

# Town and Parish Council Community Engagement Survey- Analysis and Findings

JANUARY 2023



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Registered in England Company no. 2461552 Registered charity no. 900560

## Introduction

In autumn 2022, Community First Oxfordshire (CFO) distributed a survey to all Town and Parish Councils (T&PCs) in Oxfordshire to ask about their level of engagement with community groups in their town or parish, the challenges of doing this, and what types of support would be useful to encourage (more) engagement to happen.

This was in response to feedback that the pandemic and it's aftermath has been difficult and now the cost of living crisis is further impacting communities. Volunteers (including councillors), are harder to find so working together with other groups and different people in the community makes sense to share resources and gain additional input and ideas.

In particular we asked questions about working with Community Action Groups (CAGs) or other informal green groups, and young people. We wanted to see if local councils and their communities are able to take steps towards climate action/sustainability and in so doing contribute to climate action at district and county level. Climate action projects can also have multiple benefits and be linked to mitigating cost of living challenges.

Previous research on rural isolation highlighted that many young people do not feel engaged in their communities, it's decision making or that there are suitable activities for them to enjoy. Therefore, it's useful to understand if T&PCs are able to work with and encourage young people to participate in their communities to enhance their experience of local life. They also have great potential to support community action and help build community resilience.

There were 79 registrations for the survey and 71 completions representing 60 different councils. Therefore, results are based on the 71 completions (not all questions were answered by all respondents).<sup>1</sup> The 60 councils are based in the five districts across Oxfordshire as follows: Cherwell 14; South Oxfordshire 18; Vale of White Horse 12, West Oxfordshire 16.

The results of the survey are outlined below and will help shape the support that CFO provides to T&PCs and inform broader discussions with other councils and organisations about current challenges, community led climate action and the involvement of young people in their communities.

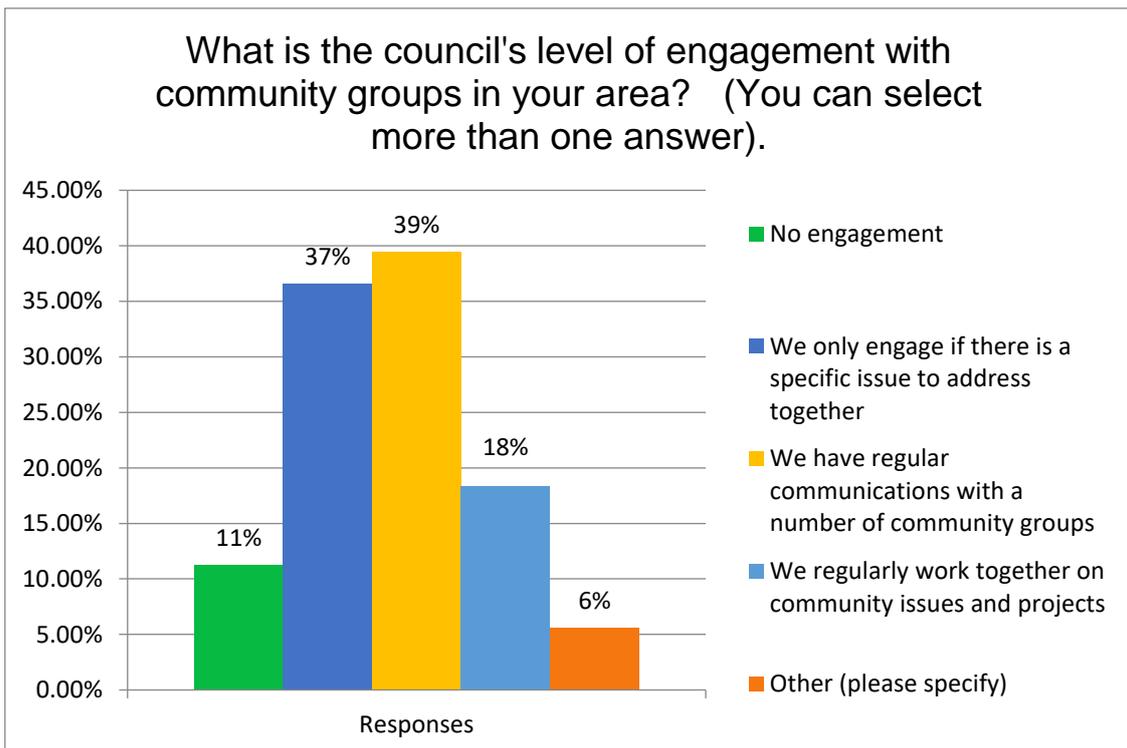
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<sup>1</sup> Respondents could select which questions to answer and provide several responses to one question. Some councils were represented by multiple respondents

