building, traffic and poor agricultural practices are taking their toll of our countryside. We are in danger of destroying the very thing that most of us moved here to enjoy – fresh air, a protected countryside. The verges in our village are an absolute disgrace but unfortunately people (in our village) are all too often looking out for number one and couldn’t care less as long as it doesn’t spoil their view of the countryside!” (Parish member - Undisclosed Parish Council - January 2002)

Litter was also cited as a problem for just over 41% of parishes, particularly those located in the tourist belt of the Cotswold ‘honey pot’ villages (Bourton on the Water, Stow, The Slaughters etc). The installation of re-cycling centres and litterbins had helped to improve the situation in many villages in recent years but some parish councils recognised that more still could be done. Several parish councils in the South East of the county highlighted the problems associated with the refuse disposal service provided by the district councils. They argued that, as many were operated by private contractors, the necessary attention to timely and efficient pick ups were being sacrificed in favour of profit margins. Others reported that the frequency of refuse collections had become less reliable in recent years as the district and county councils increasingly become fixated with meeting “targets and objectives”. Most agreed, however, that parish councils could provide an effective force for good when empowering locals to take pride in their local communities.

The nature and extent of service provision within parishes prompted some interesting responses to issues relating to the decline in services and how this impacted on certain sectors of the community. Around 50% of parishes in the county consider the decline in village services to be a cause for concern. The more isolated the parish geographically, the more acute the problem. Anecdotal evidence abounded with accounts of Post Office closures, the cessation of mobile library services, pub and village shop closures. Although the degree of severity varied according to location

(parishes in the West of the county and those bordering the Forest of Dean viewed the decline in services with particular concern), the perceived impact that such a decline had on the elderly and younger rural population was clearly evident, although surprising in some cases.

Over 60% of parishes viewed the lack of activities for the young in rural communities to be a particular problem (Figure 11).

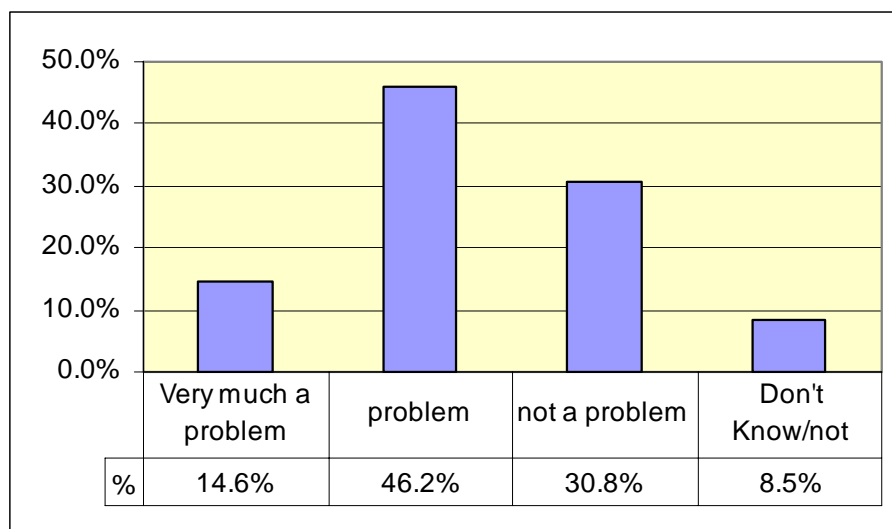


Figure 11: Activities for the young

Many councils have attempted initiatives to redress the boredom and isolation felt by young people but have met with varying degrees of success. The formation of youth clubs, after school sporting activities and Saturday Clubs had been successful in a few parishes but were often met with a degree of apathy and skepticism amongst the young who often preferred to ‘hang around’ the focal points of the villages (such as the church, shop or village cross) than forcibly attend

“...a rather contrived attempt to harness youthful aggression and angst” (Parish member - Undisclosed Parish Council - January 2002)

Allied to this dearth in youth-orientated activities is the apportionment of blame that some parish clerks attach to episodes of vandalism and petty crime, which take place in the parish. A surprising number of respondents shared the view that youthful boredom and misplaced rebellion were the catalysts for a recent spate of car break-ins, graffiti and church burglaries. As one respondent put it:

“They’ve got absolutely nothing to do, have they? They’re too young to drive and too old to play with toys so they look for they’re own entertainment. In my day, we would play for hours outside in the sun; these days they’re stuck in front of a computer screen, filling their head with all sorts of rubbish. Is it any wonder that [they] resort to such activities.” (Parish member - Undisclosed Parish Council - January 2002)

Indeed these comments were shared by a large number of the respondents and reflect research carried out by Yarwood (1995), Murdoch & Abram (1997) relating to the incidence of crime in rural areas. Luckily not all were this narrow minded and most recognised that more needed to be done to harness the boredom of younger rural people.

At the other end of the spectrum and surprisingly, only a quarter of parishes regarded the lack of facilities for the elderly to be a problem (Figure 12).

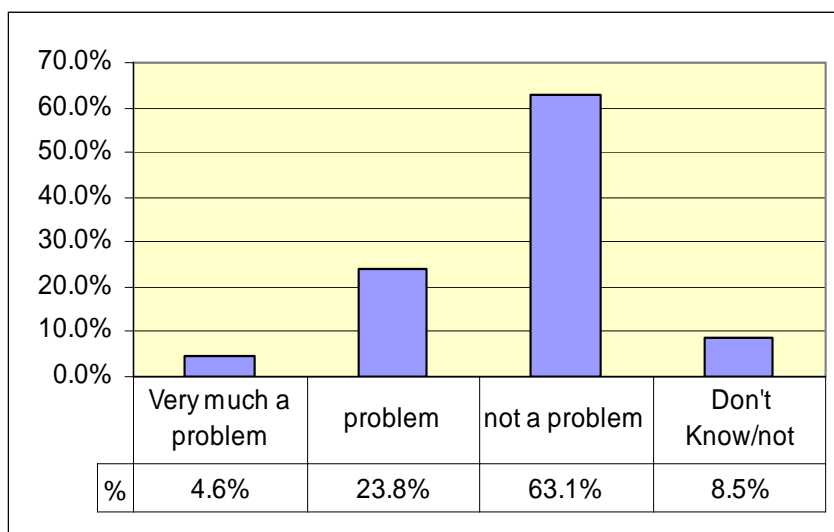


Figure 12: Services for the elderly

Over half of respondents agreed that the lack of public transport in rural parishes was a problem but very few considered this to be to the detriment of the old. One reason for the uncharacteristic result could be the apparent affluence of the elderly in Gloucestershire. In terms of housing and investment wealth, the county is one of the richest in the country outside Greater London. With affluence comes choice. It may well be that the grey population enjoy increased mobility in terms of car ownership and more choice in terms of care provision (e.g. more able to afford home-help).

Despite this result, many parishes were actively behind initiatives for the elderly. The provision of mobile grocers, the promotion of free internet access to aid with online shopping, mobile libraries and the formation of "Golden Years" tea clubs were all given as examples where parish councils in Gloucestershire were aware of the issues associated with an aging population.

The final section of the survey, which dealt with the problems, and issues facing parish councils in Gloucestershire allowed respondents to record any concerns not covered elsewhere. Not surprisingly strong opinions were voiced concerning the outbreak of foot and mouth during the second half of 2001. Thirty-six parish councils voiced their fears and concerns on this issue. Not surprisingly, these were concentrated amongst the more agricultural communities in the county, notably the west and south east of the county. The main thrust of these concerns centred on the government's management of the disease and the economic impact that the quarantine of large groups of farm animals and tracts of open countryside would unleash on the community at large. Several respondents highlighted their concerns

over the economic impact for fledgling rural tourism enterprises in the area. Examples cited included various sporting and recreational activities, which had to be postponed as a result of the outbreak. Others expressed their disappointment concerning the cessation of fox hunting over this period, whilst others saw this impact as highly desirable. But the overwhelming strength of feeling was reserved for the local and central Government reaction to the crisis. Many shared the national perspective that Foot & Mouth was the final nail in the coffin for the countryside. Some parishes reserved particular anger for what they saw as the complete mismanagement of quarantine and vaccination arrangements at a local level. The role of district and county councils came in for particular criticism:

"The council has been next to useless. Two farms in my parish were restricted with their cattle movements under government ban, which the farmer was prepared to accept. But the amount of misinformation and crossed wires that followed [on the part of the council] was unforgivable" (Parish member - Undisclosed Parish Council - January 2002)

On a more positive note, a handful of parish councils commented that despite the obvious economic and emotional impact of such a crisis, in some cases, the outbreak had brought communities closer together – even if it was only momentarily through its criticism of the Government. Clearly more research is necessary to examine the interactions between central and local government during this crisis, and to assess how close, or how disparate, community participation become during this period.

One final issue that raised concerns with a growing number of parish councils was the prevalence of new age travellers and gypsies in rural areas – groups often seen as “rural other” in academic discourses. Twenty-one parish councils considered the



location of travellers to be a problem. Many apportioned blame for an increase in petty crime and vandalism in the parish to these groups:

"We are really concerned. There are several camper vans parked on the outskirts of our village. These people breeze into our area, sign up to all the benefits they can get and most importantly promote a feeling of insecurity in the area. I'm not saying anything but.....we've had a recent spate of car breaks of late. What are we supposed to think!" (Parish member - Undisclosed Parish Council - January 2002)

Despite their concerns, many were angered by the lack of support offered to them by the district or county councils in dealing with this issue. Such bodies, it was commented, seemed to be extremely apathetic to these concerns, preferring to "pass the buck" to neighbouring councils where travellers set up camp on regional and county boundaries. Clearly, this may well also be a clear signpost of future research.

### **7.3 - Conclusions**

The survey findings and observational evidence, which emerged, presented a snapshot of the local countryside where the issues and problems that were being faced up to in Gloucestershire largely mirrored those felt on a national scale. The nature and extent of the issues facing parish councils today is, in part, related to a number of interrelated factors. Individual perception of council members, geography and locality, the local political scene, the social and demographic fabric of the indigenous population and the enthusiasm and political will of the councillor's themselves to mention but a few.

## **CHAPTER 8: PARISH COUNCILS- ROLES, NEEDS & CONFLICTS**

### *Introduction*

Parish Councils perceive their functions and responsibilities at a variety of levels.

This chapter explores the key roles and functions of Parish Councils in Gloucestershire as seen through the perceptions of the council members themselves. In turn, it presents a detailed case study of the needs faced in rural decision making, exploring council members attitudes to external actors (e.g. county and district councils, for instance) and the potential for conflict that this can generate. The empirical evidence collected illustrates the multiple, interweaving, strands of local actor networks operating on the local parish scene.

The second part to the chapter examines how far attitudes to current rural governance legislation and the differing tiers of the rural governance structure have influenced the effectiveness of the council. The research suggests that recent government legislation regarding community involvement, partnership and participation has been slow to filter down to a large numbers of parish councils. The final part of the chapter explores the future for parish councils as seen through the eyes of the council members themselves.

### **8.1 - Perception of the roles of Parish Councils**

The survey analysed the perception of roles within the parish council. Eight “typical” roles (ranging from 'representing the views of parishioners' to 'improving social welfare in the parish') were defined and respondents were invited to register their

views. (Figure 13). Not surprisingly, over 86% of respondents felt representing the views of parish members was a central role for their council. This core belief was reflected by many additional comments. One parish clerk best summed this up as follows:

"...well that's what we're here for isn't it. The core role of the council [which has remained unchanged across the centuries] has always been to represent and stick up for the people in the parish. And that's the way it should remain!" (Parish Clerk - Undisclosed Parish Council - January 2002)

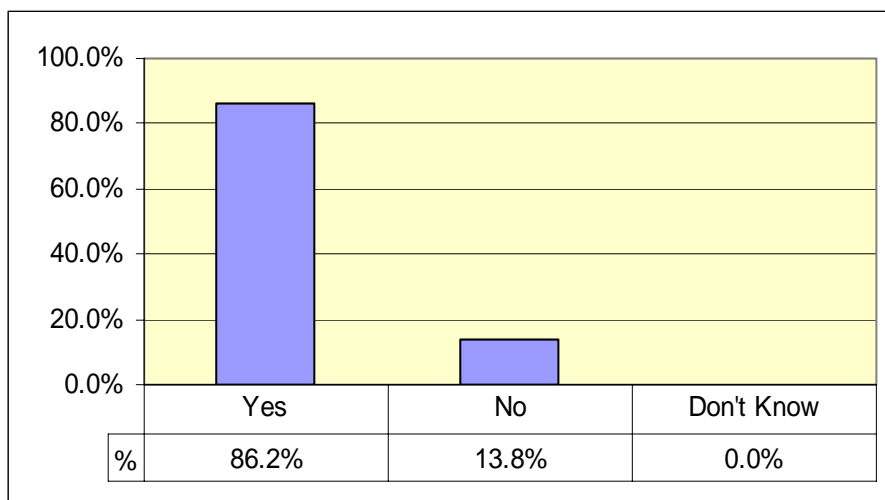


Figure 13: Representing the views of parishioners

This comment made by a Parish clerk from the east of the county illustrated the strong perception amongst many that parish councils should perhaps be seen as preserver of rural traditions, and that their roles are rooted in the history of the parish rather than in the governance structures of the modern countryside. This reflects relatively recent findings made by Little (2001) in the South West of England and MacKinnon (2002) in the Scottish Highlands

Interestingly, of the 14% or so of respondents, who disagreed with this view most saw their roles as custodians of the parish rather than representatives of the wider parish population. Responses from these councillors tended to reflect the view that the interests of the countryside are best represented by Central Government and the myriad of civil service agencies, which serve rural areas at arms length. Surprisingly,

these parishes tend to be those that had been classified themselves as 'very rural' in the survey. This is an interesting perspective, given that most literature suggests that community participation is severely hampered by the centralizing tendencies of government (Cloke 2003) and that community involvement in parish politics is piecemeal at best (Woods 1998).

