



# Community Engagement & the Democratic Deficit

Prepared for South East Cornwall  
Community Area Partnership

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## Background

At its meeting in June 2025, the South East Cornwall Community Area partnership resolved to establish a new networking group for Community Engagement that would recognise the democratic deficit, potential barriers to engagement and possible solutions.

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### South East Cornwall Community Area Partnership

The community area partnership brings local organisations and people together. Its role is to tackle the issues that matter to communities, so everyone can start, live and age well. There are 12 [community area partnerships](#) in Cornwall.

Partnership meetings are open to the public and the press.

The partnership involves Cornwall Councillors and town and parish councils in the area. It also involves other organisations that serve our communities. These include the Police, health services and voluntary and community sector.

### Disclaimer

This report is authored by John Hesketh in his capacity as Clerk representative, and the views expressed here do not represent those of his employer, St Keyne & Trewidland Parish Council.

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## 1.0 Headlines & Key Points

This report, authored by Clerk representative John Hesketh, addresses a critical "democratic deficit" within the South East Cornwall Community Area Partnership (CAP). While national voter turnout at the 2024 General Election hit its lowest level since 2001 (59.7%), the local situation is more severe. In the May 2025 elections, 27 out of 29 local councils in the CAP area were uncontested, meaning voter turnout was effectively zero for 93% of these authorities.

### Causes of Disengagement

The report identifies several systemic and local barriers to participation:

- **Knowledge Gap:** Residents often lack a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities of parish and town councils.
- **Perceived Disconnect:** There is a growing sentiment that councillors are an "out-of-touch elite".
- **Systemic Barriers:** Mandatory voter ID and complex registration processes have disproportionately impacted younger and lower-income demographics.
- **The Trust Paradox:** While only 9% of voters have "high trust" in parish councils, this is still higher than the trust levels for district councils (6%) or the House of Commons (5%).

### Driving Engagement through Data and Action

To address these issues, the report introduces an **Engagement Index**. This tool uses published minutes to track councillor performance across three metrics: **Attendance**, **Agenda contributions** (proposing discussion items), and **Actions** (taking on tasks arising from meetings). Data shows that while attendance is generally high, active participation in setting agendas and taking actions is often concentrated among a few members, leaving significant room for improved collective capacity.

The report collates over 40 specific actions across three categories: internal communication (clerk-to-councillor), council-to-resident engagement, and individual councillor outreach. Key recommendations include:

- **Digital Modernization:** Using QR codes, social media, and accessible websites.
- **Proactive Presence:** Hosting surgeries in high-traffic areas and visiting schools to encourage youth registration.
- **Transparency:** Using PowerPoint in meetings and publishing the documents councillors use to make decisions.

### The Path Ahead: Devolution

The urgency of these reforms is heightened by the upcoming **English Devolution & Community Empowerment Bill**. This legislation will mandate "effective neighbourhood governance" to move decision-making closer to residents. The report concludes that parish councils must be proactive in improving engagement now to ensure they are recognized as the central "first tier" of government capable of handling these new devolved powers.

## 2.0 The Democratic Deficit

2.1 The metric most often used to measure the health of our democracy is that of voter turnout. Nationally, regionally and locally it's in decline. At the 2024 General Election, turnout was just **59.7%** - its lowest level since 2001 and much lower than the peak of **83.9%** seen in 1950. While national figures are concerning, the situation at the local level is problematic too. Nationally, turnout at the local elections in May 2025 was 34.3%. Cornwall was slightly higher at 37% but that itself was down from 39% in the 2021 elections.

2.2 At town and parish council level, and using the same indicator, voter turnout in our South East Cornwall CAP area was effectively - zero. That is to say, of the 29 councils in our area, only 2 were contested (compared to 5 that were contested in 2021). So the remaining 27 council areas (93%) were uncontested – meaning that there were either fewer candidates than seats or an exact number of candidates to fill those vacancies.

For the South-East Cornwall CAP, this is unusual because nationally, in the May 2025 local elections, contested seats (where there are more candidates than seats) rose by 40% compared to the previous year.

- **21% of councils** held competitive ballots in 2025, up from 15% in 2024<sup>1</sup>.
- This suggests a 'turning point' in local engagement, although 74% of councils still ended up with vacancies because not enough people stood for election.