## Findings and analysis

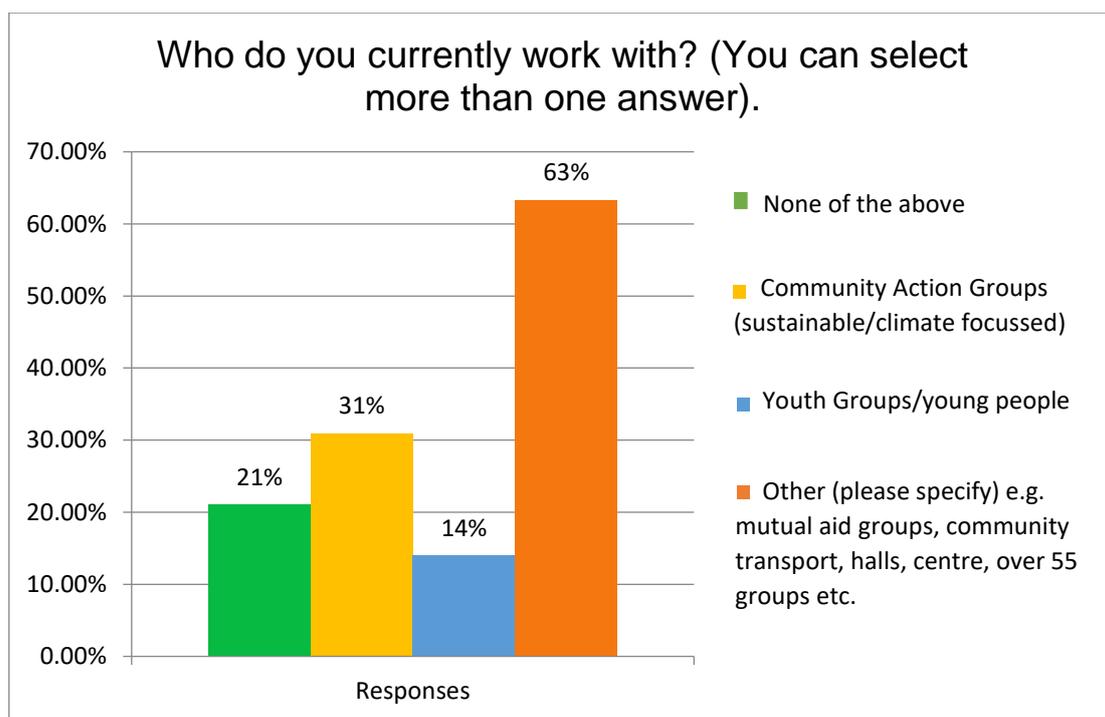
### Q2 What is the council's level of engagement with community groups in your area? (You can select more than one answer).

Most T&PCs (53), have some sort of engagement with community groups with over half regularly communicating and/ or working alongside other groups. However, 11% (representing 7 parish councils) said they had no engagement and 37% only engage when necessary (collectively nearly half of responses). This suggests further engagement is possible if the conditions are right.