Respondents were also asked to consider whether they felt that it was the job of the council to 'lead by example' and set a standard for parishioners to follow. Perceptions were a little less decisive here. Whilst two thirds of the parish councils surveyed agreed that this was another important role, the remaining third disagreed or were unsure. This may highlight a misunderstanding over where local councils feel they fit into the different tiers of rural governance (Goodwin 1998).

Indeed interviews with parish clerks provide some mixed viewpoints on this issue. Several clerks had very strong views about the responsibilities bestowed on their council. These people were of the opinion that the council should be seen at the forefront of village life, acting as a hub to community, a mediator in local disputes and as a forum where best practice could be shared:

" We should be seen to set a good example. People should feel that they can come to us for unbiased, well informed and timely advice" (Parish Clerk - Undisclosed Parish Council - July 2003)

The parish council's role in maintaining and improving the aesthetic landscape of the parish was also explored. A clear majority of respondents considered the protection of the parish built and natural environment to be very important. Seventy-seven percent of councils considered maintenance of the parish fabric to be very important, whilst over 80 percent considered that the council should play a pivotal role in making the parish a better place to live.

Evidence suggests that there are many examples across Gloucestershire where parish councils are actively involved (via funding and co-ordination) in parish maintenance and improvement programs. Many councils operate self-funded recycling units with the support of the district council. Others have been instrumental in building local recreation grounds where locals have been involved with the actual building projects. A growing number of councils now run their own local litter maintenance, akin to the network which exists for such things as the Neighbourhood Watch Schemes (Yarwood 1995). All of these examples provide ample scope for further exploration of the mechanics of successful partnerships being forged on the local scene.

Several parish councils meeting observed in the study region paid particular attention to the need to preserve and improve the local aesthetic of the parish. In 8 out of the ten meetings observed, at least one agenda item featured the upkeep, regeneration or building of local facilities, parkland and open space. At one meeting in the west of the county, in particular, opinions became very animated when discussion revolved around which material and contractor should be used to provide a batch of new public benches on the village green. Over two hours of a 3 and hour of meeting were taken

up discussing the impact of beech rather maple wood benches on the look and feel of the local landscape. Clearly, this sense of personal ownership and responsibility stretches to making sure that the parish landscape is well preserved.

Involvement in planning and mediation issues was also an area where parish councils were expected to play a key role in affair (Figure 14). Planning permission applications, the co-ordination of local housing policy and mediation in land rights disputes are all areas where parish councils felt they should be involved. The responses were less decisive than those which dealt with the upkeep and improvement of the parish with 74% agreeing that this role for councils is important, whilst the remaining 26% either disagreed or were unsure. The research threw up many examples where parish councils were (and had been) involved with planning application disputes (albeit as a silent partner to the district and county council representatives) and it was also an area where councils felt they could benefit from formal training to aid their role in such wrangles.

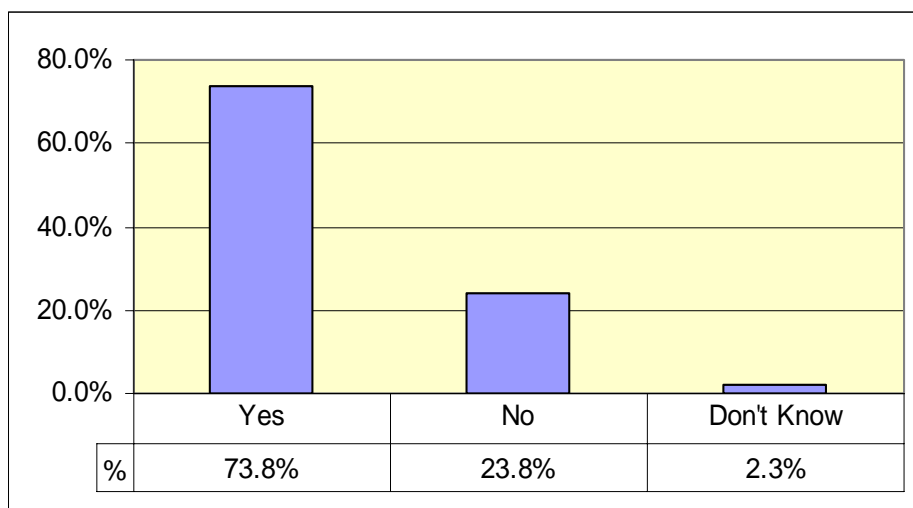


Figure 14: Parish Council as planning mediator

The dearth of training in planning issues also became apparent whilst observing actual parish council meetings. At every meeting, at least one agenda item considered either a new or existing/long running planning application or dispute. In the majority of cases heard by the council many were forced to uphold decisions whilst applications were passed to the district or county councils. It was clear that whilst council members possessed the local knowledge and expertise related to their parish and the views of their parishioners, they failed to adequately interpret these in their understanding of planning regulations and property law. Evidence from the several parish council meetings attended in North of the county confirms that often the interpretation of local planning regulations can become clouded by the vested interests of the parish council members themselves. In one incidence, discussions surrounding the guidelines and regulations which govern alterations and modifications to Grade 2 listed building and farm out buildings seemed to cause a great deal of confusion. Often the person tabling the planning application would adopt a much more relaxed attitude to the rules whilst the other councillors would read the rules literally. This finding confirms research conducted by Tewdr-Jones (1997) on the planning perceptions of parish councils in rural Wales. In a small handful of cases (invariably where a personal planning application was brought forward by an actual council member), the meetings were reluctant to discuss the process whilst I was in their presence (see Chapter 5 for further discussion on this). Maybe this suggests that in a minority of cases, planning permission be endorsed wording with relative ease when the applicant happens to sit o the parish council itself.

One area of responsibility, which attracted rather mixed responses, concerned the issue of social welfare (Figure 15).

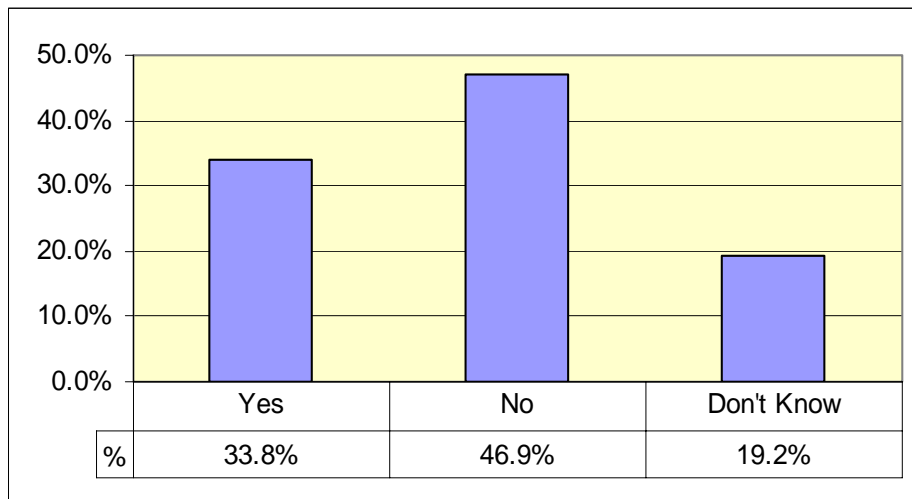


Figure 15: Parish Council as social welfare provider

Only 34% of councils said that they should take an active role in the provision and improvement of social services while 47% disagreed, with 19% unsure. A major factor influencing these responses was the interpretation of the term 'social welfare'. Several of the survey forms were annotated with comments, which asked for the meaning of this term. At the local level, social welfare could be interpreted as something as simple as looking out for an elderly neighbour, whilst the interaction of councils with district social services constituted a more involved role. Many respondents agreed though that the provision of welfare services (education, health, and employment and disability benefits) was something they felt district and county councils should take a lead role in:

" You have to understand – our powers are very limited when it comes to the social and financial welfare of our parishioners. Don't get me wrong we are very willing to represent the needs of individual parishioners but any change in provision or legislation must be and remain the remit of the County Council" (Parish Clerk - Undisclosed Parish Council - January 2002)



Whilst it is true to deduce from the survey that only about a third of respondents considered the provision of social welfare should be the responsibility of the parish council, evidence gleaned from parish clerk interviews and observations made from a variety of parish council proceedings, suggests that in certain parishes, social welfare is placed firmly at the top of the local parish agenda. One case study involved the potential loss of a local doctor's surgery in a rural village. The doctor in this case has a permanent surgery in the nearby market town and made visits three times a week to the village concerned. For these visits a temporary surgery was set up in the village hall on the outskirts of the village. It now transpired that the hall was considered to fall below acceptable local authority health standards for a local health clinic/surgery. The village faced the loss of its regular doctor's surgery and parishioners (many of whom were elderly) would be forced to travel to the main surgery in the market town around 6 miles away. This issue provoked fierce debate at the council meeting attended. Attendance (according to the local clerk) had been the highest for well over 5 years and it was clear from observing the meeting that feelings were running high. In this case, the parish council very clearly operated as the "voice" of its parishioners, spearheading a Q&A session with representatives from the local council and the East Gloucestershire Healthcare Trust. Various options were mooted such as providing a mobile surgery to a free bus service to the surgery located in the town. Although the meeting had not resolved the matter, the council and healthcare officials had agreed to consider the various options put forward by the council. Clearly then, in certain parishes (often those faced with the potential loss of an important community service), the social welfare of parishioners is still considered an important role of local parishes.

Some interesting perspectives emerged in relation to other roles which councils might fulfil. Several councils saw their role as “cultural and social ambassadors” of the countryside, promoting and encouraging the re-emergence of traditional rural pursuits and crafts (e.g. farmers markets, barn dances and harvest festivals). This perhaps would be akin to the more well documented roles as “custodians of the countryside” (Halfacree, 1995; Lowndes and Sullivan, 2004). This perspective was well illustrated by several examples from the research where parish councils were keen to list village pageants, sporting events and even medieval jousting tournaments as recent successful ventures where the council took on a pivotal role in promoting cultural, sporting and historical events. Indeed one respondent from a parish council, located in the South East of the county, devoted several additional pages of the survey outlining in great detail the logistical role played by the parish council in organising their villages’ medieval pageant. In this example, the council regarded themselves as central to efforts designed to increase community participation. The respondent took particular pride in describing his efforts in empowering the school, local WI and church to work in ‘partnership’.

Others emphasised their responsibilities as the “information hub” of the village, providing helpful and timely information on all manner of issues from benefits to the provision of internet access in the local village hall or Post Office. From the interviews carried out with selected parish clerks, many seem to view the role of the council as a centre of advice and support to fulfil a very important role for the community. One example cited was that of a “buddy network” set up in a fairly remote parish in the north west of the county. With a population of just under 150 people, the residents of this parish often suffered from isolation and a lack of

community spirit, particularly after the pub closed three years ago. The idea of the “buddy network” involved the assignment of a “buddy” or focal point to new members of the community, or those who were elderly or infirm. The support network was managed by the parish council and was intended to offer local guidance, practical information on local facilities, community integration and information on local events and activities. Additionally, it provided for a dedicated network of local carpenters, plumbers, drivers and the like that had been vetted by the council. The scheme operated on a purely voluntary basis and was managed by the council. According to the parish clerk interviewed, the scheme had been an unmitigated success:

“The buddy scheme has provided a certain degree of social integration and cohesion to the community. Its success relies on a willingness to get involved and look out for your fellow villager. I think you could say that the village is a much more friendly place as a result.” (Parish Clerk - Undisclosed Parish Council – August 2003)

## **8.2 - Issues of Ownership: The power alignment in Parish Councils**

The balance of power within and outside the parish council is an area, which has been well documented over the last 10 years or so. The perspectives of parish councils in Gloucestershire do not differ widely from those shared at a national level (Goodwin 1998; Edwards *et al* 2000; Woods 2005). Almost 95% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that parish councils were a valuable mechanism for the rural community and were very important in promoting community participation. As we shall see later though, views on how best to deliver this role vary considerably between councils. Respondents were also asked to consider whether parish councils were powerful organisations. Predictably perhaps, 70% of parishes disagreed or strongly disagreed that this was the case. Many considered that parish councils had

never been powerful organizations and throughout history had always been at the will of centralising tendencies:

“...we only exist to make the government feel that there is at least some semblance of democracy in the countryside. But as for any real power.....you must be kidding!” (Parish member - Undisclosed Parish Council - January 2002)

Despite these rather strong views, parishes were less sure on the issue of whether parish councils had more power than in the past. Nearly 30% responded that they were unsure or didn't know, and surprisingly, 1 in 5 parishes suggested that councils had greater autonomy and empowerment than in the past (Figure 16). The remainder disagreed

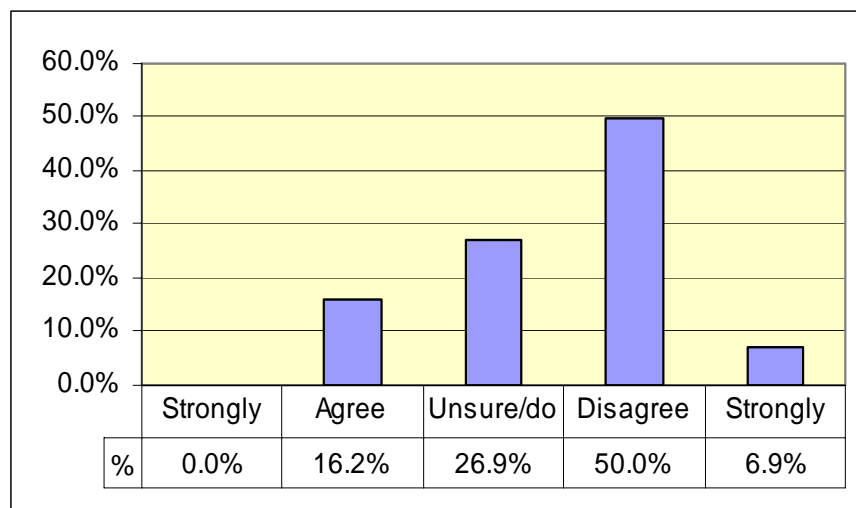


Figure16: Have parish Councils more power today than in the past?