2.3 What might the reasons behind this be? At national level, the House of Commons benefits from a dedicated 24 hour news channel (BBC Parliament), regular programmes on our national politics, news items on every bulletins, talk shows, phone-in programmes, and sophisticated political machines behind candidates to maintain their profiles and get them re-elected. No parliamentary seat is ever uncontested – but turnout is still falling.

2.4 At our county level, we have a scaled down version of the national picture: television programmes, radio programmes, canvassing, hustings. Still no seat is ever uncontested and still turnout is falling.

2.5 Our town and parish councils are non-political, and the nature of our councillors is that they are not professional politicians and so do not have the back-up and resources seen nationally and across the county. Is this the explanation for the apparent lack of engagement between the electorate and those elected to represent them? or has the democratic process become a distant or irrelevant exercise for them?

2.6 Direct Feedback on Services. When surveyed by the Local Government Association (LGA),<sup>2</sup> residents often distinguish between the 'council' as an institution and the 'services' provided.

Residents tend to be more satisfied with specific local 'parish' services (like allotments, parks, and community centres) than they are with the broader administrative 'council' structure. Nationally, research shows there is a growing demand for 'community power', with

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<sup>1</sup> <https://democracyclub.org.uk/blog/2025/07/29/parish-councils-and-political-parties-some-initial-findings/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/research-and-data/research-publications/lga-perceptions-survey>

75% of people believing that allowing communities to have more of a say in local decisions would be more effective than central government control.

## 2.7 The contradictions in perception and reality

<b>Aspect</b>	<b>Public Perception</b>	<b>Statistical Reality (2025)</b>
Trust	Higher than MPs and District Councils	Only ~9% have 'high trust'
Politics	Prefer 'non-political' independents	Party candidates are 5x more likely to win
Engagement	Seen as 'distant' or 'invisible'	40% surge in contested elections
Staffing	Assumed to be fully staffed	74% of councils have vacancies

## 3.0 Possible Causes

3.1 Research into public attitudes toward parish and town councils suggests a complex relationship: while voters often trust them more than national politicians, there is also significant confusion about what they actually do.

Recent data from organizations like the National Association of Local Councils (NALC)<sup>3</sup> and the Democracy Club (2024–2025) highlights several key trends in voter perception and behaviour.

3.2 National level

- **The First-Past-the-Post (FPTP)<sup>4</sup> system**

Widely cited as the leading cause. By 2024, data showed that nearly 58% of voters were not represented by a candidate of their choice. This ‘winner-takes-all’ approach often results in a ‘disproportionate’ outcome where a party gains a massive parliamentary majority (and thus total executive power) despite receiving a minority of the popular vote.

- **Lack of Accountability in the Second Chamber**

The House of Lords remains an unelected body. There have been long arguments over the removal of hereditary peers: unelected individuals can delay or block legislation promised in election manifestos. Critics argue that because peers are unaccountable to the public, their power to stall laws like the *Employment Rights Bill* creates a significant gap in democratic legitimacy.

- **Over-Centralization in Westminster**

Despite devolution, many feel that ‘bottom-up’ power is a myth, with the Treasury often micro-managing local deals. The recent delay of mayoral elections in regions like Sussex and Norfolk until 2028 has further fuelled the perception that local democratic rights are secondary to Westminster’s political convenience.

3.3 Local level

- **The Trust Factor:** A study by the *Centre for Policy Studies*<sup>5</sup> found that only 9% of voters have ‘a lot of trust’ in their parish council—which sounds low, but it is actually higher than the trust levels for larger district councils (6%) and the House of Commons (5%).

- **Perceived Disconnect:** A growing sentiment that councillors are an ‘out-of-touch elite’ whose decisions do not reflect the lived reality of ordinary residents.

- **Knowledge Gap:** Research suggests that for many voters, the roles and responsibilities of local councils remain ‘poorly understood.’ Many residents only engage with their council when a controversial planning application or local issue arises.

- **Systemic Barriers:** The introduction of mandatory voter ID and complexities in the registration process have disproportionately affected younger and lower-income demographics.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nalc.gov.uk/about.html> (access may be restricted to members)

<sup>4</sup> <https://electoral-reform.org.uk/voting-systems/types-of-voting-system/first-past-the-post/>  
<https://electoral-reform.org.uk/should-the-house-of-lords-be-reformed/>

<sup>5</sup> Centre for Policy Studies (CPS) report ‘Who Governs Britain’ July 2018,

- **How to find you: at a simpler level, do your residents know who you are, where you can be found and what you do?**