### Q3 Who do you currently work with? (You can select more than one answer).

The majority of T&PCs work with groups other than CAGs/ green groups or youth groups/young people. However, 19 councils (from 21% of the responses) work with green groups and 9 councils (from 14% of the responses) work with young people but they can only work with these groups if they have been established. This suggests that more needs to be done to facilitate green groups throughout the county and additional youth provision is required.



Below is a representation by district of those T&PCs who responded and who work with green groups and youth groups:

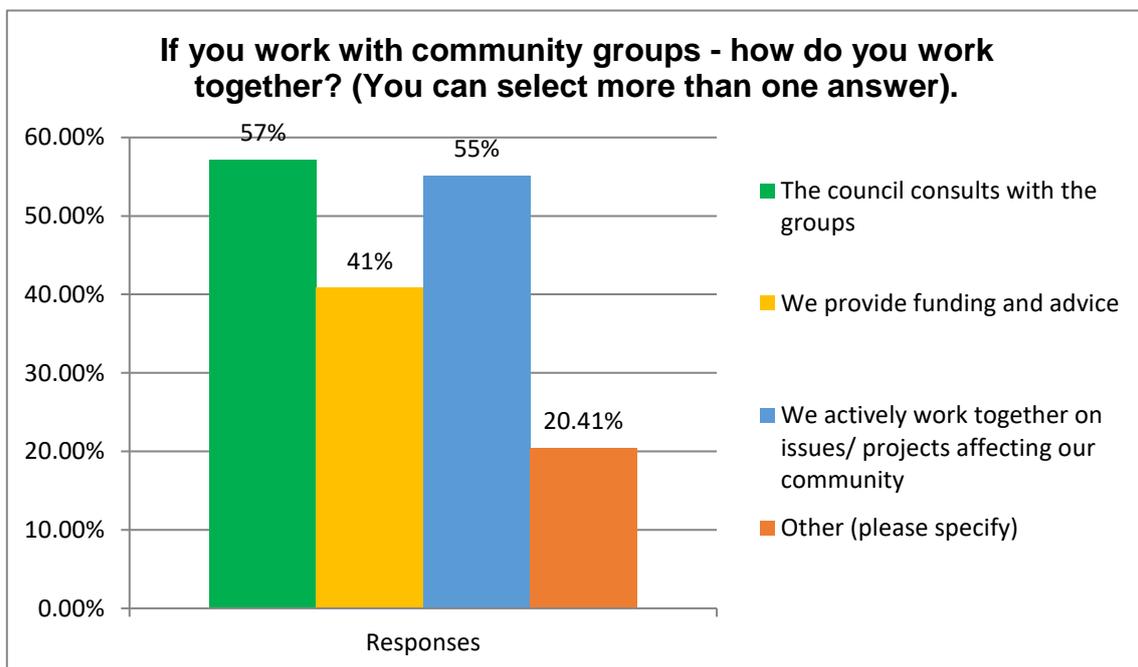
District	Work with CAG/ green group	Work with youth groups/young people	Work with both
Cherwell	3	0	0
South Oxfordshire	6	7	4
Vale of White Horse	5	1	1
West Oxfordshire	5	1	1
<b>Total from those who responded</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>

The types of community groups frequently mentioned in the 'other' option were village hall groups, over 55's groups, sports clubs, schools and other volunteer groups such as mutual aid groups.