Consequently, when asked whether parish councils should be given more power in the future, over 70% welcomed this notion, with only 1 in 10 considering this to be a bad idea.

Although the majority of parishes considered that they had less power or that parish councils were not powerful organizations, a large number did consider that they had

been given more responsibility for the operation and management of parish politics (Figure 17).

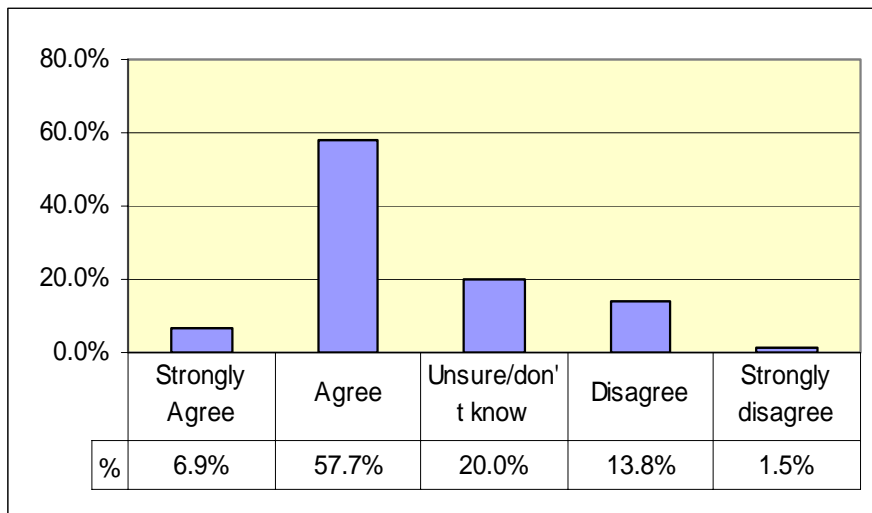


Figure 17: Have Parish Councils got more responsibilities now than in the past?

Two thirds of parishes considered that the plethora of rural initiatives and programs stemming from government organizations such as the now disbanded Countryside Agency and RDA's created more work for them. Some saw this as yet more red tape and bureaucracy whilst others recognised the need for a more well defined framework in which parish councils should operate. Whilst many agreed that parish councils should be subjected to performance appraisal via a set of key targets or criteria set out by government, they were less sure about the practical application of such measures:

“Haven't we heard this all before. The Village Plan seems to be the forerunner of this new Quality Parish initiative. Surely this is yet more bureaucracy and form filling in a desperate bid to meet performance targets which will have no practicable application in the areas it is intended to benefit...”  
 (Parish Clerk - Undisclosed Parish Council - January 2002)

While the majority of councils consider that their workload and responsibilities have increased in recent years, one third felt they should have more responsibilities.

Clearly, this mixed response is indicative of the varying perceptions that councils place on their function. Some remain frustrated by the ‘hands tied’ feeling exacerbated by county and district interference, whilst others are pleading for a more active role on the local political scene. This state of affairs reinforces the call by Goodwin (2003:2) for geographers to “shift the research lens” from looking at the outputs of governance to looking at *the processes* of governance from the perspective of those living in rural areas.

Although many that were surveyed agreed that more responsibility had been bestowed on their council in recent years, this was not matched by an increase in funding to fulfil these new duties. Two fifths of councils disagreed that their parish council received more funding than in the past. A further fifth were unsure. 80% felt they should have more funding (Figure 18). There is obviously a tension between the desire of parish councils to receive more funding and the increased responsibilities and bureaucracy this would bring.

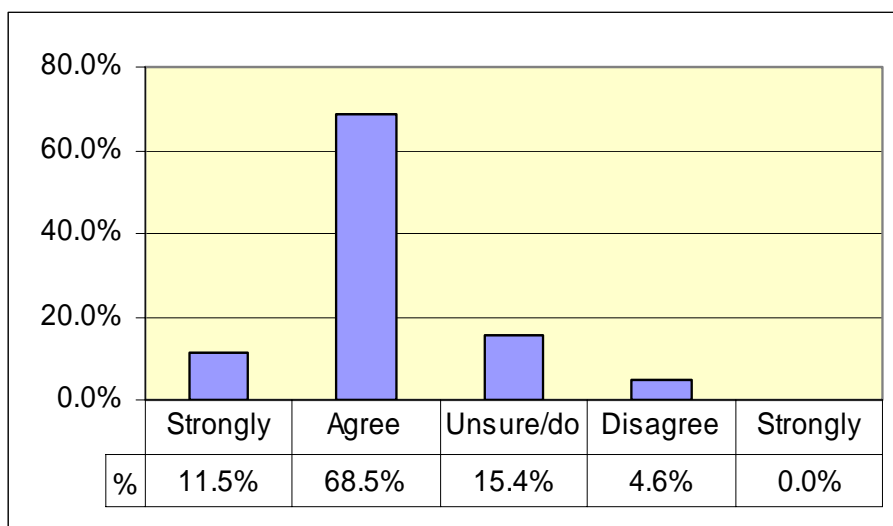


Figure 18: Parish Councils should be given more funding

Less bureaucracy, more training in financial management and the responsibilities of parish clerks, closer consultation with county and district councils, a greater

appreciation of rural planning regulations and the encouragement of a wider cross section of the community to participate in the operation and management of the council topped the wish list were the main things council's felt would improve their operations. Again, this list clearly reflects the conclusions of a wide cross section of current research (Tewdr-Jones 1997; Woods 1997; Little 2001; Goodwin 2003; Lowndes & Sullivan 2004).

On a positive note, many cited the support that they had received from local organisations such as GAPTC. The training material provided by such organisations was seen as invaluable by many parish clerks. This material often covered a plethora of issues such as planning regulations, financial accounting, land management and advice on setting up village committees and societies. The network of advice provided by the central agencies such the Rural Development Agencies, Countryside Agency and DEFRA was seen as less impressive. Many complained that reference material and leaflets were written very much with a national viewpoint and often this advice failed to translate at the local level.

The linkages and interrelationships between the various tiers of local government were also seen as an obstacle to better and more cohesive management of the parish council. Many clerks complained that when a representative from the district or county council was asked to attend an important parish meeting, they often cried off at the last minute. Others suggested that the network of advice offered by such institutions failed to recognise the particulars of local areas. Many complained that the person on the other end of the phone seemed to have no appreciation of the issues facing specific parishes. Lowndes and Sullivan (2004) argue that this can

result in a “significant accountability deficit”. When partnerships are an amalgamation of several government agencies, local landowners and parishioners, this often results in a lack of clarity over the key mechanisms of the project or parish decision making process – audit reporting, corporate governance, project management etc. Woods (2005) suggests that one way to circumnavigate this deficit is to make the governance of the partnerships or projects themselves a policy issue.

**8.3 - Attitudes to training**

Near the top of the list of improvements that councils endorsed as important to the operation of a successful parish council was effective and timely training of council members. One in two parish councils considered that more training was required in order for them to fulfil their responsibilities to maximum effect (Figure 19).

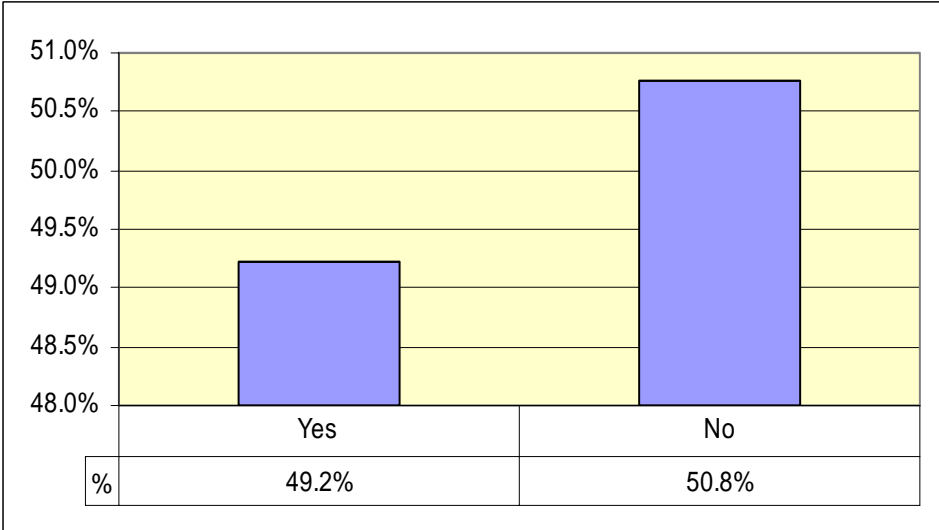


Figure 19: More training needed for Parish Council members

The range of identified training needs included financial accounting and book-keeping, parish clerk training, IT and internet training, minute taking and performance appraisal training. Although there appears to be a considerable gap in the training



requirements of parish council members, many did report that they had received very effective support, advice and training from local organisations such as GAPTC and the Countryside Unit at the University of Gloucestershire. Fifty four percent of parish councils had members who had received training from these organisations in the past 5 years. Top of the list of training programs was the Parish Clerks Introductory Course run by GAPTC in conjunction with the University of Gloucestershire. Many found this course particularly useful:

“It provided a solid foundation for the effective running of any parish council. My participation in the program has helped me no end.....I am now beginning to impart the skills I learnt there to other members of the council” (Parish Clerk - Undisclosed Parish Council - January 2002)

Despite the encouraging number of council members embarking on some form of training, many suggested that only a very narrow range of training opportunities was available to them. Forty-three percent of those who had embarked on training in the past 5 years considered that further training opportunities had been limited

Other parish councils considered that more training was not required for them to be an effective council. Just over 40% did not consider formal training to be necessary, citing that the professional knowledge and expertise and local knowledge of council members far outweighed any benefits that formal training could offer. Fifty percent of this group also cited a lack of time or a lack of opportunity as contributing factors to explain why training wasn't taken up (Figure 20).

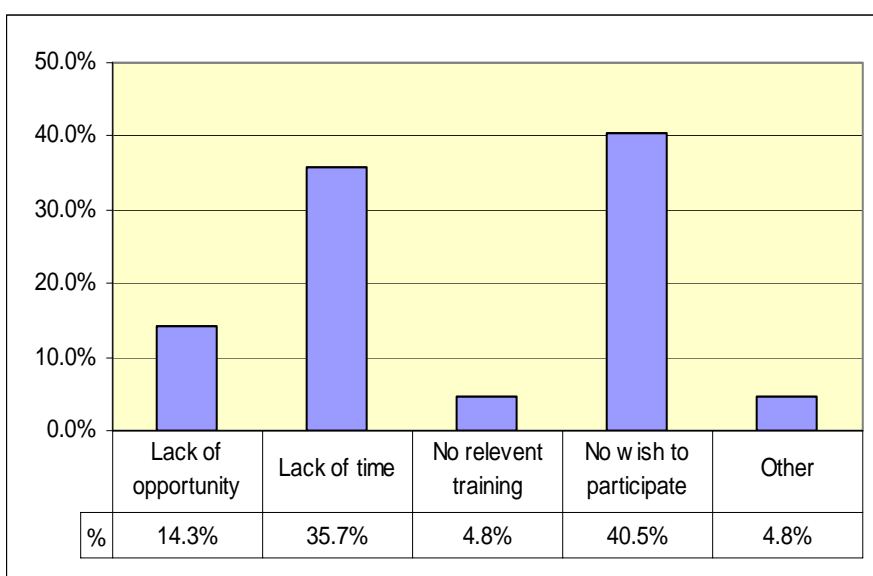


Figure 20: Reasons why training was not taken up by parish council members

Many members had full-time, demanding jobs, which often inhibited any desire for further extracurricular training. Although this group seldom took up formal training, there was ample evidence to suggest that a great many councils were well informed and media savvy when it came to issues that directly impacted on their local countryside. A whole raft of publications, Internet sites and advisory bodies were cited as the media through which parishioners in Gloucestershire were kept informed.