## 4.0 The Role of the Parish Council and its Councillors

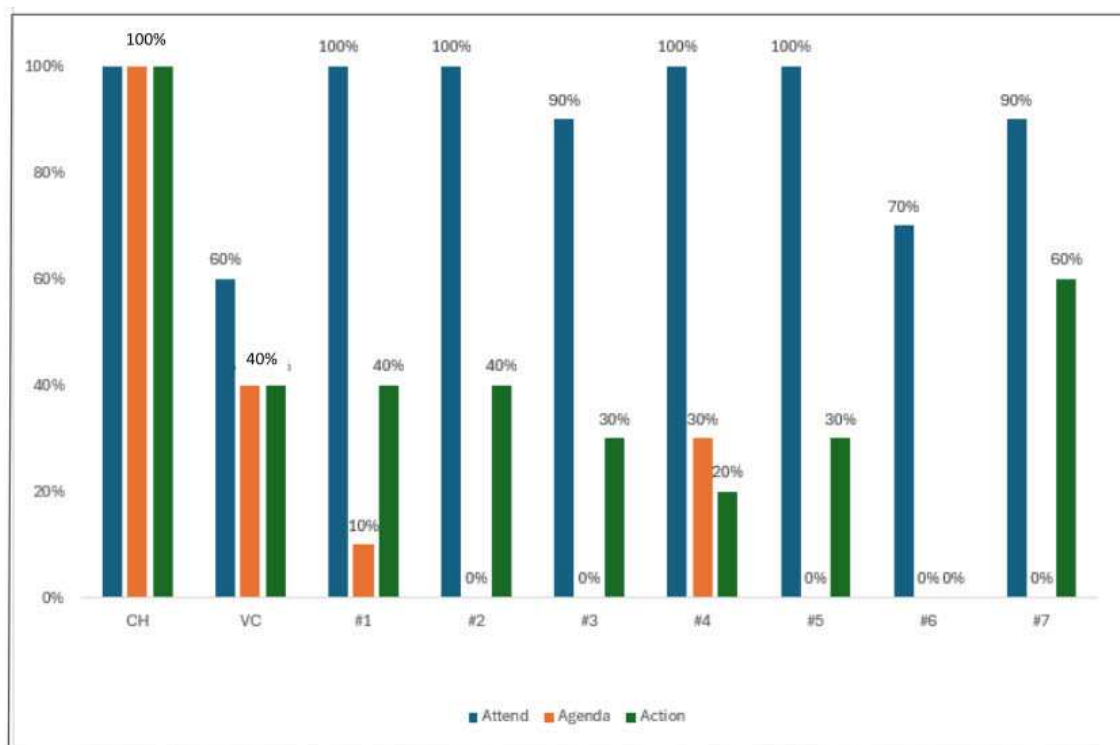
4.1 As the 'first tier' of local government, Parish and Town Councils occupy a unique and vital position. Unlike Westminster or even the county council, Parish Councillors are embedded within the very communities they represent. They are the most accessible face of British democracy, but how many of your residents engage with you? The minutes of your public meetings will record how many members of the public attended, but what are your own members doing to facilitate this?

4.2 In local government, the relationship between an individual councillor and the council itself is the engine room of community engagement. While much is written about national trends, it is the internal dynamics of a parish or town council - specifically how effectively a councillor collaborates with colleagues and the Clerk - often dictate whether a project succeeds or stalls.

4.3 The author has created an **Engagement Index** that extracts information from your published documents (most typically your minutes) that charts the engagement activities of councillors in relation to those meetings. This Index was developed to provide a constructive framework for understanding these internal working relationships. Rather than focusing on external popularity, it extracts the practical behaviours that sustain a high-functioning council: attendance; willingness to bring items to the public meeting for discussion and then taking on actions arising out of those decisions.

It is designed to help councillors identify areas where they are providing strong leadership and where the council's collective capacity might be improved. Ultimately, the goal is to foster a culture where the focus remains on the community's needs, supported by a council that is professionally resilient and internally aligned.

4.4 In this example, there are 9 councillors analysed (Chair, Vice Chair and 7 others) over a 12 month period in terms of Attendance, Agenda (items included) and Actions (arising from the meeting).



- Blue column shows attendance (generally good except for the Vice Chair and Councillor #6)
- Orange column shows number of times that a councillor has asked for items to be included on the agenda. You would expect the Chair to be actively engaged in drawing up the agenda and to be proposing items for inclusion. However, 5 councillors have never asked for items to be added.
- Green column shows the number of occasions that councillors have agreed to take on actions arising from discussions and resolutions in the public meeting. Councillor #7 attends well, never has any agenda items but has taken on actions. Exceptionally, this may include extra work that the Clerk has been informed of.

