

## 4. Meaningful Civic Councils

- 4.1 Regardless of the RPA's final recommendation on the number of councils, it is crucial that the larger councils are supported in their role by effective civic councils. The RPA is at pains to point out that civic councils 'would not be a third tier of government (regional and sub-regional government being the first two), but would be a development of the area committee structures employed in other jurisdictions'<sup>1</sup>. Beyond this, however, little detail is available.
- 4.2 The RPA consultation document indicates that they will comprise elected representatives from a given area, consult locally, form partnerships to gather local views which would feed into their respective councils, and undertake assigned duties on their behalf. In so doing, the RPA Team suggests, they will provide civic leadership.
- 4.3 The closest equivalent to these in other parts of the United Kingdom is parish councils in England and community councils in Wales and Scotland. There are some 8,000 parish and town councils in England, and 2,000 community councils in Wales and Scotland. According to Wilson and Game<sup>2</sup> many of the parish and community councils in England and Wales provide a wide range of services, either on their own initiative or acting as agents for their county or district councils: village halls, allotments, playing fields, gymnasia and baths, open spaces and camping sites, shelters, war memorials, public clocks, street lighting car parks, burial grounds, footpaths and churchyards.
- 4.4 But all these services are *discretionary* – there is no requirement that they be provided. Where services are provided, they are financed partly by fees and charges and partly by means of a precept added to the local tax collected by their district council from the area's taxpayers (ratepayers in Northern Ireland). Parish and community councils have the right to be notified and

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<sup>1</sup> *The Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland: Further Consultation* (2005) 40, 4.33. Belfast RPA.

<sup>2</sup> Wilson, D. and Game, D. (1998) *Local Government in the United Kingdom* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Basingstoke: Macmillan.

consulted by their respective district and county councils about local planning applications, footpath surveys and certain bye laws.

- 4.5 Scottish community councils are rather different. They are entirely optional, have no automatic right of access to public funds, and cannot therefore be properly regarded as an additional tier of the local government system in the way that English and Welsh parish and community councils, respectively, can. Their principal functions are not the provision of services, but consultation and representation: ascertaining and articulating the views of their local communities.
- 4.6 Banbridge District Council, cognisant of the wider UK experience, suggests a more distinctive approach to civic councils, building upon emerging models of partnership governance now prevalent in Northern Ireland. This could draw on best practice ideas evolving from the work of local strategy partnerships (LSPs), community safety and district policing partnerships (DPPs). Civic councils should not be seen as an alternative to local partnerships, but rather complementary to them, operating at a level which facilitates local expression and accountability.
- 4.7 Local strategy partnerships, for example, are expected to engage in integrated planning within district council areas – to ensure that services provided to the public are better integrated across administrative boundaries and more responsive to the needs of local communities. To do this, LSPs were tasked to develop a local area strategy and action plan that was to become the framework for sustainable regeneration and development in each district council area. The local integrated strategy would, according to guidelines issued by the Special EU Programmes Body, ‘seek to improve the economic, social and environmental conditions in a local area and contribute to sustainable development’<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Special EU Programmes Body (2001): *Local Strategy Partnerships – Guidelines*: 8.

- 4.8 The obvious comparison here is with local strategic partnerships in England and Wales which provide a co-ordination framework to: prepare and implement a community strategy for the area; bring together local plans, partnerships and initiatives; work with local authorities that are developing a local public service agreement; and develop and deliver a local neighbourhood strategy<sup>4</sup>. LSPs in the Northern Ireland context have assumed this role in a non-statutory capacity.
- 4.9 The RPA, however, now proposes that local councils will have a ‘central role in developing and co-ordinating local policy on service delivery between major service providers within their council boundary’. To achieve this, councils will have ‘a statutory duty to prepare a community plan in consultation with other service providers and the community they represent’. Other service providers, according to the RPA, will be required through legislation to co-operate in this planning process<sup>5</sup>. Banbridge District Council argues that civic councils should become the conduit for the local expression of the varying priorities and needs of the constituent areas which make up the larger councils, feeding into their community plans.
- 4.10 What has emerged from the experience of District Policing Partnerships thus far, for example, is their capacity to effectively monitor local police and engage local people in this process. The main responsibilities of the DPPs include: consultation with the public, influencing policing priorities and targets, gaining co-operation from the local authority, acting as a forum for discussion, and monitoring performance. These roles could easily translate into the responsibilities assumed by civic councils where they would feed into the discussions and debates of their parent council and, at the same time, hold it and other public bodies to account for performance against the agreed community plan in their areas.

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<sup>4</sup> Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions (2001): *Local Strategic Partnerships: Government Guidance*: 5-6.

<sup>5</sup> *The Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland: Further Consultation* (2005) 23, 3.5. Belfast RPA.

