

DAPTC Conference Summary Notes - A Fresh Start – Devolving Dorset

Date: Thursday, 30th October 2025

Attendees: Cllr Clarke and Michelle Harrington (Clerk)

Event organised by: Dorset Association of Parish and Town Councils (DAPTC)

Slides presented on the day will be added to these notes once available.

Speaker 1 – Justin Griggs

Head of Policy and Communication, National Association of Local Councils (NALC)

Topic: The National Perspective of Devolution

- The Labour 2025 manifesto includes major devolution plans:
 - Transfer more power from central government to local communities.
 - Deepen existing devolution for Combined Authorities and extend it to new areas.
 - Give Metro Mayors and local authorities greater powers over transport, adult education, housing, planning, and employment support.
 - Create an Assembly of the Nations and Regions and strengthen devolved legislatures.
 - Aim: Take power out of Whitehall and pass it to local authorities.
- The government is pushing for a more uniform system of devolution nationwide.
- NALC continues to advocate for better relationships and stronger strategic collaboration across all council levels.

Speakers 2 & 3 – Cllr Nick Ireland and Dr Catherine Howe

Nick Ireland: Leader, Dorset Council (DC)

Dr Catherine Howe: Chief Executive, Dorset Council

Key Points:

- Cllr Ireland has been visiting every Town Council in Dorset and intends to continue doing so.
- DC's "Community for All" manifesto commitment focuses on:
 - Improving the lives of all residents.
 - Building communities where people can thrive, access essential services, and enjoy life at every age.
 - Fostering social support, well-being, and belonging.
 - Ensuring public resources are used effectively to meet local needs.
- The Council Plan priorities are:
 1. Provide high quality and affordable housing.
 2. Grow our economy.
 3. Community for all.
 4. Respond to the climate and nature crisis.
- Acknowledged past poor relationships with T&PCs and the need to rebuild trust.
- The Statement of Reasonable Expectation is the foundation for improving collaboration and will continue to evolve.
- DC now has a clearer picture of its assets, estimating £47 million in unwanted assets, which are likely to be sold.

Dr Howe's reflections:

- Since joining DC in August 2025, she recognises the need to re-learn community engagement post-unitary formation.
- Emphasised outcomes-based working, focusing on *why* things are done and *what* the desired results are.
- Believes co-design is essential for meaningful devolution, acknowledging that every community is different.
- DC must respect T&PCs and be available when needed.

Q: "Would we be here today looking at devolution if DC had more money?"

- Yes. Nick Ireland believes Dorset has been ignored by central government for too long.
 - Suggests that working jointly with Wiltshire, Somerset, and BCP could strengthen Dorset's voice.
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Speaker 4 – Amanda Card

Town Clerk, Yeovil Town Council

Topic: *Devolution in Somerset – The Yeovil Experience*

- Somerset faced financial pressures, forcing rapid devolution to T&PCs. Dorset is not currently in the same position.
 - Yeovil TC chose to take on only assets/services directly benefiting residents, avoiding highways to prevent confusion over boundaries.
 - Assets devolved included the Country Park, museum, entertainment complex, play parks, and conference centre.
 - Financial impact:
 - Expenditure rose from £1.3m (2023/24) to £8.1m (2025/26).
 - Precept increased from £145 (2023/24) to £347 (2024/25).
 - Residents did not react against precept rise as they saw that it saved services they valued
 - Negotiation lesson: When offered only parts of assets (e.g. Country Park), Yeovil insisted on an *all or nothing* approach and secured the full site.
 - Staffing impact: Increased from 11 permanent staff to 60, plus from 0 to 125 casual workers.
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Speakers 5 & 6 – Graham Sansom and Jacqui Andrews

Graham Sansom: Adjunct Professor, University of Technology Sydney & Co-author, *Fresh Start Report*

Jacqui Andrews: Democratic & Electoral Services Manager, Dorset Council

Key Points:

- Graham described the upcoming Community Governance Review (CGR) as a “CON Job”:
 - C = Community
 - O = Opportunity
 - N = Necessity
 - Jacqui outlined the CGR process:
 - Parishes can merge and create wards to retain local identity.
 - The Bridport GC application (2021) was highlighted as exemplary.
 - The next review will begin in 2027, completing by 2029 ahead of the May elections.
 - Communities are encouraged to start discussions with neighbouring parishes now.
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Speaker 7 – Jane Biscombe

Town Clerk, Weymouth Town Council

Session: *Panel Q&A Discussion*

Panel Members:

Nick Ireland, Catherine Howe, Neil Farmer (Chair, Toller Porcorum PC & Vice-Chair, DAPTC), Sarah Mason (Retired Chief Officer, Cornwall ALC), and David Smith (Consultant).

Selected Q&A Highlights:

- Q: How can smaller parishes ensure their voices are heard?
A:
 - *Nick Ireland:* Use Ward Members as advocates.
 - *Catherine Howe:* Effective devolution design should make all voices heard.
 - *Sarah Mason:* Don't rely solely on Ward Members, attend meetings, read reports, and stay prepared.
 - *General note:* T&PCs can act now, if a service can be improved locally, agreements can be made.
- Q: Will T&PCs take on full costs of devolved assets/services?
A:
 - *Catherine Howe:* No fixed policy yet. Past transfers sometimes included 1–2 years' transitional funding. T&PCs must prove affordability and improvement capability.
 - *Nick Ireland:* 70% of DC's budget goes to Social Care; DC precept is capped at 5%, but T&PC precepts are not.
 - *Neil Farmer:* Discuss community needs first, then consider finances. Residents may accept higher precepts for better local services.
 - *Amanda Card:* In Somerset, people chose to pay more rather than lose services. Communicate precept changes clearly.
- Q: What role might T&PCs play in area forums or similar bodies?
A:
 - *Nick Ireland:* No set policy yet, but likely centred around market towns.

- Q: What should T&PCs do now to prepare?
Panel Answers:
 - Increase precepts and build reserves.
 - Align councillors and start discussions early.
 - Envision where the parish should be by 2050.
 - Be proactive and brave.
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Speaker 8 – David Smith

Topic: *Motivational Session*

- Focus on the future, not the past.
 - People often remember the past through *rose-tinted glasses*, look forward and embrace change.
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Breakout Sessions

- Smaller Councils Session: Hosted by Sarah Mason.
- Town and Larger Councils Session: Hosted by Steven Ford, Corporate Director, Strategy, Performance & Sustainability, Dorset Council.

Key points raised (Town & Larger Council session): - Attended by the Clerk

- SF noted he used to work in Cornwall Council and was part of the double devolution team who worked with the T&PC's .
Member of the audience were invited to ask / state matters they felt were important.
 - Resources must be locally based, decision-makers should know their communities.
 - Faster decision-making needed at DC level to save time and money.
 - A true partnership approach between DC and T&PCs is vital; DC must listen, not dictate.
 - DC should define which services to devolve and ensure fairness, cannot retain only the profitable ones.
 - Services should be reviewed for strategic importance; non-strategic ones should be devolved.
 - Example: Parking enforcement, currently inefficient due to travel times; local councils could deliver it better. (Lyme Regis) -Lyme Regis offered to take on the service DC said No.
 - Example: Bridport TC cuts local verges for DC and is compensated proportionately.
 - Residents need to see tangible benefits from devolution.
 - Consultations must be meaningful, recent Local Transport Plan consultation was criticised as ineffective.
 - *Steven Ford* acknowledged this and confirmed DC is reviewing how consultations are carried out.
 - Dorset Council need to talk and listen to **all** T&PC's, not just the Town & Larger PC's.
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Sarah Mason's practical suggestion:

- Each T&PC should map their area, including:
 - All DC and local assets (e.g. bins, grit bins, bus shelters, parks).
 - Land ownership and service locations (highways, parking, youth/social care facilities, etc.).
- A list of Dorset Council's statutory services can be found within the *Fresh Start* report
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End of Summary Notes

(Slides and Q&A sheet to be added once released.)