This is very much a broad brush analysis, but the chart can provide a baseline for scrutinising how your councillors perform and where there are opportunities for improvement.

#### 4.5 One simple question for you - does your council just post an agenda on a physical noticeboard and wait for residents to attend?

#### 4.6 Strategies for Proactive Engagement

If the electorate feels unheard, then the responsibility of opening a conversation with them must lie with the council and its members. Proactive engagement aims to rebuild the 'social capital' necessary for a functioning democracy.

- **Demystifying Governance:** The Council and its Councillors should actively educate residents on what the Parish Council actually controls—from local allotments and play areas to influencing planning applications. Clear, jargon-free communication via social media and an accessible website can bridge the knowledge gap.
- **Targeted Outreach:** Since disengagement is highest among young people and those in lower socio-economic groups, councillors should seek out these voices where they are, rather than expecting them to attend formal council meetings.
- **Demonstrating Impact:** Engagement is sustained by results. By highlighting 'quick wins' and showing exactly how resident feedback led to a specific local improvement, councillors can restore the belief that local participation yields tangible benefits.

These strategies are explored further in Appendices 1-3 below.

## 5.0 The English Devolution & Community Empowerment Bill<sup>6</sup>

5.1 This Bill is currently going through Parliament, and will set out requirements for all local authorities to establish '**effective neighbourhood governance**' to 'move decision-making closer to residents, so that decisions are made by people who understand local needs.' Details of the neighbourhood governance obligations will be set out in regulations to be made after the Bill comes into force, but prior to this, Government will undertake a review on the best way to achieve its aims, including consulting the local government sector to ensure they have an opportunity to contribute and share existing good practice. It is likely that the Community Area Partnerships will have a role in this process – but the response to them will require consultation with your residents, both before the regulations are agreed and following passing of the Bill to ensure that (informed) decision making is made by people who understand local needs.

5.2 The National Association of Local Councils believes that '... the Bill delivers real power to communities on the ground and is a 'once-in-a-generation opportunity' to strengthen local democracy. ... parish and town councils must be fully recognised as central to any neighbourhood governance reforms ... and that without properly empowering this 'first tier of local government', the Bill would fall short of its promise to deliver genuine community empowerment.'

5.3 The SLCC (Society of Local Council Clerks) has been actively engaged with this Bill because it directly impacts the parish and town council sector in England. Their view generally supports devolution but emphasizes that for community empowerment to be 'real' it must include the professional clerks and councils closest to the people, ensuring they have the resources and statutory recognition to take on devolved responsibilities. Effective, active and quality engagement between parish councils and their residents will be an essential component in the working of this Act if it is to succeed.

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<sup>6</sup> Full Cornwall Council Briefing in Appendix 4

## Engagement within the parish council – between clerk and councillors, and councillors and councillors.

**Who leads/manages this? Clerk – all of these items below.**

**Why?** Part 2 of the Clerk's Job Description is: To act as the contact point for the Council, including receipt of correspondence and documentation; telephone calls; emails; etc., and to deal in accordance with the known policy of the Council, or to bring to the attention of the Council.

Item	Purpose	Notes
Contact list for Cllrs and Clerk (personal phone numbers, personal and council email)	Enables everyone to communicate between themselves at basic level.	Easy to create and circulate from information already on file. This might be adapted for your website.
WhatsApp group (private group for Cllrs and Clerk)	Easy text messaging system on your smartphone and PC.	Free to set up, familiar to use, closed and confidential. Easy to set up additional groups. Can also be used for group phone calls and video messaging.  NB Your texts are open to FOI requests
Text	Text messaging using your phone	Fallback from WhatsApp if you are in an area with poor broadband/WiFi coverage.
Phone	Catch ups that save you writing or texting	Do you keep your Clerk and Councillors numbers in your phone's contact list?
Email	Group mailing lists enable you to send out/forward info from Clerk	Create a separate email list for Chair/Vice Chair? Easier for quick communications.
Answer your emails promptly	Demonstrates your attention to your colleagues – even if it's a simple 'will discuss later' response.	Clerks will check their mailboxes daily. Councillors – if you can't check daily, best days Tuesday and Thursday? (Tuesday to pick up emails sent from Friday to Monday, including the deluge on Monday, and Friday for the Tuesday to Wednesday, giving you time to reply before the weekend)
Attendance at public meetings	Where you need to communicate directly with your councillors and check	Do you need to hold a private meeting prior to the public meeting? (this would not be a