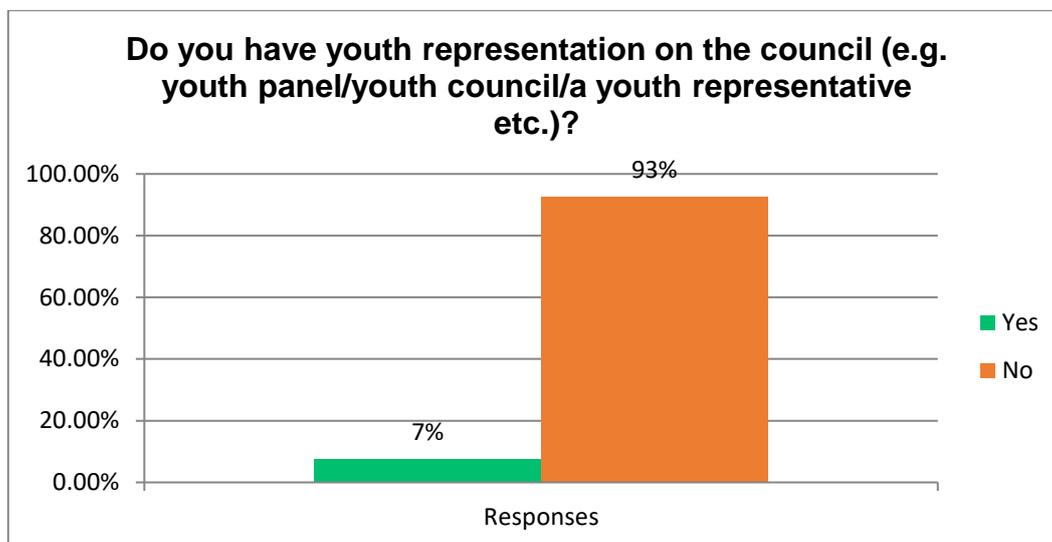
**Q4 If you work with community groups - how do you work together? (You can select more than one answer).**

When asked about how the T&PCs work with community groups, there was a high level of engagement with nearly the same number of responses for both consulting with groups and actively working together on projects (some T&PCs provided several responses to the questions). 28 T&PCs (from 57% of responses) said they consult with community groups and 26 (from 55% of responses) that they actively work together, with 17 T&PCs saying that they do both which is encouraging. Four consult only, six work together without additional consultation, 20 are able to provide funding and advice to community groups and ten said they work in all three ways.

Answers to 'other' approaches included working together by providing donation/grant funding and the council having representation on other groups.



**Q5 Do you have youth representation on the council (e.g. youth panel/youth council/a youth representative etc.)?**



Only four councils responded that they have some form of youth representation on their council. This shows a possible issue with the lack of youth voice and involvement by young people in local decision making.<sup>2</sup> This is concerning, given that some young people in rural areas feel they are not listened to or that there is a lack of things for them to do in their community.<sup>3</sup>

There is also a reduction in volunteers across the county. Older members of the community who would usually volunteer are now caring for grandchildren, may have a medical vulnerability and are aging so there is a need to encourage community participation by everyone but especially those who are younger.

There is potential to support councils to engage with young people whether via consultation, having youth representation or setting up a youth council to work alongside T&PCs. The British Youth Council has a number of programmes that could be useful to youth groups and local councils. One of the next steps from this research will be to gather good practise from those who are already engaging with young people and provide an overview of options and approaches to enable councils and young people to consider if and how they can work together.

