

Local (Parish and Town) Councils and the Compact

January 2012

This guidance document, jointly developed by Compact Voice and NALC, is designed to provide information about the purpose and benefits of local Compacts to local (town and parish) councils.

What is the Compact?

The Compact is an agreement between government and the voluntary and community sector (VCS) in England which sets out principles that should underpin their relationship. First launched in 1998 by the Labour government, and recently updated and strengthened in 2010 by the coalition government, the Compact can help partners from all sectors to come together to break down barriers and identify shared goals for the benefit of communities and individuals. Whilst the Compact document reads like a set of minimum standards for partnership working, in reality it is about much more than that.

Who is Compact Voice?

Compact Voice represents the voluntary and community sector on the Compact. We are co-signatories on the national Compact, and negotiated its content on behalf of the sector, based on its views.

We have a membership of 2500 and our board contains all the main infrastructure organisations in the voluntary and community sector as well as others. A full list of our board members is available on our website.

We provide training, support, advice and information about better partnership working to both sectors both nationally and locally, representing the voluntary and community sector's interests and views to government, and championing the Compact.

What are local Compacts?

Local Compacts began to be developed in 2003, recognising that a national agreement between the government and the voluntary and community sector representatives would not always accurately reflect the circumstances, needs and aspirations of local partners and communities.

As of 2011, there are 203 local Compacts covering every top tier local authority in England, with many district/borough level partnerships also electing to develop a Compact. It is common for local councils and / or county associations of local councils to sign up to their local Compact.

What are the benefits of local Compacts for local councils?

There is an increasing emphasis on the design and delivery of services being decentralised - meaning more power and responsibility is handed to communities.

In this new emerging landscape of increasingly local governance there is a vital role for both

voluntary and community sector organisations and local councils. For the localism agenda to be properly delivered, it is crucial that local councils and voluntary sector organisations are able to work together effectively. Local Compacts are a key mechanism to help local councils do this by:

- Understanding the needs of communities
- Getting things right first time
- Breaking down barriers
- Influencing at district and county level
- Delivering Localism
- Laying the foundations for the Big Society

“In Shropshire, we’re taking a bottom up approach to the Compact. As a result of joint work between the Voluntary and Community Sector Assembly, Shropshire Council’s Elected Members and the Association of Local Councils, we’re selecting six areas to pilot innovative projects.

As part of these projects, the local parish/town council, local voluntary and community organisations and the elected member for that area will all work together to develop new partnership arrangements, resolve local issues or develop new services. We’re calling the project Flourishing Shropshire Communities because that’s exactly what we hope it will create.”

Sarah Dodds, VCS Assembly Coordinator and Cllr Gwilym Butler, Compact Champion

Understanding the needs of communities

To be an effective local council you have to be able to reach communities and groups which are sometimes termed “hard to reach”. Far from being a box ticking exercise for meeting obligations with equality legislation, speaking to and hearing the views of a diverse audience within a community can help ensure more effective policy and build trust.

The voluntary and community sector has unique access to a wide range of audiences and can help to provide a valuable conduit for engagement. By actively participating in, and helping to strengthen a local Compact, local councils will also be tapping into this valuable resource. This is especially relevant when designing or delivering services.

Getting things right first time

Following Compact principles should not be seen as a burden. Rather, the Compact should be considered as a framework that helps ensure decisions which are being made are the right ones.

As an illustrative example, consider a local council which has been allowing a nearby charity to run an annual event on its land for the past few years, but is now thinking of charging a fee to help raise income. By talking openly about plans at the earliest stage, consulting all organisations and groups that might be affected and undertaking an equalities impact assessment, the council will be able to make a responsible decision and fully understand a wide range of implications. Additionally, the local council's partners in the voluntary and community sector will have had an opportunity to feed into the decision and prepare for possible outcomes.

Breaking down barriers

Most local organisations and groups, regardless of sector, will share similar aspirations: to deliver positive benefits to their communities. Most local Compacts have a group that meets from time-to-time to discuss Compact related issues. These groups are often called a

“Compact Steering Group” or a “Compact Implementation Group”, and are made up of representatives from a variety of organisations in both sectors.

Such groups help partners to understand each other’s priorities and identify areas of duplication or potential cooperation. By setting agreed parameters for cross sector partnership, the Compact can help both sectors to speak the same language. Representatives from local councils may have a valuable contribution to make to such groups.

Influencing at district and county level

Compact group meetings are a forum where public sector and voluntary and community sector organisations which are active in the area can raise issues and influence partners. Local Compacts offer a unique opportunity for local councils to not only engage with other public sector partners in the wider district and / or county, but also to engage with voluntary and community sector organisations which operate across boundaries.

Delivering Localism

The Localism Act has strengthened the position of local councils by giving them a key role in the creation of neighbourhood plans. To successfully define planning priorities for new homes, town centre revitalisation, protection of green spaces, and regeneration, these plans should require the engagement and input of the voluntary and community sector. Such input will be best facilitated by local councils that are already working to Compact principles.

In addition the Localism Act has brought in Community Rights which will aim to:

“... Ensure that community organisations have a fair chance to bid to take over land and buildings that are important to them... Using new community rights, local community and voluntary bodies, and parish councils, will be able to identify land and buildings that are important to them.”

As both local councils and community organisations are being actively encouraged to engage with new mechanisms to deliver community projects, there is significant opportunity for both to come together to form joint bids. Implementing Compact principles will ensure that such partnerships will have the best possible chances of success.

Laying the foundations for the Big Society

The recent renewal of the national Compact was launched during the Prime Minister’s speech which also announced the Big Society, and the two principles should be seen as complementary and with some shared goals: to empower local communities for shared benefit. The Compact should be seen as the foundations upon which the Big Society will have to be built.

Compact Voice has published a guidance note on how the Compact relates to the Big Society which can be found [on our website](#).

Should there be a role for local council associations?

It may be that in some areas local councils feel that their local association is best placed to represent them in the local Compact. This could be done by nominating a representative to sit on the Compact implementation group or by rotating that role between local councils.

A role that associations should be encouraged to play is in publicising the Compact to its members and ensuring that they understand how to engage with it.

Are local councils required to sign up to local Compacts?

There is no statutory requirement for local councils to sign up to a local Compact. Local

Compacts receive backing all over the country because they offer tangible benefits to partners. Local councils that do not sign up to their local Compact or contribute to local Compact activities such as working groups or forums could be seen as sending a negative message to local partners.

What does NALC say about the Compact?

NALC believes that the national Compact is a very valuable tool for grassroots and community bodies to use to demonstrate a commitment to local delivery and principles.

Though the Compact has no binding requirements for local councils, they should feel confident when signing up to a local Compact. Many local councils are already partnering in projects with neighbouring community groups in such things as Big Lottery Fund endeavours.

So the Big Society is not a new concept for community groups or local councils and the Compact is an excellent way of demonstrating a 'localist' ethos. The Localism Act has watermarked significant new neighbourhood planning powers and Community Rights to the grassroots – in particular to local councils and community groups.

Signing up to local Compacts would be a tremendous way for local councils to formally build relationships which will help apply these new powers in the right way.

Where can I find out more?

The Compact Voice website has a wealth of resources on local Compacts including guidance, case studies, research and briefings.

Please visit www.compactvoice.org.uk or call 020 7521 2461 if you have any questions or support needs, including details of local Compacts.

Please visit www.nalc.gov.uk or call 020 7637 1865 if you have any questions or support needs, including details of how local councils can sign up to local Compacts.