	understanding/take questions.	closed session and not included on your agenda). Probably easier to arrange this before the meeting rather than at the end (when councillors and staff may be anxious to leave)
Private meetings	For sharing confidential or non-attributable information, testing ideas.	Helpful where you need to prepare people for good/bad news and scope out options for a response.
Clerk as go-between	Clerk may be needed as an 'honest-broker' or impartial distributor of news and proposals between other organisations.	This is dependent on your level of trust and confidence that you and other people outside of your council have in your Clerk.

Engagement between the parish council and parish residents		
<p><b>Who leads/manages this? Chair &amp; Clerk</b>  <b>Why?</b> Because Part 2 of the Clerk's Job Description still applies, but the Chair has a leadership role in their council which would require a public presence and public actions to represent their members.</p>		
Item	Purpose	Notes
Attendance at public meetings	For residents to bring their issues directly to the council.	Potential for confusion over the council's powers to resolve issues, but has the potential to start a dialogue between resident and council.
Attendance at public events.	To demonstrate the council's leadership role in the community.	Annual events, such as carol services; Remembrance Sunday (do you supply a wreath on behalf of the council?); funerals of residents who have given public service.
Public statements for significant events	To clarify and state, for the record, the parish council's position on important issues.	Example might be – where a major incident (crime, local emergency, national events) occurs. Your statement might be limited to your website, social media or parish noticeboard. Other events might warrant a notice in local newspapers.
Visiting schools to encourage voter registration	To promote the democratic process to young people in your locality.	Also an opportunity to explain the role of councillors and the parish council, and their links to the wider democracy (Cornwall, regional, national)
Joint working projects	To bring in wider experience and knowledge than might be available from councillors.	Typically, this may be a 'working' or 'task & finish' group. Where involving residents, it is especially important to be clear on your aims, objectives and outcomes. Their expectations may be different from yours. (and their sense of timing too). Neighbourhood Watch is about supporting communities: can your council initiate a group? (they also support youth groups)

Engaging with other parishes.	An opportunity to share best practice and benefit from joint working,	Your Community Area Partnership is a good starting point, as well as major planning applications whose impact may affect more than the host council.
Networking at council events.	Further opportunities for the council to extend its influence and meet other councillors and residents.	Chair, Clerk or Councillors are all well placed to attend and represent their council. Sound knowledge of your council's key objectives and projects is essential, and reporting back as an agenda item at your next public meeting enables other councillors to understand their wider role and what is being done in their name.
Answer your emails promptly	Demonstrates your attention to your residents – even if it's a simple 'will reply later in more detail' response.	Clerks will check their mailboxes daily and can alert the Chair to issues that require an immediate response.
Surgeries	For residents who do not use email, social media or have private issues to discuss, presenting a public face of the council in a familiar location is helpful.	Try to link your public surgeries to other events that might have a greater pull, eg church coffee morning? police visit? Annual show?
Parish Noticeboard	Old -fashioned in a digital age, but effective when giving residents information to read.	Needs to be kept topical and up to date. (Your minutes from a meeting 3 months ago is the thing to avoid).  Consider how attractive you can make your council notices. If you have no boards currently, can you locate them in areas of high pedestrian traffic? (eg outside a shop, bus stop or village hall?). Make the mixture engaging – not a sea of black and white council notices.  Have you room for other organisations to post their news? Council comes first! But can you install a second board

		for them – it will generate footfall.
'A' board outside meeting room	Clear and visible sign that the council meets 'Here Tonight'	Get the graphics professionally designed and printed (A4 black and white notices on the entrance door don't cut it).  If no 'A' board, can you laminate a clear A3 sign to post outside your meeting room entrance?
Website	An invaluable resource for residents looking for immediate information and background to your services.	Same as your noticeboard – keep it up to date and relevant. Can visitors easily see the date of your next meeting (and agenda) on the front page? Can they see pictures of their councillors? And the Clerk?
Use QR codes where possible in publicity.	Quick links to information you might wish to promote.	In a digital age, your posters and flyers might have limited space for detail (and too much information might put people off). Upload the detail to your website, and link it via a QR code in your printed matter.
Surveys and consultations	Engages directly with residents to involve them in your planning.	Give people taking part in face to face meetings (or online) the opportunity to leave their contact details so that you can send them the results of your consultation. This is important otherwise there is no 'reward' for them giving up their time to you. Tell them when you'll be publishing or having a public discussion of the results.
Newsletter	An opportunity to get printed information about your work into the hands of residents to read in their time.	An A5 newsletter is usually sufficient in size for the content you might have. However – time consuming to edit (unless you have a dedicated councillor or resident). Cornwall Council have competitive print rates. Major problem may be how to distribute the publication (hand delivered to residents or displayed in local shops and other public outlets?). As an