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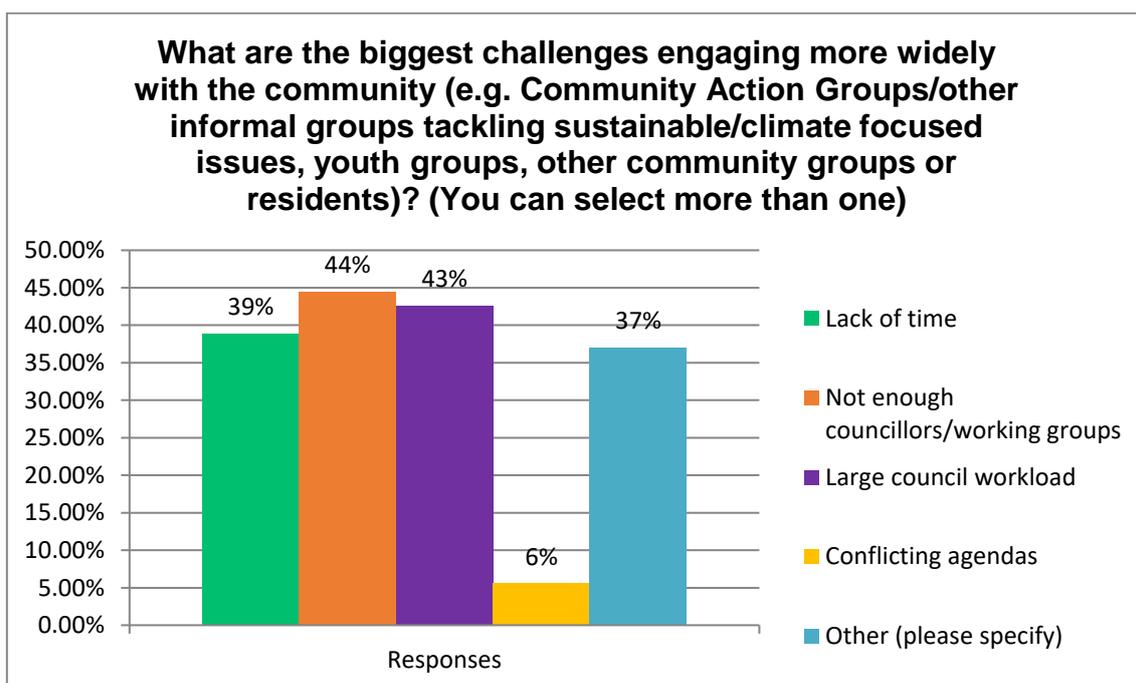
<sup>2</sup> Additionally, responses to Q3 showed that while nine T&PCs work with youth groups and young people only four have some form of youth representation on their council

<sup>3</sup> In 2022, Community First Oxfordshire carried out research on behalf of Healthwatch to understand the levels of isolation felt in rural communities: <https://www.communityfirstoxon.org/resources-reports/rural-isolation-in-oxfordshire-march-2022/>. Some youth club members mentioned feeling unheard and highlighted the lack of things for them to do and the difficulty of being in a community which has activities for older people or young families but not for those in their late-teens/early-20s.

**Q6 What are the biggest challenges engaging more widely with the community (e.g. Community Action Groups/other informal groups tackling sustainable/climate focused issues, youth groups, other community groups or residents)?**

Looking at answers to the responses to this question it is clear that there are a lot of pressures on T&PCs, especially having a large council workload (43%) and not enough councillors or working groups to manage the work (44%). Followed closely by not having enough time (39%). Twenty-three councils or just over a third mentioned two of the three challenges in various combinations. This highlights the need for council support bodies at district level and specialist countywide organisations and infrastructure groups in Oxfordshire to review the support that is provided to overstretched councils, learn from each other and T&PCs, and assess how best to assist T&PCs to fulfil their role and engage more broadly with their communities.

These factors make it challenging for many T&PCs to connect more widely with other community groups. Only three T&PCs answered that conflicting agendas between the council and community groups was a barrier to working together and earlier questions in the survey suggest that a high percentage make time to reach out to their community in some form, suggesting that generally councils and communities can find common ground.



‘Other’ responses to the question included a general lack of volunteers and vacancies for councillors and a lack of public interest or engagement by the residents with the council. ‘Engaging with younger members of the community’ was also mentioned as a challenge.