Many parishes had gone one better and built and set up their own internet sites, intended to keep parishioners informed about local events and facilities, provide access to information about local jobs, training, membership of local societies and a message board for parishioners to post issues and problems that concern them. Some even had an option whereby parishioners were invited to construct the agenda for the next parish council meeting. Of course, the quality and usefulness of such sites depends largely on the degree of expertise and knowledge already in the parish

and to a certain extent, the willingness of council members to maintain and update the internet site regularly. A random selection (around 25 websites) of Gloucestershire parish council internet sites (where they exist) accessed over the past 6 months suggested that only around a third of sites contained information, which was completely up-to-date.



Figure 21: Website of Rodborough Parish Council – A Vibrant Parish

#### **8.4 - Attitudes toward external bodies & other parish councils**

Parish councils can often exist in isolation both geographically and politically.

Sometimes this is a product of choice, but it can often be borne out of frustration that their 'rural voice' is not being listened to at the various levels of rural governance.

The survey attempted to gauge the strength of opinion of the Parish Councils towards the different tiers of rural legislative and voluntary bodies, which act on the countryside scene. It quickly became clear that many parish councils had, at one time or another, been embroiled in a dispute with the county or district level of governance. Furthermore, a large majority of these disputes involved disagreements over residential and commercial planning, proposed measures to resolve traffic congestion, the siting of village halls and doctor's surgeries, the handling of petty criminal offences and the adherence to parish by-laws and by-ways. These disputes

often resulted in the direct involvement of the county council, something that was often resented at the parish level:

"...the county council just don't listen to us. We have campaigned for traffic calming ramps in our village for 7 years now and still they don't take action...something about spoiling the aesthetics of the village. How long will it be before someone gets hurt or, worse...our hands are tied, we need the backing of the council to take this forward. " (Parish member - Undisclosed Parish Council - January 2002)

Other examples of disputes involved the interaction between the parish councils and neighbouring councils. These largely centred on boundary disputes, particularly in terms of responsibility for the upkeep of pavements, verges and roadsides, which straddled parish boundaries.

What is interesting in all this is the perception held by the parish council regarding to role it feels it should adopt in such disputes, contrasted against the stance it is often forced to take as a result of district and county level interference. Many councils seem to feel that the bureaucracy and intransigence of these bodies often tie their hands. They all agree that parish councils should be given more power but are more sceptical about the media through which this power is devolved by the county council. This 'hand-tied' outlook often results in frustration and annoyance with the various tiers of rural governance. Others take a more apathetic view and express a "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" attitude to such disputes:

"Our job as parish councillors is not to embroil ourselves in every petty land dispute or planning application on the table but more to act as a conciliatory voice of the parish. We know we have no real power but we believe the tradition of the parish council is one that is worth preserving.....even if it does smack of tokenism... " (Parish Clerk - Undisclosed Parish Council - January 2002)

It is clear that the way that parish councils view their roles and responsibilities within the rural governance framework varies considerably between parishes. The experience in Gloucestershire is by no means unique as research by Cloke and Little (1997), Edwards *et al* (2000) and Woods (2005) highlights similar findings.

The research in Gloucestershire identified three different typologies to describe the defined roles adopted by parish councils in the county. These were *'empowered parish councils'*, *'mediatory parish councils'* and *symbolic parish councils*. These typologies have been broadly determined by the proactive nature of the councils, their perception of the roles and functions they fulfil for the communities they serve and their willingness to embrace initiatives which have been generated by recent rural governance legislation.

Some parishes in the county undertake an active practical role at all levels of parish business and are not afraid or deterred by county or district interference. In fact many invite close consultation with such bodies and on the whole have positive relationship with the tiers of local government above them. For these councils, the repositioning of their role post-White Paper has been relatively straightforward. This was particularly evident amongst the larger market town councils. Parish Councils that fall into this category may be considered to be *'empowered parish councils'*.

Other councils (in the more rural western and north-eastern parts of the county) have carved out a more comfortable mediatory role for themselves, viewing the parish councils as just the first level for the rural voice to be heard. They see themselves as a 'sounding board' for rural concerns. It is the responsibility of the parish to pass on

these concerns and complaints to the county and district bodies. For these councils it is very clear that they have redefined their roles and functions on the basis of their own perceived shortcomings. These councils have dipped their toes into the array of new responsibilities set out by the White Paper but much prefer to leave the strategic decision making process to the tiers of local government above them. These Parish councils may be termed '*mediatory parish councils*'.

Finally, there are some councils in the county (dominated by the smaller 'honey pot' villages of the Cotswold belt) who share a much more traditional and symbolic view of their council. They see themselves as a quaint adjunct to the rural scene, acting out the country squire role, championing the needs of the impoverished rural folk but without actually doing anything particularly practical. These parish councils could be considered to be '*symbolic parish councils*'. Often these councils are dormant for much of the year and attendance only reaches high levels when the likes of planning applications are being considered. The professional middle class retired who have moved to the country to 'act out' their perception of rurality to maximum affect often dominate these councils. The dominance of this type of individual may be seen as a 'post rural superimposition' of the traditional role of the landed gentry, which prevailed in the countryside some 30 years ago. Observational evidence seems to support this view of the parish council as a dormant adjunct to the rural scene. The frequency of parish meetings in these smaller villages is directly linked to the issue of planning or the twinning of the village with a European counterpart. As many as 15% of respondents stated that the only reason their council was called to meet was to discuss such issues. In a way then, some parish councils can be seen as rather more reactive than proactive.

One other level of dispute, which emerged from the findings, involved the internal wranglings between the parish council members *themselves*. Eighteen parishes reported examples where personality clashes between members had resulted in 'hung' council meetings where decisions were often pushed upwards to the district or county level. Others preferred to involve non-governmental bodies such as Gloucestershire Association of Parish & Town Councils (GAPTC) to act a mediator in such disagreements:

"GAPTC have been terrific. They provide all the helpful information you need to run a council efficiently and offer excellent training to our clerks. They're also good mediation between the parish and district council.... something we've used here ourselves to great affect" (Parish Clerk - Undisclosed Parish Council - July 2003)

A signpost for further research may be to explore the tensions expressed within parish council meeting themselves.

Respondents were asked to assess the helpfulness of a variety of local and national organizations in terms of the management and support given to their council.

Opinions regarding the helpfulness of the County Councils were divided (Figure 22).

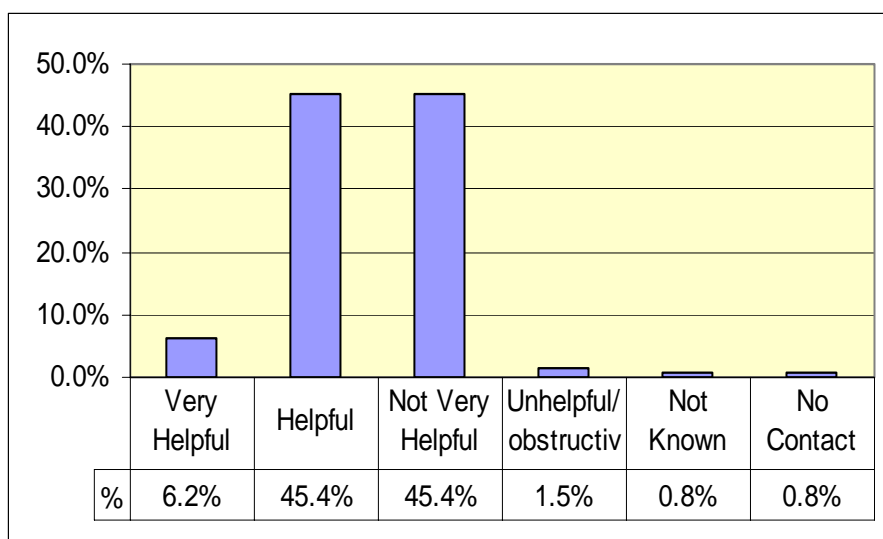


Figure 22: Helpfulness of County Council

Only 53% of parishes considered that Gloucestershire County Council had been or were helpful to them in the management and operation of their parish council. This result perhaps bears out the distrust and frustration felt by many councils at their lack of power when entering into negotiations at the county level on such initiatives as traffic calming measures and maintenance of roads in the parish. A small number of parishes even commented that the county council was often obstructive towards the parish:

"We meet a dead end at every turn when it comes to the county council. Every suggestion we seem to make is viewed with scepticism and disdain!" (Parish Clerk - Undisclosed Parish Council - January 2002)

Conversely though, opinions toward the District Councils seem to be more favourable (Figure 23).

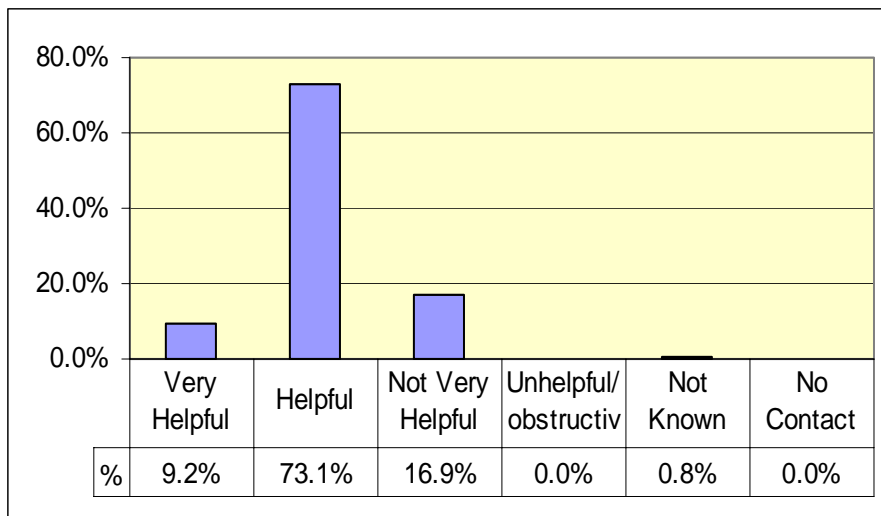


Figure 23: Helpfulness of District Council

Just over 80% of parishes considered the advice and support offered to them by these bodies to be helpful or very helpful. This may reflect the local understanding that district bodies have with their rural areas and the increased willingness of parishioners to engage in meaningful dialogue with them. This local affiliation



seems to have filtered down to other similar organisations in the county. GAPTC for instance was rated extremely well by parish councils (Figure 24). Eighty-five percent of parishes considered the support, advice and training offered to them by this body to be helpful. Such a response is borne out by many examples where GAPTC have offered invaluable training of parish clerks, local knowledge and a practical voice to the more remote villages in the county. However, despite the overwhelming backing for GAPTC, nearly 1 in 7 parishes had never heard of the organisation or had no contact with them. This may be due to the fact that often the organisation acts in collaboration with other local groups and thus it is not always immediately clear where the boundaries of the organisation lay.

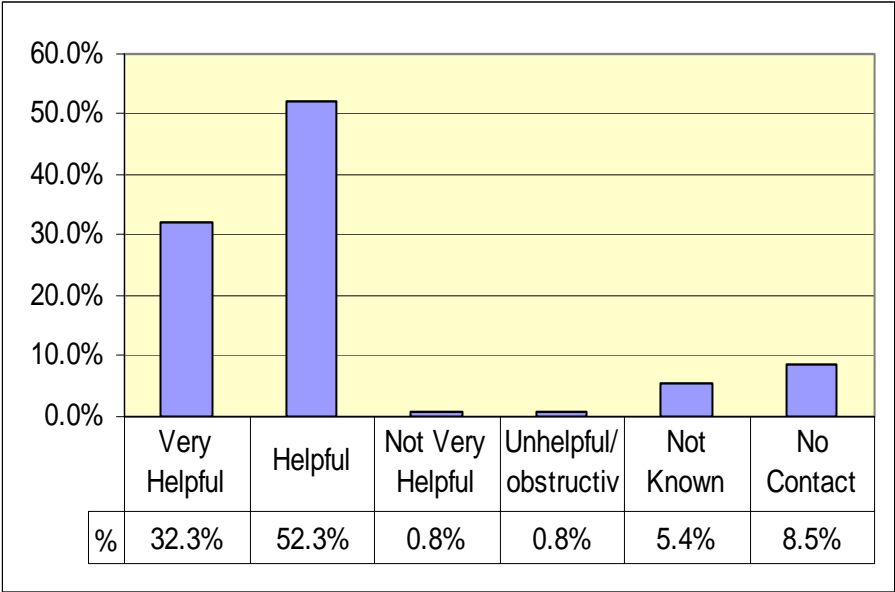


Figure 24: Helpfulness of GAPTC

Another local group which receive popular acclaim were the local police, particularly in respect of their handling of petty crime, vandalism and car break-ins. Just over 82% of parishes agreed that their experience of the law had been helpful or very helpful. Many commented that the local knowledge and rural sympathies of the

“local bobby” helped instil a feeling of greater security and trust in the community. These sentiments are echoed in research carried out by Marsden (1998) and Jones and Little (2000) and others regarding the geography of rural crime. The Police, it was said, had been particularly supportive in an advisory role when it came to the management and operation of local Neighbourhood Watch Schemes and other domestic security education programs.

This local unity breaks down though in an examination of the relationship of the parish council with neighbouring parishes (Figure 25). The survey suggests that nearly 1 in 2 parishes in Gloucestershire view these relations to be unhelpful and in some cases, obstructive.

