

## Devolution and Its Impact on Town and Parish Councils

The government's recent plans for devolution aim to shift significant powers from central government to local authorities. While much attention has focused on changes to larger councils, such as Worcestershire County Council and the potential dissolution of the District Council, it is equally important to consider what devolution means for **town and parish councils**. These local councils represent the closest level of government to communities and could see their roles and responsibilities change dramatically.

### What is Devolution?

Devolution involves transferring powers and responsibilities from central government to more local levels of governance. In the past, devolution has been associated with the creation of national assemblies in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. However, recent efforts focus on strengthening local government structures within England, which includes town and parish councils.

For town and parish councils, this could mean taking on new responsibilities traditionally managed by district or county councils. By empowering these local councils, the aim is to ensure that decisions are made closer to the people they affect, allowing for solutions that better reflect the unique needs of each community.

### The Role of Town and Parish Councils

Town and parish councils are the smallest and often the most community-focused level of local government. They currently oversee tasks such as:

- Maintaining parks, cemeteries, and allotments.
- Managing community facilities, including village halls and playgrounds.
- Organising local events and transport schemes.
- Representing the views of their communities to higher levels of government.

While they usually operate with modest budgets funded by a small share of council tax in the form of a precept, devolution could give them the chance to expand their role, helping to shape their communities more directly.

### Opportunities from Devolution

Devolution offers town and parish councils several exciting opportunities, including:

1. **Enhanced Local Control:** Councils could take on services like public transport, housing, leisure centres and libraries, tailoring these to meet local needs.
2. **Improved Accountability:** Local councils are closer to the people they serve, making it easier for residents to share feedback and hold decision-makers to account.
3. **Community Empowerment:** With more responsibilities, residents might feel more connected to their councils, fostering pride and involvement in local affairs.

4. **Economic Development:** Councils could promote tourism, support local businesses, and launch initiatives that boost the local economy.
5. **Access to New Funding:** Additional powers might come with increased funding, enabling councils to invest in better services and infrastructure.

### Challenges for Town and Parish Councils

With greater powers come greater responsibilities, and town and parish councils may face several challenges:

1. **Resource Constraints:** Many councils currently operate with small budgets and limited staff. Taking on additional duties would require significant investment in training and infrastructure.
2. **Varying Capacities:** Not all councils are equally equipped to manage new responsibilities, which could lead to disparities in service delivery across different areas.
3. **Increased Complexity:** Managing more services could require councils to navigate complex legal, financial, and administrative systems.
4. **Public Perception:** Gaining the trust of residents will be essential, as people may question whether their local councils can handle expanded responsibilities effectively.
5. **Unstable Funding:** While additional funding may be provided, there could be concerns about the long-term sustainability of this income.

### Preparing for Devolution

To make the most of devolution, town and parish councils should begin preparing now. Key steps include:

- **Training and Development:** Investing in skills and knowledge for councillors and staff to handle new responsibilities effectively.
- **Community Engagement:** Actively involving residents to understand their needs and priorities, building trust and support.
- **Collaboration:** Partnering with other councils, businesses, and voluntary groups to share resources and expertise.
- **Advocacy:** Clearly communicating their needs and ambitions to higher tiers of government to secure the necessary support.
- **Strategic Planning:** Developing long-term plans to manage resources, address challenges, and take advantage of opportunities.

### What can CALC do to help you prepare?

CALC can help parish and town councils get ready for devolution by focusing on training, support, and guidance. Devolution means that more power and responsibilities could be passed down to local councils, so it's important that they are prepared to take on these new roles.

CALC could organise training sessions to explain what devolution means and how it might affect councils. These sessions could cover important topics like managing

budgets, working with the community, and handling new responsibilities. This would help councils feel more confident and ready for any changes that come their way.

CALC could also encourage councils to work together and share ideas. Setting up networks or forums would allow councils to discuss challenges, share what works well, and come up with solutions together. This would help councils learn from each other and strengthen their ability to handle new tasks.

Finally, CALC will act as a voice for parish and town councils in discussions with higher levels of government. By highlighting the needs and concerns of local councils, CALC can help ensure they get the funding and support needed to succeed under devolution. This would give councils the tools to make a bigger difference in their communities.

## **Conclusion**

Devolution represents both a challenge and an opportunity for town and parish councils. By embracing the changes, preparing strategically, and building strong connections with their communities, parish and town councils can take on a more prominent role in local governance. With the right support, devolution has the potential to make local government more effective, responsive, and attuned to the unique needs of each community.

This shift could transform the role of town and parish councils, enabling them to lead the way in building vibrant, resilient, and empowered communities across Worcestershire and beyond and there could be some exciting challenges ahead.