

TOLLER PORCORM PARISH COUNCIL

Full Parish Council Meeting | Wednesday 19 November 2025

Appendix J – Devolution Article

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Devolution - The Times They Are A Changin'

Reflections from a small parish council

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The pace of change in small rural parishes may seem slow but it can be significant. In my parish, the last 100 years has seen the closure of the railway in the 1970s, the closing of amenities like shops, the village pub and the school along with a slow decline in population. It has also seen the arrival of indoor plumbing with connection to the main sewer system in the 1930s and the internet has put us back on the map – at least with delivery drivers – who visit the village every day.

During these times of change, the parish council has, on the whole, ambled along, not changing much. The views of residents have continued to be represented, and some services are now delivered locally. This could all be about to change as the terms 'devolution' and 'double devolution' have been echoing in the corridors of County Hall for some time and are beginning to reach town halls and the colder village halls of rural Dorset.

What does it mean? Devolution is the transfer of powers from central government to larger regional assemblies with the potential demise of unitary councils like Dorset Council. Double devolution is the transfer of services and assets from those larger regional assemblies or unitary councils to town and parish councils. Examples of the services and assets in question are parks and open spaces and their upkeep, public toilets, theatres, recreation centres and car parks.

At a recent Dorset Association of Town and Parish Councils (DAPTC) conference these big topics were discussed. For some at the conference, particularly town councils and some larger parish councils, devolution and double devolution were already on their radar and discussions underway about services and assets. Many smaller parish councils, who do not provide nor have the capacity to provide services, seem to believe devolution will not affect them and they can go back to their sleepy villages and carry on as they always have.

In my view, it would be wrong to have a closed mind about these potential changes in governance and service delivery. A possible outcome of devolution is a greater void between regional assemblies, with their mayors, and town and parish councils. My concern is that this will distance rural residents' further from the decision makers. A potential solution to this is some type of area forum but at this time no one quite knows what these might look like or do.

Time to start a conversation

To make sure the voices of rural parishes like mine are heard is going to require a different way of thinking. Now is the time for rural parish councils to start a conversation, both internally and externally, on how they might work better with neighbouring parishes to create a stronger voice for their communities - one that can be strong enough to effectively represent our residents in whatever local governance structures are created.

A process that is currently available is clustering of parish councils. Clustering is a widely used term to describe several parish councils working collaboratively to meet their residents' needs through

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joint working and partnership arrangements. Clusters can be formal or informal and include other community bodies.

What are the advantages of clusters? A cluster of parish councils can effectively address issues which are of concern to multiple parishes rather than each individual parish addressing them with local government. A cluster would benefit from the shared knowledge and experience of its constituent parts, be able to engage with a larger section of the county's population and speak with a louder voice.

Clusters are more likely to be able to deliver services locally and maintain community assets – one of the major points of double devolution – and they can gain access to different funding opportunities due to increased abilities to undertake larger projects. Clusters could even go a step further and become a single larger administrative service deliverer.

Clusters do not come without challenges of course. There are resource constraints that will need to be solved both in terms of finance and staffing. Clerks and councillors will require new skills to be able to manage the varying degrees of increased capacity.

Devolution and double devolution will bring increased complexity, and it is fair to say that, as of today, there are more unknowns than knowns as to how any new ways of governing and delivering services might impact everyday life. There is a great deal of work to do to win over the trust of residents that potential changes to service delivery and continuation of services are worth potential increases in local taxation.

Now is the time

We must not ignore the benefits and drawbacks of change. Now is the time to understand residents' needs and priorities and build trust and support. Now is the time to consider greater collaboration with other councils, voluntary groups and becoming an advocate for communicating communities' future needs and ambitions. Now is the time to discuss what needs to change and how we might adapt to be able to deliver that change.

Now is the time to engage with DAPTC to see what each of us can learn about devolution. Now is the time to invest in the development of skills and knowledge needed to handle potential new forms of governance and working arrangements. In my opinion, not to include ourselves in the devolution debate is a serious oversight. We at parish council level are closest to our communities and most aware of their needs, provide essential local resilience and invaluable local knowledge that should inform decision-making.

I leave you with the words of anthropologist, Margaret Mead:

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world.

Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”