		alternative, consider a regular supplement in an existing publication with a contribution to costs (Church magazine? Community centre newsletter?)
Flyers	If there's a specific issue that concerns residents, consider a simple (one page A4) flyer.	This might supplement a public statement for important events. Don't forget the QR code!
News releases – local press	For promoting events or your take on important issues in your parish.	Local papers don't employ 'reporters' like they used to. Much easier for them if you can supply an article that they can copy and paste with minimal (ideally no) editing. As a rule, keep to less than 400 words, and attach an interesting photo that explains what you have written (and always list people in the photo, left to right). Don't get shirty with the reporter/editor if they don't publish your prose, but be persistent in sending them appropriate news items.
Invite for planning applications	Opportunity for applicants to explain their project and for councillors to ask questions.	Where possible, invite the applicant (their postal address should be on the application form). Failing that, invite the agent – their email address can be obtained from the company name included on the application.
Welcome information for people attending meetings	Most of your residents won't know who their councillor is, what the council does or how they should engage with it. A 'quick guide' will help break down this barrier.	It helps to avoid over-formality in public participation and manages expectations of what your councillors can do. Consider mailing out a copy to people whom you have invited to your public meeting.
PowerPoint for your public meeting.	Useful at the meeting so that councillors and other people attending can see what is being discussed.	Copying and pasting each agenda item to a separate slide for the public meeting helps understanding and adds interest. Especially useful when discussing planning applications where you can

		display location, layouts, drawings etc.
Publishing documents on your website that councillors use in their decision making	Part of being open and transparent in your council decision making.	Residents can see for themselves what information councillors are using to make their decisions with.  Consider advice from the British Dyslexia Association in all your printed/published material (search online for Dyslexia Style Guide).
How diverse is your community and are any special methods needed to engage with them?	To enable your messages to reach the widest audience, consider if any groups have specific needs and tailor your methods accordingly.	Social media can be helpful here – Facebook remains a dominant social network for adults in the UK, especially those over 25 but is now seeing growth in older users. Younger people have a wider choice of media – take advice about which to invest your time in – and make your content appropriate to the audience.
Walkabouts	Gives residents the opportunity to meet councillors in their space – on the street, in a park or walking along.	Publicise well in advance – laminated posters on lampposts along the route, councillors can wear hi-viz jackets (and their name badges).  Good for following up in the next public meeting.

Engagement between individual councillors and residents		
<p><b>Who leads/manages this? Chair &amp; Councillors, supported by the Clerk</b>  <b>Why?</b> Because Councillors are elected to represent the interests of residents and make decisions that improve the local area. Having discussions with individual residents is a part of that. The Clerk is best placed to coordinate communications between residents and the council, whilst staying in the loop to give advice and support to both parties.</p>		
Item	Purpose	Notes
Private meetings with residents	Direct exchange of views and opinions – cuts down endless emails.	<p><b>Be aware of safeguarding concerns, set ground rules for meeting and what is recorded.</b></p> <p>This is critical if you meet in a private residence. May be challenging but a good bonding opportunity.</p>
Private meetings with special interest groups	May be helpful where an issue has been raised in a public meeting that needs more information gathering or a contentious issues that needs careful management away from an open public meeting.	<p>Be clear what expectations about the meeting are, and what the boundaries to your authority are. It might be best to take the Clerk along as well if you're unsure (at the least, they can take notes – with agreement of the organisers – so that you can feedback to other councillors at your public meeting).</p> <p>Wear a name badge when meeting any groups of people so that they can identify you and check your credentials on the council's website.</p>
Attending public events	Opportunity to meet wide range of people in informal settings.	<p>Have something to promote (provide a focus for the event). Benefit from someone else doing the organising!</p> <p>At the least - do you have a pull-up roller banner for your council? Or display boards to promote your work?</p>
Text/Email	You can manage this kind of work around your own commitments.	Having a written record (an email trail) is helpful to all parties. Be aware that your council communications (even if you use a private phone) is