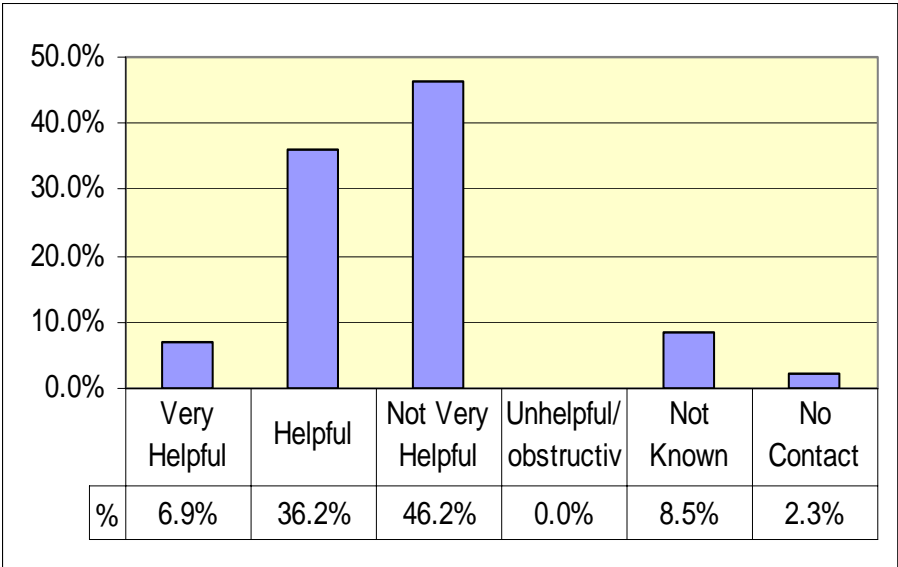


Figure 25: Relations with neighbouring parishes

As discussed earlier, boundary disputes, road maintenance and planning regulations top the list of grievances here:

"When it comes to the land boundaries between parishes things can sometimes get a bit hairy! If some maintenance needs to be done (say repairs to damaged verges) no one parish will hold up their hands and take responsibility for it – it can get very frustrating!!" (Parish Clerk - Undisclosed Parish Council - January 2002)

This is an interesting perspective on the interrelations with different stakeholders in the rural governance structure and points towards one potentially fruitful avenue for future research. Indeed, little original research has been conducted into the potential conflicts between neighbouring parish councils. It does, however, reinforce the call for more research into the “joining up” of partnerships and parish politics as advocated by Goodwin (2003).

Finally, the parish council’s opinions of charitable organisations such as ACRE were canvassed. From the results it appears that in terms of voluntary help, most parishes preferred the expert local knowledge of GAPTC to the nationwide assistance of organisations such as ACRE (Figure 26). Seventy-five percent of parishes’ had either not heard of or had no contact with the latter organisation

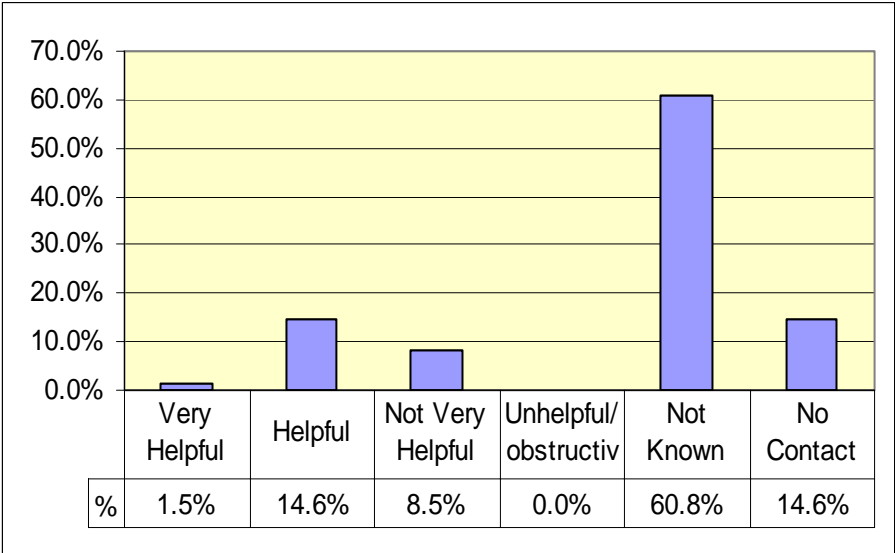


Figure 26: Helpfulness of ACRE

Of all the organisations in place to offer support and advice to parish councils in the region, it is the civil service agencies and centralised voluntary groups, which were viewed least favourably.

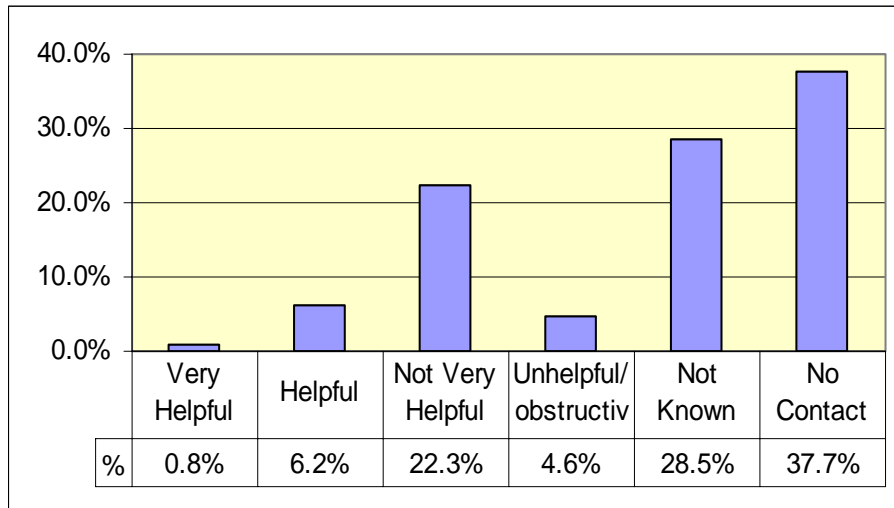


Figure 27: Relations with DEFRA

The Rural White Paper and in particular, initiatives such as the Parish Plan, Rural Sounding Boards and Quality Parish Councils, DEFRA received some predictably hostile responses. First, and rather surprisingly, nearly 1 in 3 of parishes (Figure 27) had never heard of the government department. This may be due to the fact it had only been ‘created’/renamed shortly before the survey was carried out. This is rather worrying in itself. It suggests a contradiction in the results as later on in the survey, it is found that most parishes have heard of at least one of their initiatives (the Quality parishes concept) but perhaps they were unaware as to who was the author. Either way, this result highlights the disinterest and perhaps, apathy felt towards the centralising tendencies of Whitehall; or perhaps a general confusion over whom has lead responsibility for rural issues in the Government. Of the remaining parishes surveyed, 38% had little or no contact with the department (perhaps understandably as most of the policy initiatives authored by DEFRA are devolved to the various civil

service agencies that sit below it), and only 7% actually found them supportive and helpful.

So if the Government’s Department for rural affairs didn’t fair well, what about the agencies and voluntary bodies who are responsible for turning government policy into action? Established in April 1999 (and now in the process of being disbanded), the Countryside Agency advised government and its partners across a wide range of rural issues, conducting research and highlighting, piloting and spreading best practice. The Countryside Agency essentially acted as a rural voice for the “disenfranchised” countryside. From the survey results (Figure 28), 1 in 2 parishes found the agency helpful or very helpful in terms of support, advice and training opportunities (Figure 29). This is perhaps not earth shattering when one considers that most of the initiatives designed to encourage community participation and empowerment in rural villages emanate from this Agency. More interesting though, are the 30% of parishes who had never heard of the Agency ‘s work.

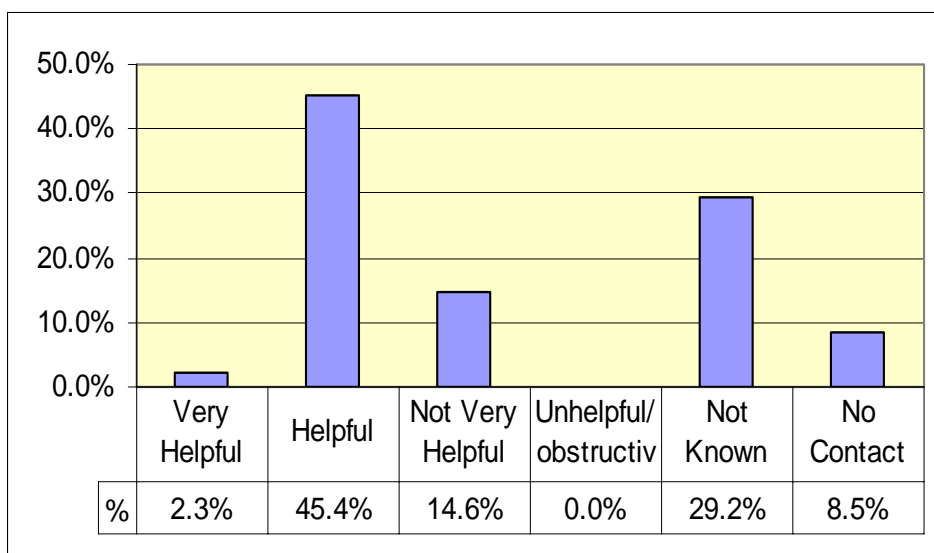


Figure 28: Relations with the Countryside Agency

Somewhere in the plethora of literature and initiatives flooding the rural governance scene, some parishes in the county are slipping through the system. Either that or the disassociation amongst these parishes has resulted in a decision to turn their backs on such government interference:

".....It's one initiative after another. First it was Village Plans, then appraisal, then the 'Quality parish' – when will it end. I'm sure that all these initiatives are just a smoke screen to deflect us from the real issues in the countryside – banning foxhunting. Blair just keeps stalling on that one cos' he knows what a political hot potato and potential vote loser it is!" (Parish Clerk - Undisclosed Parish Council - January 2002)

If the Countryside Agency fared reasonably well in terms of parish perception, some, more quasi-governmental organisations in the rural hierarchy did less well. The Gloucestershire Rural Development Agency provides a similar service to the CA in terms of training, advice and support but on a more local scale. Whilst, 28% found this assistance to be at least helpful, a staggering 51% either had no contact or had not heard of the agency. Of the remainder, 20% considered what support and advice they had received to not be very helpful (Figure 29).

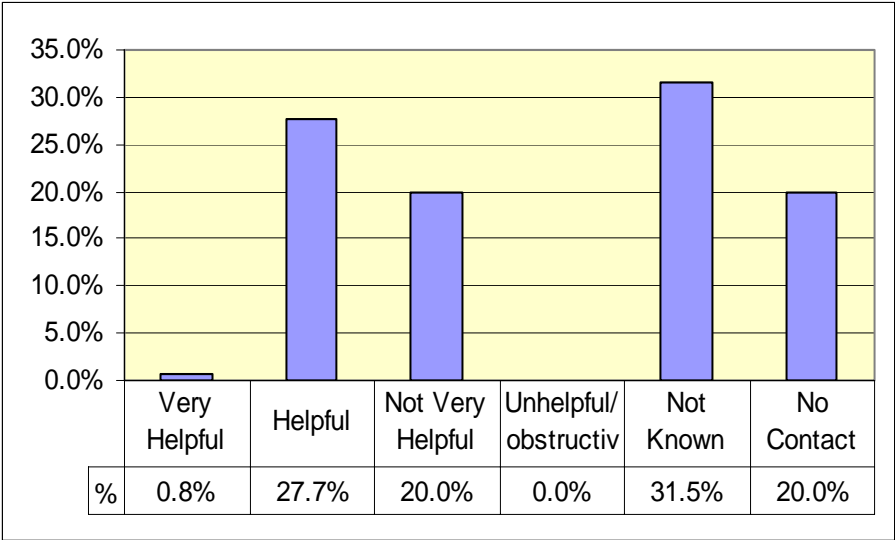


Figure 29: Relations with Gloucestershire Rural Development Agency

## **8.5 - Conclusion: Future Issues for Parish Councils in the Locality**

The research suggests that recent government legislation regarding community involvement, partnership and participation has been slow to filter down to a large numbers of parish councils in Gloucestershire. Through evidence gleaned from the survey, observations at parish council meetings and interviews with parish clerks, the research was able to offer a unique insight into the future issues likely to face parish councils in the county. These issues were typically dominated by the concern over imposition of more bureaucracy from central and county level government, coupled with a misunderstanding of what was expected of each parish. Parish councils across the county have adopted very different perspectives relating to what they see as their role in the community. Depending on the perception adopted, councils have repositioned themselves accordingly in the light of the new responsibilities required of them by the Rural White Paper.

More generally, and at the local level, issues concerning planning, rights of way, provision of services for the young and elderly, protection of the environmental fabric of the parish, wrangles with neighbouring parishes, crime and transportation continue to be considered the key issues facing parish councils in Gloucestershire, both now and into the future.

It is clear that the way that parish councils view their roles and responsibilities within the rural governance framework varies considerably between parishes. The experience in Gloucestershire is by no means unique as research by Cloke and Little (1997), Edwards et al (2000) and Woods (2005) highlights similar findings.

