

**Ordinary Meeting of Harberton Parish Council
Tuesday 14 July 2026**

Item: 12 Parish and Town Cluster

Correspondence for the Parish Council's consideration from the Totnes Town Clerk, following the Cluster meeting held on Tuesday 30 June 2026

Dear all,

Thank you so much to everyone who came along this evening. It was another really useful and constructive discussion, and I came away feeling that despite all the uncertainty swirling around Local Government Reorganisation, devolution, asset transfers and the future shape of services that there is a real opportunity for us to organise ourselves locally, positively and with purpose. Bear with on this email, it is longer than I usually care for and slightly more direct in tone – reflective of the discussion held!

In attendance this evening were representatives from Totnes, Dartington, Staverton, Berry Pomeroy and Broadhempston, including clerks, councillors and our Traffic and Transport Chair. We had apologies this time from Rattery, Ashprington, Stoke Gabriel, Harberton, Marldon and Littlehempston.

And before I go any further, a particular apology from me to Littlehempston, who I managed to omit from my last update about the invite list for cluster meetings. That was absolutely an error caused by too much rushing and not enough checking. Littlehempston is very much invited and is an important part of our area — not least because I live there!

What we discussed this evening

The main focus of the meeting was the recent updates and briefings around LGR, devolution, asset transfers, the potential future pressures on town and parish councils, and the wider messages coming through from DALC, NALC and other councils around the country that have already been through similar processes.

A strong theme in the room was that we now need to move from a loose informal network into something a little more structured. Not hugely bureaucratic, not onerous, and definitely not 'committee for committee's sake' but something with enough shape, identity and momentum to allow us to speak collectively, share information properly, and start thinking strategically about what we may need to do together over the coming months and years.

As one member from Dartington neatly put it: *'If you build it, they will come.'*

So, with that in mind, the suggestion from tonight is that we press ahead with forming a more regular Clerk and Councillor Cluster group for the wider area, with monthly meetings, some in person, some online.

The ask of each council

Could I please ask each parish council to consider whether it wishes to **formally opt in or opt out** of the cluster at this stage.

For those councils who do wish to opt in, it would be really helpful if you could nominate **one or two councillor representatives** to attend more regular meetings, alongside clerks where possible.

Clerks are, of course, hugely encouraged to attend where they can, but I am very conscious that everyone is already doing too much on not enough time. Where clerks cannot attend, it would still be really helpful if updates could be shared on to all members of your council.

For councils that are not able to formally opt in at this stage, please do not worry, you will not be cut off from information. We will continue to copy you into updates if they are useful, and the door will remain open. But equally, we do need to press on with those councils that are ready and able to start shaping this more actively now.

To be very clear: **formally opting in at this stage does not commit any council to taking on services, spending money, signing agreements or making any decisions beyond engaging in the conversation.** It simply means being part of the working group as we explore what might be possible and sensible.

Why this matters

The advice coming from councils in other parts of the country that have already been through reorganisation, including places such as Falmouth, Bridgwater and Northampton, has been very consistent: start preparing early, build capacity, build resilience, and do not wait until decisions are made around you.

That means thinking now about staffing time, budgets, reserves, possible localism funds, and the capacity of councils to respond if services, assets or responsibilities start moving downwards. Not that it will but other areas have shown that problems can be dropped in suddenly and we are all setting our budgets well in advance so I would urge Councils to build in a bit of flexibility (not to be confused with massive sudden increases and reserves with no plan!)

There are significant services that are often described as 'discretionary', although in reality 'non-statutory' is probably a better phrase. That includes things such as libraries, public toilets, leisure centres, youth services, grass cutting, community events, public realm maintenance and potholes that are apparently not quite pot-hole enough to meet the repair threshold.

These are the things residents notice. These are the things that affect daily life. And these are exactly the areas where, if we are not organised, there is a risk that services simply diminish without any joined-up local plan to respond. They could of course improve and we have nothing to worry about, in which case we can all revert to business as usual.

Without being political, it doesn't seem realistic keep expecting volunteers, clerks and local members to shoulder more and more while core services are cut to the bone. If we want to protect and improve services locally, we will need to be realistic, practical and united, particularly where the 'boundaries' between areas can be pretty unrealistic.

What the cluster could do

Initial ideas discussed this evening included the cluster working together on both advocacy and practical projects.

On the advocacy side, this could include:

- Speaking with a stronger collective voice for our area.
- Influencing the new unitary council when it is formed.
- Engaging with central government, Devon structures, South Hams partners and agencies such as the NHS and Integrated Care Board.
- Making sure town and parish councils are not an afterthought in future governance arrangements.
- Developing a shared local vision that works across political and geographical boundaries.