		open to FOI requests. And only use your council email address for communications like this.
Phone – clerk & councillors	Quick, simple, direct communications.	Be aware of other peoples' boundaries, and please respect the Clerk's time limits. Do you publish other peoples' phone numbers? It's usual for only the Chair and Clerk to put their telephone numbers in the public domain OR buy a dedicated council-phone for them.
Publish council contact details	Open, transparent and easy communications.	Publish them on your parish noticeboards, magazine, newsletters, website etc.
Using your personal networks to raise your profile (or develop one)	Brings a relevant (and personal) approach to issues in your immediate community.	Having a 'name and face' to recognise, speak with and hold to account is critical to your work as an elected councillor. In your personal networks, you're with friends, so this is a possible easy first step for newly elected members.
Being active on social media	To be able to speak directly to residents and engage in a public discussion electronically.	Set up a separate 'Councillor Smith' account, and remember you are still bound by your Code of Conduct. Don't engage in extended discussions with one person (unless you're happy to do this). Better to take the discussion offline and contact them directly. Block people who are abusive.
Consistent signatures on councillors emails	To present a professional and inclusive format to your emails – demonstrates joined up working.	Be sure to include your 'Councillor' name (your postal address and any phone number is optional). Consider a standard disclaimer notice about confidentiality, data protection and virus protection. Your Clerk can supply this information.
Personal engagement plan	Enables you to consider appropriate engagement opportunities throughout	Opportunities may include local events, residents' associations meetings, national events etc. Whatever suits you and your

	the year and plan your appearances.	style of engagement – then get them in your diary.
Answer your emails promptly	Trust, confidence, credibility. All the above.	Nothing is more frustrating for a residents who takes the trouble to write to you – and doesn't get a reply. Is this why voter turnout is falling when residents aren't acknowledged?

## Briefing: Proposed Legislation on Neighbourhood Governance

This paper provides a briefing on proposed legislation on “neighbourhood governance,” as this will potentially impact on the future of Cornwall’s neighbourhood governance model, currently consisting of the Community Area Partnerships.

The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill includes provisions that will:

- Require all local authorities to establish “effective neighbourhood governance” to “move decision-making closer to residents, so that decisions are made by people who understand local needs.”
- The details of the neighbourhood governance obligations will be set out in regulations to be made after the Bill comes into force (Bill likely to do so by end of 2025/2026).
- Before the regulations are made, the Government will undertake a review on the best way to achieve its aims, including consulting the local government sector to ensure they have an opportunity to contribute and share existing good practice.
- The Government will issue guidance on how neighbourhood governance structures can work well with town and parish councils. It has stated it is determined to “make sure that all local authorities have a way of working with people in their neighbourhoods, so they are not relying on town and parish councils to do it.”

What we don’t know yet:

- Expectations on local authorities in terms of structures, processes, timescales and resource commitments
- The Government’s approach to the regulations. For example:
  - Will it set outcomes it wishes to see? Such as increased participation and improved trust - while leaving local authorities and their partners to determine the most appropriate structures to deliver those outcomes OR
  - Will it be prescriptive, setting out a required model? At present, based on media statements made by the Minister, the Government seems to favour the “Area Committee\*” model.
- \*Area Committees are formal Council committees for a defined geographical area. They can fulfil the same roles that Community Area Partnerships (or other existing models in other local authority areas) can undertake. Two significant differences are:
  - They comprise principal authority councillors (so, if Cornwall had them, they would comprise the Cornwall Councillors representing the electoral divisions in each area). They can still involve other local stakeholders such as town and parish councils and other partners, but the principal councillors would have formal voting authority.
  - The Council can also delegate functions to them, giving them decision-making power on those functions within each area.
- An example of a local authority that operates Area Committees is North Yorkshire. Here is an illustrative selection of their roles and functions, in comparison to the CAPs:

North Yorkshire (D = Delegated function)	Cornwall: Do CAPs have a comparable role?
1. Vision: "To improve the quality of life for people in their area by acting as a 'critical friend' to policy makers and decision makers, enabling the voice and concerns of the public to be heard and driving improvements in public services.	Vision: "Bringing local organisations and people together to tackle the issues that matter to communities"
2i Town & Parish Councils: partners (non-voting) Terms of Reference (ToR) identify role for T&PCs in feeding into Community Area Action Plans	2i Town & Parish Councils: members (voting) ToR give CAPs role in championing and facilitating work of/networking between T&PCs
2ii Public participation	Yes
3. Community Area Action Plans	Yes
4. To hold Executive [Cabinet] to account by challenging performance/service delivery (D)	Limited: CAPs can request information/comment on Council/partner delivery and performance but have no powers in this respect.
5. Making/enforcing new street byelaws/orders; stopping up/diversion of highways; promotion of road safety information/training (D)	No (however, CAPs have been active in helping to promote road safety information advice and speedwatch initiatives)
6. To promote enterprise/investment and maintain economic wellbeing/regeneration (D)	No
7. To make recommendations to the Council on spending Community Infrastructure Levy and Section 106 expenditure (D)	No (however, CAPs have been asked to make recommendations on other funding streams i.e. highways and Shared Prosperity Funding)
8. To consider and review crime and disorder and community safety (D)	No (no delegated power, but CAPs can and do contribute to this agenda)
9. Appointments to outside bodies (D)	No
10. To promote tourism, heritage, arts, leisure and culture – and scrutinise proposals relating to this (D)	No (no delegated power, but CAPs can contribute to these issues and, although they have no scrutiny powers, can look into issues of their choice.

- Views on the Neighbourhood Governance proposals from the associations for principal and town & parish councils:

**Local Government Association:** “The LGA is committed to the principle that local areas are best placed to decide what form of community engagement is appropriate for their context. If the Government moves ahead with its intention to standardise the neighbourhood area committee model, then councils should receive new burdens funding to reflect that delivering this model will – in a way which truly empowers communities – require resources. It’s also vital that neighbourhood-level committees are designed in a way which empowers communities to engage with wider public services, such as the NHS and police, and the voluntary and community sector.”

“The LGA would like to see at the very least, a requirement for the involvement of health, police and fire services in neighbourhood committees. There must be alignment between this clause and the commitments in the 10-year health plan for England, to introduce a neighbourhood health service, which local government will have a critical role in shaping and delivering.”

**National Association of Local Councils:** [comments also about the Bill in general]: “Our president Baroness Ros Scott [has urged] the Government to ensure that the... Bill delivers real power to communities on the ground. [She] described the legislation as a ‘once-in-a-generation opportunity’ to strengthen local democracy. She warned, however, that the substance of the Bill must live up to its spirit. That parish and town councils must be fully recognised as central to any neighbourhood governance reforms. She highlighted the essential role played by...parish and town councils...She stressed that without properly empowering this “first tier of local government”, the Bill would fall short of its promise to deliver genuine community empowerment. ‘This is a pivotal moment,’ she said, ‘and we must ensure that local government reform is rooted in the communities it serves.’”

“From our perspective, the Bill represents a significant step forward. Still, its success will depend on whether it truly empowers parish and town councils. We call on the government and parliamentarians to seize the opportunity to make devolution meaningful for communities across England.”

Steve Foster (Localism Manager Cornwall Council) 2.12.25

## References & Further Reading

### **2024 General Election Turnout**

House of Commons Library Sep 2024

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/general-election-2024-turnout/>

### **Turnout at Elections**

House of Commons Library Jan 2023

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8060/>

### **What do we know about voter turnout in parliamentary elections?**

Ashley Lait, Economics Observatory 2024

<https://www.economicsobservatory.com/what-do-we-know-about-voter-turnout-in-parliamentary-elections>

### **How can councils engage residents to tackle local issues?**

Innovation in Democracy Mar 2020

<https://www.involve.org.uk/our-work/our-projects/how-can-councils-engage-residents-tackle-local-issues>

### **New conversations: LGA Guide to Engagement**

Local Government Association Feb 2017

<https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/new-conversations-lga-guide-engagement>

### **Cllr Lou Laybury**

St Cleer Parish Council

### **James Hardy**

Clerk to Penzance Town Council

<https://www.penzance-tc.gov.uk/download/community-engagement-strategy/?wpdmdl=1319&refresh=695a94912ed5e1767543953>

### **Karenza Heald**

Clerk to Millbrook Parish Council

### **Fiona Carnie**

Educationalist and writer. 'Tackling the democracy deficit in schools'

The Guardian Nov 2025

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/nov/05/tackling-the-democracy-deficit-in-schools>

### **Society of Local Council Clerks AGM**

Lanhydrock Dec 2025

### **Clerks to Smaller Councils Meeting**

Portreath Nov 2025



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