The research identified three different typologies to describe parish councils in Gloucestershire, these were: 'empowered parish councils', 'mediatory parish councils' and 'symbolic parish councils'. These typologies have been broadly determined by the proactive nature of the councils, their perception of the roles and functions they fulfill for the community they serve and their willingness to embrace initiatives which have been generated by recent rural governance legislation.

Recent government legislation concerning rural parish councils and their role in their respective communities has been underpinned by the development of the concept of "partnership". Such local empowerment has been viewed as a holistic mechanism to encourage ownership and participation in rural issues, whilst, at the same time offering the benefits of pooled resources, funding, knowledge and expertise. However, the degree to which such partnerships are effective forums for political change in the countryside is very much determined by the socio-political and idiographic fabric of the rural areas themselves. In Gloucestershire, this is certainly the case. The research suggests a marked indifference and apathy to the new wave of rural governance legislation sweeping the countryside. Many respondents have clearly misinterpreted the literature or are turned off by yet another layer of governance. All appreciate, that more will be required as a result of these new initiatives but complain that a lack of training, indifference demonstrated at county and district level and from residents themselves, have made their job more difficult. Most agree though that, parish councils need to understand more about the processes underlying community involvement in rural decision making rather than the structures (public, private or voluntary) that overarch them (Cloke 2003; Goodwin 2003).



## CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSIONS

This thesis has examined the changing roles of rural parish councils in the context of the Government White Paper on Rural England (DEFRA, November 2000). This suggested that new responsibilities should be given to parish councils within rural planning frameworks. The research examined the appropriateness and willingness of parish councils in Gloucestershire to fulfill these new tasks. It examined the key role that parish councils have as 'agents' of government and explored and assessed how far they have adjusted to the new forms of governance set out by the White Paper. Consideration was given to how councils have adapted alongside greater voluntary and community activity, focussing in particular on the new forms of partnership now pervading the countryside. It also attempted to draw out the failure of some parish councils to adapt, highlighting the reactionary stance adopted by many. A conceptual framework was placed around the empirical evidence for Gloucestershire, focussing in particular on examples illustrating Partnership and Local Actor Network modes of governance. In doing so, the research contributes to our current understanding of the changing nature of governance in rural areas and points to signposts for future research. More specifically, using the case study evidence from Gloucestershire, it has examined a number of key issues:

- the changing perception of roles for Parish Councils
- the issues facing councils in today's countryside
- levels of community participation, partnership and involvement
- attitudes to current rural governance legislation and the differing tiers of the rural governance structure

- the future for parish councils through the eyes of the council members themselves.
- A detailed exploration of current governance literature

By drawing together the findings from the two phases of investigation (structured survey and parish clerk interview/observations at meetings) alongside other supplementary data, a number of conclusions can be drawn about contemporary community participation within the parish councils of Gloucestershire, and their role and effectiveness against the backdrop of current rural governance legislation and related research literature. Signposts for future research can also be identified.

### *Summary of Main Conclusions*

1. The effectiveness of parish councils in Gloucestershire is extremely varied and often piecemeal in nature, influenced by a wide variety of social, economic and geographical factors.
2. Parish council meetings across the county are characterised by low attendance, (largely characterised by apathy and a disassociation with the local community) and a very narrow cross section of the community.
3. Both individual decisions and wider structural factors, including the opportunities provided by self-interest, influence the variations in the type and level of participation in community leadership.

4. The emergence of new organisations and actors in rural community governance has generated only a *moderate* shift in the way parish councils operate.
5. An individual's pathway to participation in parish politics is shaped by opportunities, obstacles and personal motivation.
6. Parish councils perceive their function and responsibilities at a variety of levels and they can be broadly classified into three distinct typologies.
7. Parish councils consider that they have very little influence in the broader sphere of rural governance structures.
8. The interaction of parish councils with local and central governmental bodies varies considerably
9. Recent government legislation regarding community involvement, partnership and participation has been slow to filter down to a large number of parish councils.
10. The effectiveness of the Quality Parish and Town Council scheme in England will be reliant on high levels of participation in parish councils, something that has yet to materialize.

11. The geography of partnership initiatives across the UK has emerged as a very uneven map of rural governance. This “map” is mirrored in the incidence of effective partnerships within rural politics in Gloucestershire.

12. The complex nature of participation in community governance and leadership revealed by the research confirms the need for further examination of the shift from “joined up” to “joining up” partnerships, and the incidence of partnership marginalisation felt across many parish councils.

A brief discussion of these conclusions follows, and where appropriate, linkages are made with the conceptual framework relating to theories of Partnership and Local Actor Network theory. Some signposts for future research have been identified.

*The effectiveness of Parish Councils in Gloucestershire is extremely varied and often piecemeal in nature, influenced by a wide variety of social, economic and*

*geographical factors.* Across Gloucestershire, the effectiveness of parish councils to mobilize the community varies significantly. Of course, apathy (in terms of a willingness to participate) plays its part but more often than not the incidence of exclusivity prevalent in parish politics, ensures that council meetings are often dominated by the same set of long-serving local “actors” on the rural scene. The subconscious assumption made in the White Paper that the countryside is a homogenous, all-inclusive unit has been found to be very unrealistic in reality. In terms of parish politics in Gloucestershire, the same levels and types of exclusion exist as on the national stage. The research found that in a large majority of parishes in Gloucestershire, the elitism and social exclusiveness emphasised by Local Actor

Network theory in particular was still widely prevalent. Many councils also suffer from a 'governance inertia' when they have been obliged to take on the decision making process from the tiers of local and central government above them. Indeed the application of such a paradigm to examine the balance of parish politics in the county offers a unique 'participants eye' perspective of rural conflict on one hand and a "stylized micro sociology of the locality" (Murdoch and Pratt 1993: 23) on the other. In describing rural conflicts though, the application of LAN theory to certain parishes can run the risk of becoming a subjective device, its objectivity being dependent on the researcher's ability to see beyond the 'actor world' of the network. However, the employment of several modes of research and data collection enabled the researcher to see beyond the 'actor world' of the network.

Moreover, the structure of a local council in terms of age, gender, professional background; the length of residence in the locality; the dominance of county and district layers of governance in parish politics can, in turn, impact on the effectiveness of the decision making process.

Parish council meetings across the county are characterised by low attendance, (largely characterised by apathy and a lack of association) and a very narrow cross section of the community. As was expected, levels of involvement in running and organization of parish councils across Gloucestershire varied considerably. Regular attendance by a core group of members was the norm, whilst the discussion of emotive issues relating to planning and the environmental fabric of the locality typically brought out the crowds. Remoter, smaller parishes tended to see attendance levels, which were far smaller than most, often with no more than one or two

members turning up at a time. Larger urban councils fared better. This evidence alone suggests a considerable apathy and disinterest with this type of participation and reflects the findings of Edwards & Woods (2004) who explored the national level of community participation in England and Wales.

Significant biases remain in the characteristics of parish community leaders in Gloucestershire. The large majority are men, usually over 60 years of age, typically middle class and from a professional background. The leadership of councils is dominated by a small, close knit network of individuals, each bringing their own skills, perceptions and attributes to the role. In a large number of cases, the recruitment and identification of new members of the council is organised from *within* this social group. This evidence adds to the growing breadth of research analysing the very real application of Local Actor Network theory to rural parish politics.

The survey addressed the issue of attendance and participation with a series of questions. Seventy-five percent of respondents answered that there were large parts of the community that did not get involved with parish council matters. This finding suggests that the incidence of exclusion as described by Edwards (2000), Goodwin (2003) and Woods (2005), is typical of parishes in Gloucestershire too. Most respondents to the survey cited the young and second homeowner as the most apathetic sectors of the community. However, observational evidence from the attendance at parish council meetings suggests that these two groups of rural society are not always so indifferent.

Whilst participation in the statutory confines of local parish politics was found to be fairly low across Gloucestershire, community involvement at a different level was

widespread. There is a definite distinction between participation at the parish councillor level (statutory responsibilities, public accountability) and that of the “more focussed and self defining role played by the un-elected co-ordinator of community development”. Many community empowerment initiatives (such as organising church fetes and local amateur dramatics societies) involved members of the community who fall outside the formalised structures of the parish council. As such, the devolution of powers and responsibilities to communities may act to strengthen the power of community élites rather than empower citizens in the community. Across Gloucestershire, this level of community participation was more readily offered up as an example of how the parish councillors mobilized their communities to become more involved in village life.

The research therefore identifies another layer in the tiers of ‘actor-network’ participation beyond that of the political structure of the parish council. It can be argued that ‘the unelected co-ordinator’ may, in some parishes, have more power in galvanizing community aspirations than the parish councillors themselves. This research clearly adds to our understanding of the nature and complexity of local actor networks and calls for more research into the behaviours and motivations of those ‘background actors’ who consciously or subconsciously ‘choose’ to mobilize the community in a non-political manner.

*Both individual decisions and wider structural factors, including the opportunities provided by self-interest, influence the variation in the type and level of participation in community leadership.* Planning permission applications, the co-ordination of local housing policy disputes over rights of way and mediation in land rights disputes are

all areas where parish councils felt they should be involved. In some cases, vested interests amongst councillors promoted a degree of self-interest.

Rural community power structures in Gloucestershire remain to some degree exclusive and elitist. The devolution of power and responsibilities via the White Paper has not necessarily lead to the empowerment of the entire community. The research clearly indicates that that large parts of the community remain disenfranchised in terms of parish politics. The young, the second homeowner, the unelected volunteer and the elderly remain the key strands of the community excluded from decision making at the parish level. The research here lends support to previous research in this area.

*An individual's pathway to participation in parish politics is shaped by opportunities, obstacles and personal motivation.* The research suggests that a persons willingness to become involved in parish politics is influenced by a variety of interrelated factors - age, professional background, length of time resident in the parish, local connections and knowledge, vested interest (particularly in terms of planning issues), time constraints, finances, distance to travel to parish meetings and more selflessly, a desire to serve the local community and preconceived views about the performance of the current community leaders.

Some people are mobilised by a specific event, whilst others are encouraged to participate on a more piecemeal basis. In the case of Gloucestershire, an individuals propensity to become involved in community initiatives was more often than not influenced by a lack of competition for the role rather than a sudden surge in community



empowerment by the individual concerned. The degree to which an individual became mobilised may also be because they were the only people with the right skills and attributes for the job in hand.

*Parish councils perceive their function and responsibilities at a variety of levels and they can be broadly classified into three distinct typologies.* The research identified eight “typical” roles (ranging from 'representing the views of parishioners' to 'improving social welfare in the parish') for parish councils in Gloucestershire and respondents were invited to register their views. The identification of these “roles” adds to the research already conducted relating to the perceptions shared by parish councillors of their function on the parish scene. It provides valuable case study evidence of the *known* roles but also suggests that there are more *subconscious* roles not necessarily highlighted by the research to date, but worthy of closer examination.

Not surprisingly, over 86% of respondents felt that the central role for councils was to represent the views of parishioners and over two thirds believed that they should “lead by example”. A small minority reflected the view that the interests of the countryside are best represented by Central Government and the myriad of civil service agencies, which serve rural areas at arms length. Surprisingly, these parishes tend to be those that had been classified as ‘very rural’ in the survey. This is an interesting perspective, given that most literature suggests that community participation is severely hampered by the centralizing tendencies of government (Cloke 2003) and that community involvement in parish politics is piecemeal at best (Woods 1997).

One area of responsibility, which attracted rather mixed responses, concerned the issue of social welfare. Only one-third of councils said that they should take an active role in the provision and improvement of social services. A major factor influencing these responses was the interpretation of the term 'social welfare'.

Some interesting perspectives emerged in relation to other roles which councils might fulfil. Several councils saw their role as “cultural and social ambassadors” of the countryside, promoting and encouraging the re-emergence of traditional rural pursuits and crafts (e.g. farmers markets, barn dances and harvest festivals). This perhaps would be akin to the more well documented roles as “custodians of the countryside” Halfacree (1995) and, Lowndes and Sullivan (2004). Others emphasised their responsibilities as the “information hub” of the village, providing helpful and timely information on all manner of issues from social benefits to the provision of internet access in the local village hall or Post Office.

The research threw up many examples where parish councils were (and had been) involved with planning application disputes (albeit as a silent partner to the district and county council representatives) and it was also an area (when asked about their training needs) where councils felt they could benefit from formal training to aid their role in such wrangles. The dearth of training in planning issues also became apparent whilst observing actual parish council meetings. Thus the research contributes a useful case study of the nature of planning disputes and the reactions of councillors to solutions to these disputes.

It is clear that the way that parish councils view their roles and responsibilities within the rural governance framework varies considerably between parishes. The experience in Gloucestershire is by no means unique as research by Cloke and Little (1997), Edwards et al (2000) and Woods (2005) highlights similar findings.

The research also identified three different typologies to describe parish councils in Gloucestershire, these were: 'empowered parish councils', 'mediatory parish councils' and 'symbolic parish councils'. These typologies have been broadly determined by the proactive nature of the councils, their perception of the roles and functions they fulfil for the community they serve and their willingness to embrace initiatives which have been generated by recent rural governance legislation.

*Parish councils consider that they have very little influence in the broader sphere of rural governance structures.* The balance of power within and outside the parish council is an area, which has been well documented by rural commentators over the last 10 years or so. For the Gloucestershire experience, the perspectives of parish councils do not differ widely from those shared at a national level (Goodwin 1998; Edwards *et al* 2000; Woods 2005).