4.11 Bridge Partnership (Banbridge's LSP) for example has commented:

By looking at best practice of LSPs and DPPs and by setting up a body which involves both locally elected representatives and the community sector, it is hoped that local people could be effectively engaged and that this could prevent the community from feeling that their local identity has been swallowed up by the larger council structure. It is crucial that civic councils are not merely a talking shop. They must have support from the highest levels and be able to influence decisions about their local areas<sup>6</sup>.

4.12 **In summary, Banbridge District Council sees the civic council model working as follows: Civic councils would comprise councillors representing each of the constituent councils in the large councils with powers to co-opt or form partnerships with other civic stakeholders (business, voluntary/community representatives). They should have a key role in: local advocacy, local input to the wider community planning process, community leadership, providing services at the behest of public bodies operating in their area, acting as a one-stop-shop for all public services (including health, education, housing, social security etc.), monitoring the performance of the Council and other public bodies in delivering the community plan. Banbridge District Council offices would, in effect, become the local customer interface for public services users and the location of staff delivering services in the district under the remit of the larger (area) council. In this way our local identity and closeness to our users/ratepayers is retained. The establishment of civic councils and the definition of their role should be enshrined in legislation and not left to the discretion of the new councils.**

4.13 Banbridge District Council sees real value in the retention of existing council facilities, not only as a base for the decentralisation and retention of employees within large local government areas, but as the location for a one-stop-shop (Public Service Centre). A one-stop-shop in Banbridge (and elsewhere) would offer the following advantages:

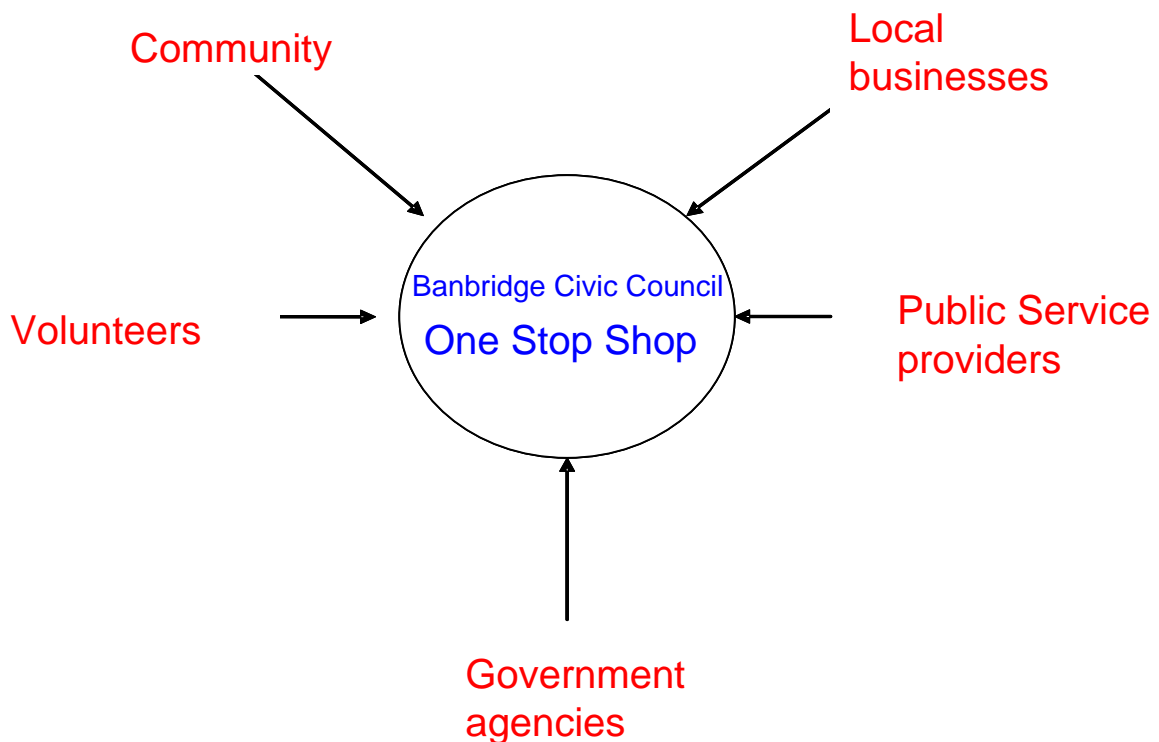
- **Helps users to access public services – larger councils could appear very remote.**

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<sup>6</sup> The Bridge Partnership (2005) *Review of Public Administration – Response to SEUPB*.

- Provides face-to-face contact for people unable to use web or telephone based services, particularly the elderly.
- Maintains a local contact point when main offices have been centralised perhaps at some distance from where people live.
- Enables all tiers of government (regional and sub-regional) to provide information and services through a single outlet.
- Responds to the government's agenda to deliver services and achieve best value.

Banbridge District Council therefore argues strongly that existing employees, located in Banbridge, are best placed to deliver local services, including the formation of a one-stop shop (Public Service Centre).



## One -Stop Shop Model