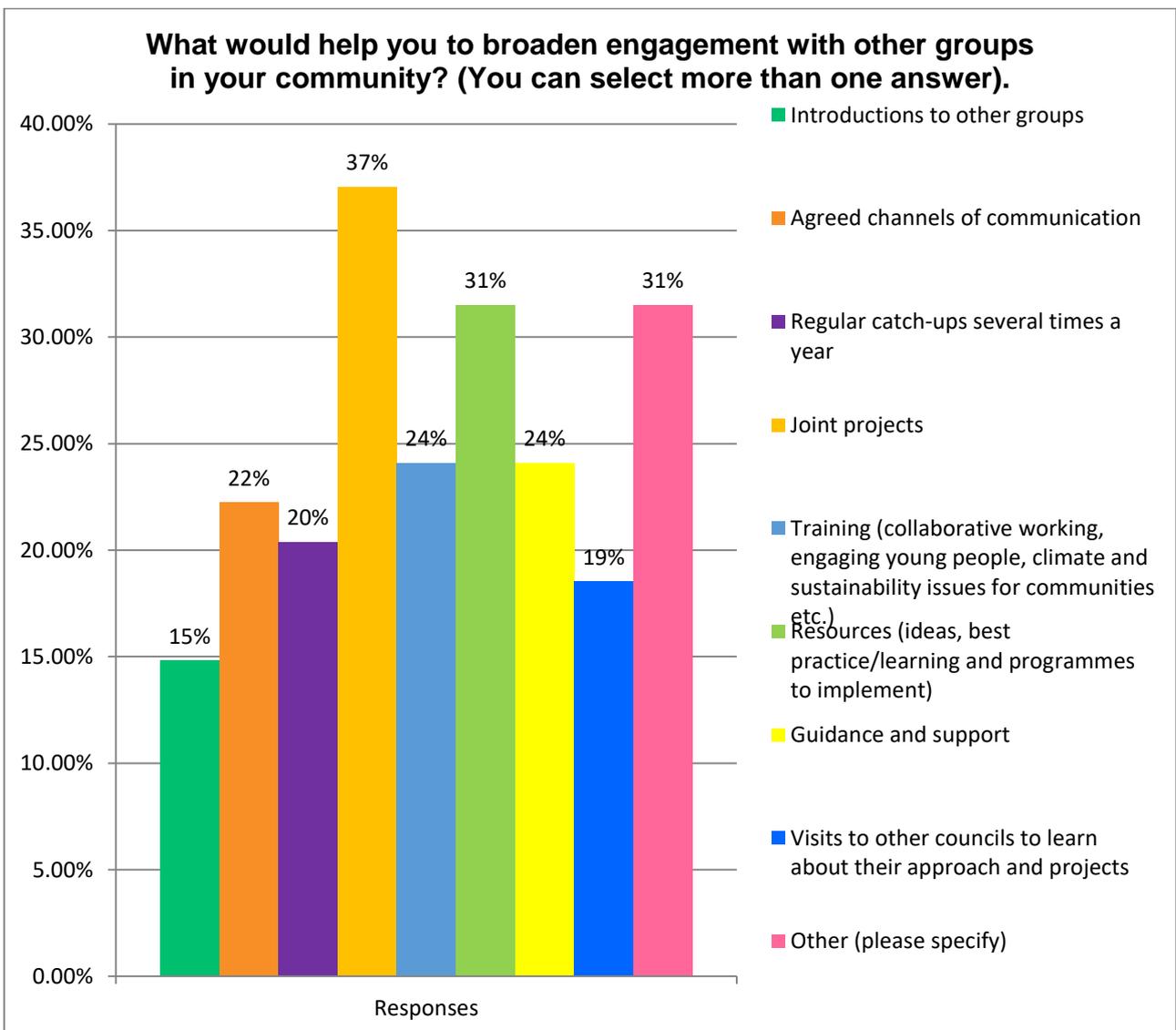
This reflects the present-day volunteer situation in Oxfordshire and the need to recruit new people by offering flexible volunteering opportunities that attract and develop people of all ages to support their communities. CFO and OCVA are currently conducting research and will offer a draft county-wide volunteer vision later this year.

Some villages are very small so there is limited opportunity for groups,

*‘Quite an insular village with an older population. Less than 500 residents, very few children and young people. As a PC we do seek to engage the community in village matters but we have a resulting low expression of interest. We would like to engage more and diversify our agenda to wider community issues.’*

**Q7 What would help you to broaden engagement with other groups in your community? (You can select more than one answer).**

T&PCs were given a number of possible responses to gain clarity about what would help their wider engagement with the groups in their community from having regular catch-ups several times a year, to doing joint projects and undertaking training (collaborative working, engaging young people, climate and sustainability issues for communities etc.)