The research identified eight issues relating to the political power and alignment of parish councils in the county and comments were invited on what could be done to improve the operation of councils in the future. Almost 95% of respondents agreed that parish councils were a valuable mechanism for the rural community and were very important in promoting community participation. Opinions, however, on how best to deliver this role vary considerably between councils.

Many (around 70%) parish councils consider that they had never been powerful organizations and throughout history had always been at the will of centralized bureaucracy. Despite these rather strong views, parishes were less sure how to respond when asked if they thought parish councils had more power than in the past. Surprisingly, 1 in 5 parishes suggested that they did feel that councils had greater autonomy and empowerment than in the past.

Although the majority of parishes considered that they had less power or that parish councils were not powerful organizations, a large number did consider that they had been given more responsibility for the operation and management of parish politics. Two thirds of parishes considered that the plethora of rural initiatives and programs stemming from government organizations such as the soon to be disbanded Countryside Agency and RDA's created more work for them.

Less bureaucracy, more training in terms of financial management and the responsibilities of parish clerks, closer consultation with county and district councils, a greater appreciation of rural planning regulations and the encouragement of a wider cross section of the community to participate in the operation and management of the council topped the wish list of many councillors. Again, this list clearly reflects the conclusions of a wide cross section of current research (Woods 1997; Little 2001; Goodwin 2003; Lowndes & Sullivan 2004).

On a positive note, many cited the support they had received from local organisations such as GAPTC. The training material provided by such organisations was seen as invaluable by many parish clerks.

The linkages and interrelationships between the various tiers of local government were also seen as an obstacle to more cohesive management of the parish council. Many clerks complained that when a representative from the district or county council was asked to attend an important parish meeting, they often cried off at the last minute. Others suggested that the network of advice offered by such institutions failed to recognise the particular uniqueness of local areas. Many complained that the person on the other end of the phone seemed to have no appreciation of the issues facing specific parishes. Lowndes & Sullivan (2004:72) argue that this can result in a “significant accountability deficit”. When partnerships are an amalgamation of several government agencies, local landowners and parishioners, there often results a lack of clarity over the key mechanisms of the project or parish decision making process – audit reporting, corporate governance, project management etc. There were several examples gleaned from the research where this “accountability deficit” took on a very real manifestation.

*The interaction of parish councils with local and central governmental bodies varies considerably.* The emergence of new organisations and actors in rural community governance has generated only a *moderate* shift in the way parish councils operate. Parish councils can often exist in isolation both geographically and on the political scene. Sometimes this is a product of choice, but often can be borne out of frustration that their ‘rural voice’ is not being listened to at the various levels of rural governance. The research attempted to gauge the strength of opinion of the parish councils towards the different tiers of rural legislative and voluntary bodies, which act

on the countryside scene. In turn, the evidence collected provides an invaluable snapshot of attitudes to the various tiers of local and central government operating across rural areas. To a large degree this evidence confirms the problems associated with the tangled web of hierarchies and institutions which dominate the 'rural scene'. In order for the 'actors' in rural parishes to become effective, the entities which support their decision-making processes need to become more effective. These 'entities' in Gloucestershire operate only on a piecemeal modus operandi. As a result, much of the decision making process (now devolved to parish councils) suffers from governance inertia where decisions at the local level can be long, drawn out and with a certain amount of blame attached to them should things go wrong.

Opinions regarding the involvement and helpfulness of the County Council were divided. This finding perhaps bears out the distrust and frustration felt by many councils at their lack of power when entering into negotiations at the county level on such initiatives as traffic calming measures and maintenance of roads in the parish. Local affiliation seems to have filtered down to other similar organizations in the county. GAPTC for instance, polled extremely well with parishes. Such a response is borne out by the documentary evidence which describes ample examples where GAPTC have offered invaluable training of parish clerks, local knowledge and a practical voice to the more remote villages in the county.

This local unity breaks down though when you examine the relationship of the parish council with neighbouring parishes. The survey suggests that nearly 1 in 2 of parishes in Gloucestershire view these relations as unhelpful and in some cases, obstructive. At present, no governance literature exists examining the interaction of

neighbouring parish councils which each other (and the impact that this may have on parish politics) and as such, this interesting finding is considered to be novel and worthy of more in depth research by the wider rural geographic fraternity.

Of all the organisations in place to offer support and advice to parish councils in the region, it is the civil service agencies and centralized voluntary groups, which were viewed least favourably. At the top of the tree of the rural governance hierarchy is DEFRA. Rather surprisingly, nearly 1 in 3 of parishes had never heard of the government department. This result highlights the disinterest and perhaps, apathy felt towards the centralizing tendencies of Whitehall; or perhaps a general confusion over whom has lead responsibility for rural issues in the Government.

*Recent government legislation regarding community involvement, partnership and participation has been slow to filter down to a large numbers of parish councils.* From the research conducted in Gloucestershire parish councils did not seem to share the Government's vision for modernisation. Even though over 65% of parishes had heard of concepts such as the Quality Parish, many did not possess a full appreciation of what exactly it entailed. Many viewed such initiatives as just another layer of bureaucracy or an attempt by central government to impose urban ideals on the countryside.

Observational evidence gleaned from attendance at selected parish council meetings, and interviews with Parish Clerks seem to reinforce this perspective. Specific focus was given to the contents of the Rural White Paper and an exploration of the perceptions of parish clerks in terms of their understanding of the impact of such measures on their council. Only 50% had actually seen a copy of the White

paper itself. It seemed from the views expressed in the interviews that misunderstanding and a general detachment to the rhetoric of White Paper persists – and this was nearly three years after its initial publication. The more worrying aspect was that it appears that parish councils filter parts of the legislation embodied in the paper to suit their own understanding. Consequently, initiatives can be widely misinterpreted.

*The effectiveness of the Quality Parish and Town Council scheme in Gloucestershire will be reliant on high levels of participation in parish councils, something that has yet to materialize.* This research suggests that such schemes are often misinterpreted by parish councils and are slow to filter down from the national level and as such could have a serious impact on their utility and potential to succeed. At present, such initiatives are met with apathy amongst councillors who view it as just another layer of bureaucracy. The Rural White Paper and in particular, initiatives (some of which have now been disestablished since the White Paper was published) such as the Parish Plan, Rural Sounding Boards and Quality Parish Councils received some predictably hostile responses. Moreover, the proposition that such proposals require an electoral mandate before parish councils can be considered for accreditation, would mean that at present, a very low number of councils in Gloucestershire would actually qualify. The research therefore reinforces the notion of hostility felt by many parish councillors toward the continuing plethora of government initiatives aimed at promoting more accountability across parish politics.



The geography of partnership initiatives across the UK has emerged as a very uneven map of rural governance. This “map” is mirrored in the incidence of effective partnerships within rural politics in Gloucestershire. Recent rural governance legislation has highlighted an enhanced role for parish councils in rural politics in the future and has set a clear agenda for reform for the Parish Council system. Parish Plans Rural Sounding Boards and the Quality Parishes initiatives have all been mooted in the past as mediums by whom the rural voice can have its say. A central theme, which runs through all these initiatives, though, is the concept of “partnership”. Survey and observational evidence from parish clerk interviews and observations from parish council meetings suggests a very patchy level of community involvement in partnership initiatives and that Gloucestershire could be considered to be “partnership poor” (Woods 2005). The research was only able to identify 11 community-based projects (where the community have a *direct role* to play in the running of the project) from those parishes surveyed, where one could define as meeting the definition of partnership as laid down by the Rural White Paper. These projects (located in the southwest and north of the county) fell into three broad categories: improving the residential/environmental fabric of the parish; improving service provision (in terms of local meal delivery service for the elderly); the instigation of voluntary youth activities. In all but two of these projects, the parish council (and hence the community representative) played a very minimal role, with Gloucestershire County Council taking the lead in terms of logistics and funding. In addition, public funding financed projects, which were implemented by private sector bodies. This research confirms Edwards *et al* (2000) research into partnership initiatives in Mid Wales and Shropshire where only 2 out of 154 projects directly involved the community. It also highlights that few projects in Gloucestershire meet

the “tripartite ideal” (Goodwin 2003:9) of public, private and voluntary involvement and, the very real need for further research into the issues of accountability, representation and empowerment surrounding the success of partnership initiatives.

Moreover, participation in partnership initiatives and the experiences of those who become involved cannot be readily understood through the existing paradigms of participation and rural governance. Far too much emphasis has been placed on the decision-making motives of the community leaders at the expense of research into the recruitment processes involved in setting up such partnerships in the first instance. The Gloucestershire research suggests that the latter is still heavily biased to a very narrow section of the community.

*The complex nature of participation in community governance and leadership revealed by the research confirms the need for further examination of the shift from “joined up” to “joining up” partnerships and the incidence of partnership marginalisation felt across many parish councils.* The research carried out in

Gloucestershire confirms the need for more research focussing on the shift from “joined up” partnerships to “joining up” partnerships across the realms of government, to form an integrated approach to policy delivery in a wide variety of sectors (health, crime, transportation). Certainly, of the limited partnership projects identified in Gloucestershire most tended to remain in splendid isolation in terms of involving other sectors of government who may have an impact on the policy. Survey and observational evidence suggests that most projects involved the county and district council as the widest layer of government involvement but few involved the community themselves as key stakeholders. The evidence collected from this

research reinforces the notion that the composition of many partnership initiatives in Gloucestershire still relies on a hand picked elite representation to get the job done. This can inevitably led to a certain degree of partnership marginalisation as intentionally or otherwise, key members of the community are effectively 'frozen out' of the decision making process. Additionally, it can just be a matter of who turns up on the day, as to who will or will not be involved in the partnership decision making process. Clearly such partnerships could reap the benefits of an even larger pool of knowledge and expertise that involvement from other sectors (public, private and voluntary) could bring. More widely, examination of the workings of partnerships spatially (in terms of county or region) is greatly needed. Although the experience of partnership initiatives in Gloucestershire by and large mirrors the experience of other research carried out in the south west and Wales (the latter by Edwards & Woods 2004) it may not follow that the same is true across the entire United Kingdom. The question that should occupy the research agendas of rural geographers in the future is: how best can the good practice of one partnership be used and promoted across a wider area or at a different scale?

This research has cast considerable light on the workings of parish councils. Placing these in the context of local actor networks and partnership working the study provides valuable evidence of the varying roles and effectiveness of local politics. It has successfully examined the key role that parish councils have as 'agents' of government and explored and assessed how far they have adjusted to the new forms of governance set out by the White Paper. It has considered how councils have adapted alongside greater voluntary and community activity, focussing in particular on the new forms of partnership distributed across the countryside. In doing so, it

has highlighted some important issues relating to the changing perception of roles for Parish Councils, the issues facing councils in today's countryside, levels of community participation, partnership and involvement, attitudes to current rural governance legislation and the differing tiers of the rural governance structure and the future for parish councils as seen through the eyes of the council members themselves. Finally, it has identified some new and novel evidence, provided signposts for future research, and lent considerable support to previous and current research into the nature and dynamics of rural governance within the British Countryside.



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## **ANNEXES**

## ANNEX 1 – PARISH COUNCIL POSTAL QUESTIONNAIRE



### PARISH COUNCIL QUESTIONNAIRE

A new millennium brings with it fresh challenges for rural areas. Given these changes, how can parish councils' best represent the interests of people living in the countryside?

This survey is being circulated to all parish councils in Gloucestershire. Its aim is to find out more about the issues affecting rural areas in the county and the role of parish councils in addressing them. The survey is part of a PhD investigation into the work of parish councils in local communities. It is being conducted independently by the Centre for Rural Research at the Geography Department of University College Worcester and is supported by GAPTC – Gloucestershire Association of Parish & Town Councils. It is hoped that information from the survey will help improve our understanding of the importance of parish councils in rural areas. This knowledge will, in turn, be important for parish councils, planners and politicians alike.

We would appreciate it if you would take the time to complete this questionnaire for us. The more responses we get, the more accurate the survey will be. Please answer as fully and honestly as possible.

The survey may be completed by the Parish Clerk on behalf of the parish council. Your council may wish to discuss the questionnaire and complete it collectively at the next council meeting. There is no requirement to give your name and any information you supply to us will be treated in the strictest confidence. Results will be tabulated in such a way that it will be impossible to identify individual parishes.

Please return this questionnaire within the next four weeks to

**Nick Bennett**  
**Parish Council Survey**  
**Graduate School**  
**University College Worcester**  
**Henwick Grove**  
**Worcester WR2 6AJ**

If you would like further information about this survey or help in completing it, please phone either Nick Bennett in the first instance on 01285 760608 or Dr David Storey on 01905 855189



**Your Parish**

**Name of Parish Council**

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**Who completed this survey?**

Parish Clerk  Chair of Parish Council   
Another member of Parish Council  the whole Parish Council   
(Please state position)

**Do you consider your parish to be:**

Very rural  Rural  Urban  Very Urban  Not sure

**Why do you think this?**

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**Have there been any major changes in your parish in the last 10 years? Indicate which changes were positive and which were negative.**

Positive Changes

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Negative changes

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Neither positive nor negative

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Are any of the following issues prevalent in your parish? Please tick the appropriate boxes depending on the degree to which your parish has been affected.