On the practical side, there may be opportunities over time to explore:

- Joint lobbying and/or funding for additional road repairs.
- Shared service costs, particularly where services serve a wider hinterland than one parish alone.
- Longer-term conversations around libraries, youth provision, public toilets and other community services.
- Shared public realm improvement projects.
- A possible shared town/parish ranger or maintenance resource.
- Shared procurement where useful.
- Sharing templates, officer time or support around consultation, engagement and public communications.
- Helping individual parishes consult and communicate better with their own residents.
- Joint approaches to emergency planning, grounds maintenance, legal support or specialist advice.

I am also working closely with the South Hams towns in a separate cluster, where we are already beginning to look at shared procurement and joint working around things like emergency planning, grounds maintenance, legal services and shared staffing or contracts. In time, that may develop into a model that supports and strengthens local town and parish clusters like ours, particularly if there is a gap in local representation and local voice as the system changes.

Community engagement and communications

One of the strongest messages from tonight was the need to bring our communities with us. This cannot just be clerks and councillors talking to each other in meeting rooms, however charming the nibbles may be.

Some ideas we could explore include:

- A shared plain-English briefing for residents explaining what LGR may mean locally.
- A simple briefing pack each parish can adapt for newsletters, websites and Facebook pages.
- Joint surveys on key local priorities, while allowing each parish to capture its own local issues.
- Shared public meetings or drop-in sessions, possibly rotating around the area.
- A shared 'state of local services' update, showing where pressures are emerging.
- A simple cluster webpage or information hub – with a map showing what area we are talking about and who is opted in
- Shared press releases when there is a united message to communicate.
- A common visual identity or logo so residents start to recognise that local councils are working together.

Residents need to see real, positive change if they are going to back what we are trying to do. The voice needs to be united, our resources pooled where it makes sense, and our communication clear, honest and real – informal and human.

Possible names for the group

We also talked about the need for a name and some branding. Although operationally this is broadly based around a Totnes hub and the surrounding parishes, I completely understand that it may be better not to lead with 'Totnes' in the title as we are just one of the group.

A few possible options, ranging from sensible to slightly less sensible:

- **River Dart Parish Cluster**
- **Dart Valley Community Cluster**
- **Dart Area Councils Network**
- **South Dart Parishes and Towns Network**
- **Dart and District Community Councils**
- **The Dart Cluster**
- **Not Another Meeting Group**
- **The Greater Cheese-Based Governance Forum** — in honour of previous catering priorities

I suspect one of the more sensible ones may win, but I thought I would include a few to test whether anyone is still reading.

The eventual structure, name and branding will inevitably be influenced by the decision from central government on the Devon unitary boundaries when that is finally announced. But we do not need to wait for every last detail before beginning to organise ourselves.

Next meeting

The next suggested meeting of the Clerk and Councillor Cluster group is:

Tuesday 28th July at 6.00pm

Via Teams

Holding this one online should hopefully maximise attendance before the August recess.

It would be really helpful to have a steer by then, whether through a formal Full Council decision or a more informal indication, from those councils that wish to join in at this stage.

The following meeting will then be held in early September.

Final thought

I completely appreciate that this is a big ask. Members have other commitments. Clerks are already stretched. Everyone is dealing with uncertainty, competing pressures and inboxes that seem to regenerate overnight. And after all – maybe the new Unitary will be amazing, a money tree will grow, local services will be funded and all will be well.

But this is a key moment in local government. There are real challenges, but there is also real opportunity. If we organise ourselves locally now, keep a can-do attitude, and work across political and geographical boundaries, we put ourselves in the best possible position to be proactive rather than reactive.

We may not be able to control every decision being made above us, but we can make sure this area has a clear, united and practical voice and that we are ready to shout, politely but firmly, when we need to so that our residents can say we are actually delivering things and improving their lives.

Thank you again to everyone who came tonight, and to everyone who continues to engage with these updates.

Best wishes from tired of Totnes,

Catherine

Attendance list from the meeting tonight (30th June 2026)

Totnes Town Council

- Catherine Marlton (Town Clerk)
- Cllr Tim Bennett (Mayor)
- Cllr Beavis
- Cllr Auletta
- Cllr Hodgson
- Cllr Collinson
- Cllr Chinnock
- Cllr Cooper

Dartington Parish Council

- Tim Bennett (Clerk)
- Cllr Goodwin
- Cllr Webb

Staverton Parish Council

- Cllr Bloomer

Berry Pomeroy Parish Council

- Susie Watt (Clerk)
- Cllr Flay

Broadhempston Parish Council

- Cllr Bamford

Other

- Graham Bennett (Chair, Traffic and Transport Forum)

Apologies

- Rattery
- Ashprington
- Stoke Gabriel
- Harberton
- Marldon
- Littlehempston