Developing joint projects was the most popular answer for 20 councils, (with 37% of the responses) which is something that could be initiated by the councils or the community groups. Having access to supporting resources was the next highest answer (16 councils), followed by training and guidance and support (12 councils for each option and 17 councils selected one or both options), suggesting that it would be helpful to provide a varied support package to help T&PCs engage more widely.

Some form of communication strategy (agreed channels, introductions and regular catch ups) had lower individual percentages but are collectively important, being selected by 21 T&PCs. Ten T&PCs or just under a fifth of those represented in the survey agreed it would be helpful to visit other councils and learn about their approach and projects. Some of the responses to 'other' mirrored those in Q6 with T&PCs mentioning the need for 'more volunteers in the village', more groups in their villages and 'a central repository of local groups and their aims etc.'

Several councils again mentioned workloads and a lack of time and another that more engagement from councillors was needed. One council suggested that a resource for legislative issues would be help time challenges rather than adding to work by further engagement:

*'It is hard enough to fill councillor vacancies so getting people to commit further time to council work is virtually impossible. By bringing in legislation like GDPR, FOI, Employment legislation, tax and pension requirements etc, most parish councils need a range of full time staff that their council tax could not support. A central source for all those things to provide active support and not just advice (OALC are good for this) is preferable to adding work loads by seeking our further engagements.'*

Another noted the need for a coordinator to work with one of the active local groups, and others that action needs to be volunteer led due to funding.

*'We have a very active Land and Nature group but we need the funds to employ a coordinator. It is too much for the clerk to carry on top of all her other responsibilities'*

### **Q8 Please share any key learning points below about working with other groups in your community (benefits, what works/what doesn't, barriers and challenges)**

The key learning from T&PCs covered a lot of different areas from challenges communicating with both residents and groups, the need for younger volunteers, difficulty 'finding a convenient time for meetings' and resourcing the coordination of complex projects.

Some solutions were found by encouraging groups to fundraise outside of the T&PC funds and adopting simple advice such as 'managing expectations' and using a 'common sense' approach.

One council noted that village politics can be challenging. Conversely, another council made the point that groups that share a common interest work well together, and another that it can be very positive to have residents on working groups but there is still a challenge engaging others outside of those who are usually involved.

When a community-wide project works well, such as work around declaring a climate emergency there is a need for further resourcing to enable the project to be adequately managed as mentioned in the quote below.

The following quotes illustrate some of the learning.

- Effective communication is important:

*'Effective communication with residents is a challenge. We have decided to upgrade our web site to improve comms. Struggled to maintain the Newsletter but hope we can structure the web site so a print out can generate a quick Newsletter for distribution.'*

- Engaging residents on working groups can be effective but new people are needed and personal contacts are key to unlocking further support:

*'There are various residents who are familiar with the Council and who are not reticent in coming forward with ideas. The Council has several working groups that include members of the public and these residents carry out huge amounts of research and move projects on. Their enthusiasm helps to motivate officers as well. However, it often seems to be the same people that step forward for projects or working groups and it is hard to know how to engage more people. A lot depends on personal contacts.'*

- Younger volunteers are needed but they require flexible involvement to match their busy lives. Support from experienced community or T&PC members could be beneficial to ensure projects and initiatives are sustainable:

*'It's usually the same people in the village who appear on different groups. As they age and retire from groups, their knowledge and experience is lost. Younger people are needed, but they generally work full time, may have families and don't have the time.'*

*'We find that younger groups are very keen, but the follow through to see initiatives through to the end is lacking.'*

- It is beneficial to encourage local groups to be financially independent:

*'Focussing such groups on doing their own fundraising rather than looking to the Council for "handouts". This has worked for us. In these difficult times PC's must focus on their prime responsibilities and perhaps encourage such groups to be more independent, relying less on our support.'*