	<i>Very much a problem</i>	<i>Problem</i>	<i>Not a Problem</i>	<i>Don't know/Not Applicable</i>
Lack of affordable housing				
Poor residential planning				
Poor commercial planning				
Crime				
Traffic congestion/pollution				
Damaged environment/countryside				
Lack of public transport				
Lack of activities for young people				
Decline of services (e.g. shops, etc.)				
Litter				
Noise pollution				
Trespassing on private property				
Lack of services for the elderly				
Racial tension				
Lack of local employment				
Other (specify - e.g. Foot & Mouth Disease)				

If you feel particularly strongly about any of the issues mentioned above or have your own opinions on issues not covered here, please feel free to use the space below to record your views.

**Your Parish Council**

How many seats are there in your Parish Council? \_\_\_\_\_

In the last Parish Council election

Were all seats filled?  
\_\_\_\_\_

Were any member co-opted?  
\_\_\_\_\_

If Yes, why were the members co-opted?  
\_\_\_\_\_

What was the percentage turnout at the election?  
\_\_\_\_\_

**9. In general are parish council meetings attended by**

A wide cross-section of the parish Yes [ ] No [ ]

A few regulars Yes [ ] No [ ]

Very low numbers Yes [ ] No [ ]

Larger numbers only when certain issues arise Yes [ ] No [ ]

**Please state the approximate numbers of attendees at your last meeting** \_\_\_\_\_

**10. Are there any sections of the community who do not involve themselves with the parish council?**

Yes [ ] No [ ] Don't Know [ ]

**If Yes, which sections do not involve themselves**  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Why do you think this is?**  
\_\_\_\_\_

11. What do you think is the role of your parish council? (Tick all that are appropriate).

	Yes	No	Don't know
Represent views of parishioners			
Lead by example			
Maintain the parish			
Improve the parish			
Act as planning/legislative mediator			
Protect the built environment			
Improve social welfare in the parish			
Other (Please State)			

12. What, in your view have been the parish councils greatest successes? Why have they been successful?

Success	Reasons for Success	Role of Parish Council

13. What, in your view, have been the Parish Councils greatest failures? Why have they been failures?

Failures	Reasons for Failure	Role of Parish Council

14. What do you consider are the issues that the parish will be faced with in the future?

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Has your parish council been involved in any disputes with local authorities, other organisations or members of the public over the past 5 years?

Nature of Dispute	With Whom?	Outcome

**How helpful have the following organisations been to your parish council?**

	<i>Very helpful</i>	<i>Helpful</i>	<i>Not very helpful</i>	<i>Unhelpful/obstructive</i>	<i>Not known</i>
County Council					
District Council					
Neighbouring parish councils					
DEFRA (formerly MAFF)					
Countryside Agency					
Rural Development Agency					
ACRE					
GAPTC					
Police					
Other (specify)					

**17. For any organisation you think is helpful or very helpful please state why you think this is.**

<i>Organisation</i>	<i>Reason</i>

**Parish Councils: Past, Present and Future**

**18. Do you think Parish Councils:**

	<i>Strongly agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Unsure/don't know</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly disagree</i>
Are important in the local community					
Are powerful organisations					
Have more power today than in the past					
Have more responsibility today than in the past					
Have more funding today than in the past					
Should be given more power					
Should be give more responsibility					
Should be given more funding					

**19. What, if anything, could be done to improve or help the operation of your parish council?**

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**20. Have members of your parish council ever undertaken any training or education for their roles?**

Yes [ ] No [ ] Don't know [ ]

**If Yes, what kind of training/education has been undertaken**

<i>Nature of training/education</i>	<i>Provided by?</i>	<i>Was it useful?</i>

**If No, why has training/education not been undertaken.** (Tick all that are relevant).

- Lack of opportunity [ ]
- Lack of time [ ]
- No relevant training/education [ ]
- No wish to participate [ ]
- Other (specify) [ ]

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**21. Are there any subjects, issues or skills on which your parish council would appreciate advice, training or education?**

Yes [ ] No [ ]

**If Yes, please list items**

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**22. How are parish councillors kept informed about:**

a. rural issues in Britain

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b. rural issues in your local area

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**23. What unique skills or insights do you think your parish council brings to the planning or management of local affairs?**

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**24. Do you think parish councils could or should be reformed in any way?**

Yes [ ] No [ ] Don't know [ ]

**Why do you say this?**

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**25. Have you heard about suggestions to 'quality test' parish councils?**

Yes [ ] No [ ] Don't know [ ]

**If yes, what do you think this will involve?**

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### THE COMPOSITION OF THE PARISH COUNCIL

Please complete the table below as fully as you can. If you run out of space, please attach supplementary pages to the back of this survey

<b>Person</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Length of Service</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Political party</b>	<b>How long has the person lived in the parish?</b>	<b>What is their role? (e.g. Treasurer)</b>



**THANK YOU FOR YOUR ASSISTANCE**

Thank you for your assistance in completing this survey. Should you feel that you would like to add further or expand on the answers you gave please feel free to attach additional sheets to this survey. Once you are happy that you have completed this questionnaire to the best of your ability, please use the enclosed SAE and return to:

Mr Nick Bennett  
Parish Council Survey  
Graduate School  
University College Worcester  
Henwick Grove  
WORCESTER  
WR2 6AJ

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## **ANNEX 2 – PARISH COUNCIL INTERVIEW & OBSERVATION DATA CAPTURE SHEET**

### **PARISH COUNCIL CASE STUDY No. 1**

The following is a record of (a) an interview with the parish clerk or similar representative of the parish selected for further research and (b) observations made by myself during attendance at a parish council meeting at the selected parish. For part (a), the interview responses have been grouped by theme. The same themes/questions were explored in each interview and observation session for each parish council selected. As a result it is hoped that the information can be used on a comparative basis. All interviews and observer sessions were conducted during June – September 2003. Where practicable, both parish clerk interview and attendance at a parish council meeting took place on the same date. Interviews usually took place in the hour or so before the formal parish council meeting. Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes.

Supplemented by data already gathered as part of the postal questionnaire

**Parish name:**

**Survey No:**

**Parish Clerk:**

**Interview Date:**

**Date of Council Meeting observed:**

**Current local issues:**

**Number on parish council:**

**A: Interview with Parish Clerk**

**Views of the role/function of parish council**

**Particular successes and failures**

**Levels of community involvement/participation**

**Involvement of local and central government**

**Attitudes/perception of Government rural policy/legislation (including White Paper)**

**Attitudes to training**

**Issues of planning**

**Attitudes to external bodies and other neighbouring parish councils**

**The power of councils**

**Future developments in the parish**

**Improvement to parish council structure**

**Other issues (including the Foxhunting debate)**

**B: Observer notes from parish council session**

**No. Attendees:**

**Duration of meeting:**

**Issues under discussion:**

**Interaction amongst attendees:**

**Time spent on particular issues:**

**Any external attendees:**

**Dominant groups/vested interests:**

**Balance between local issues and dealing with Government legislative matters:**

**Other observations:**

### ANNEX 3 - PARISH COUNCILS IN THE ADMINISTRATIVE COUNTY OF GLOUCESTERSHIRE: SURVEY POPULATION

**Bolded** Parish Councils represent those who responded to the postal questionnaire

Adlestrop  
Alderley  
**Alderton**  
**Aldsworth**  
**Alkington**  
**Alvington**  
**Ampney Crucis**  
Ampney St Mary  
Ampney St Peter  
Andoversford  
**Arlingham**  
**Ashchurch**  
**Ashleworth**  
**Ashley**  
Aston Sub Edge  
**Avening**  
Awre  
**Aylburton**  
**Badgeworth**  
Bagendon  
**Barnsley**  
**Barrington**  
Batsford  
**Baunton**  
**Berkley**  
**Beverstone**  
Bibury  
Bishops Cleeve  
**Bisley with Lypiatt**  
**Blaisedon**  
**Bledington**  
**Blockley**  
Boddington  
**Bourton on the Hill**  
**Bourton on the Water**  
Boxwell with Leighterton  
**Brimpsfield**  
**Broadwell**  
Brockworth  
**Bromsberrow**

**Brookthorpe with Whaddon**  
**Buckland**  
**Caincross**  
**Cam**  
Chaceley  
**Chalford**  
**Charlton Kings**  
Chedworth  
Cherington  
**Chipping Campden**  
Churcham  
**Churchdown**  
Cinderford  
Cirencester  
Clapton on the Hill  
**Coaley**  
Coates  
Coberley  
Cold Ashton  
**Coleford**  
Colesbourne  
**Colns St Aldwyns**  
Coln St Dennis  
**Compton Abdale**  
Condicote  
Corse  
**Cowley**  
Cranham  
**Cutsdean**  
**Daglingworth**  
**Deerhurst**  
Didmarton  
Donnington  
Dowdeswell  
**Down Ampney**  
Down Hatherley  
Driffield  
**Drybrook**  
**Dumbleton**  
**Duntisbournes**

Dursley  
**Dymock**  
Eastington  
East Leach  
Ebrington  
**Edgeworth**  
Elkstone  
Elmore  
Elmstone Hardwicke  
**English Bicknor**  
**Evenlode**  
**Fairford**  
Farmington  
**Forthampton**  
**Frampton on Severn**  
Fretherne with Saul  
**Frocester**  
Gorseley & Kilcote  
**Gotherington**  
**Great Rissington**  
**Great Witcombe**  
**Gretton**  
**Guiting Power**  
**Ham & Stone**  
Ham Fallow  
Hampnett  
**Hardwicke**  
**Harescombe**  
Harefield  
**Hartpury**  
Hasfield  
**Hatherop**  
Hawling  
hazelton  
Hewelsfield  
**Hynam**  
**Hillersley & Tresham**  
Hinton  
Horsley  
Hucclecote  
Huntley  
Icomb  
Innsworth  
Kemble & Ewen  
Kempley  
**Kempsford**

**Kings Stanley**  
**Kingscote**  
Kingswood  
Lechlade on Thames  
**Leckhampton**  
Leigh  
**Leonard Stanley**  
**Little Rissington**  
**Littledean**  
**Long Newnton**  
Longborough  
**Longford**  
**Longhope**  
Longley  
Lower Slaughter  
Lydbrook  
**Lydney**  
Maisemore  
Maugersbury  
Meysey Hampton  
Mickleton  
Mincinhampton  
Minsterworth  
**Miserden**  
Mitcheldean  
**Moreton Valence**  
Moreton in Marsh  
**Nailsworth**  
Naunton  
**Newent**  
Newland  
Newnham on Severn  
**North Cerney**  
North Nibley  
**Northleach with Eastington**  
Norton  
Notgrove  
**Nymphsfield**  
Oddington  
Owlpen  
Oxenhall  
Oxenton  
Ozzleworth  
**Painswick**  
**Pauntley**  
Pitchcombe

Poole keynes  
**Poulton**  
Prescott  
**Prestbury**  
Preston  
**Quedgeley**  
Quennington  
Randwick  
**Redmarley D Abitot**  
Rencomb  
**Rodborough**  
Rodmarton  
**Ruardean**  
**Rudford & Highleadon**  
Ruspridge & Sudley  
Saintbury  
**Sandhurst**  
Sapperton  
**Severnhampton**  
Sezincote  
**Sherbourne**  
**Shipton Moyne**  
**Shipton Oliffe**  
**Shurdington**  
Siddington  
**Slimbridge**  
**Snowhill**  
**Somerford Keynes**  
South Cerney  
Southam  
Southrop  
St Briavels  
**Standish**  
Stanton  
Stanway  
Staunton  
Staunton (Newent)  
Staverton  
**Stinchcombe**  
Stoke Orchard  
Stonehouse  
**Stow on the Wold**  
Stroud  
**Sudeley**  
Swell  
**Swindon Village**  
Source: Gloucestershire County Council

**Syde**  
Taynton  
**Teddington & Alstone**  
Temple Guiting  
Tetbury  
Tetbury Upton  
Tewkesbury  
Thrupp  
Tibberton  
**Tidenham**  
Turley  
**Toddington**  
**Todenham**  
**Turkdean**  
**Twigworth**  
Twyning  
**Uckington**  
**Uley**  
**up hatherley**  
Up Leadon  
Upper Rissington  
**Upper Slaughter**  
Upton St Leonards  
Walton Cardiff  
**West Dean**  
Westbury on Severn  
**Westcote**  
Weston Sub Edge  
Westonbirt with Lasborough  
**Whiteshill & Ruscombe**  
**Whitminster**  
Whittington  
Willersey  
Winchcombe  
**Windrush**  
Winson  
Winstone  
**Withington**  
Woodchester  
**Woodmancote**  
**Woolaston**  
**Wotton under edge**  
**Wyck Rissington**  
**Yanworth**



## **ANNEX 4 -SAMPLE PARISH COUNCIL POPULATION FOR PILOT EXERCISE**

### **NORTH WILTSHIRE**

1. Ashton Keynes & Minety
2. Cricklade
3. Hankerton
4. Purton
5. Malmesbury

### **SOUTH WORCESTERSHIRE**

1. Birlingham & Nafford
2. Eckington
3. Defford
4. Pershore
5. Elmley Castle

**ANNEX 5 – SELECTED CASE STUDY PARISHES FOR FURTHER  
OBSERVATION, PARISH CLERK INTERVIEW & ATTENDANCE AT  
PARISH COUNCIL MEETINGS**

1. Minchinhampton
2. Stow on the Wold
3. Lydney
4. Sapperton
5. Stanway
6. Winchcombe
7. Guiting Power
8. Notgrove
9. Snowhill
10. Cirencester