- It's important to participate with other councils on issues affecting multiple communities:

*'The HIF1 Road is a huge damaging challenge. The other is noise from the rail sidings. We actively participate with others on the FCC Liaison Committee'*

- Joint projects need support from both community volunteers and council officers. However, they may need paid staff to manage them as they grow and are successful:

*'We declared a climate emergency in 2019 and then held a workshop where working groups were set up on six topics - food, buildings, land & nature, energy, engagement, journeys. There's a lot enthusiasm but there comes a point where we need more paid staffing to coordinate activities. That's what's holding us back.'*

*'There are various residents who are familiar with the Council and who are not reticent in coming forward with ideas. The Council has several working groups that include members of the public and these residents carry out huge amounts of research and move projects on. Their enthusiasm helps to motivate officers as well. However, it often seems to be the same people that step forward for projects or working groups and it is hard to know how to engage more people. A lot depends on personal contacts. Rarely, there is a conflict between what the residents would like and what the Council would prefer, though often it comes down to lack of officer time to move projects on. Several residents and members of the community have been involved with Council projects for years and have practically as much influence as Councillors. Ultimately, all joint projects need both officer time and public time to help them succeed. It can be hard to remind working group members about confidentiality.'*

## Conclusion

Overall, most T&PCs engage with other groups within their communities (53 out of 60) to varying levels, from consulting, to actively working together on projects although nearly half don't engage or only engage when necessary. Nearly a third work with climate related groups and a sixth with young people, four with youth representation on their councils.

There are many challenges for T&PCs, mainly their large workload and not having enough councillors, leading to a lack of time to do more than their council duties. This is heightened when councils engage in successful joint projects which require additional resourcing to coordinate. Some communities have very few community groups to engage with due to difficulties finding volunteers, especially those who are younger or who are not usually involved.

The most popular solution to wider involvement is to develop joint projects and to strengthen communication with half of those who completed the survey responding positively about having support to collaborate whether through resources, training or guidance, showing an interest in further community engagement.

It is clear that councils are largely overstretched but have a willingness to work more broadly with their communities and most already do so. There can be challenges but working with community groups or having residents on working groups can be a positive experience.

There are several key areas for development:

- Volunteer strategies and methods are needed to encourage community members to volunteer as councillors, in support roles for community projects and groups, or to initiate community groups. Younger people are desperately needed as those who currently volunteer are often older members of the community. Youth representation on councils, active consultation, and developing projects with younger residents could be a first step to supporting young people to feel they have a voice in their community, are able to collaborate on issues that are important to them and to foster a culture of volunteering and engagement in their community.
- Funding is also required for community groups and to ensure large joint projects can be coordinated by a dedicated role within or outside of the council.
- And support for T&PCs is needed to help them to do their core work effectively, (e.g. a legislative resource) and also engage with other groups. Support for collaboration could take the form of: ideas for engagement and volunteering strategies, especially for younger people, community development and project design guidance for issues which energise the community such as tackling the cost of living crisis and encouraging green living, communication skills and methods to build relationships which are the foundation to all successful engagement and the facilitation of learning across the T&PC network.

## Next steps

1. The summary of the survey will be sent to all local councils and an opportunity given to provide further feedback and ideas on next steps. Those who asked for support will be contacted to understand their priorities and what would be most helpful.
2. There is clearly a need to better support councillors in their roles on the local council. CFO will engage with relevant organisations and partners on networks, facilitating meetings and visits.
3. Can Local Authorities offer additional support? CFO and other relevant bodies will engage at district level to see what can be offered.
4. Learning will be captured and shared from T&PCs who engage successfully and are willing to disseminate their approach, its benefits and challenges. Opportunities for shared learning will also be developed via 'learning visits' or 'open days' to successful projects and initiatives.
5. Information will be gathered and shared, and resources developed around collaboration and the key challenges from the feedback such as volunteer shortages, fundraising, communication and working with young people, to enable more councils to engage young people, green groups and the wider community.