

Relational Constitutions: a provocation for rethinking local government constitutions

Why a Relational Constitution?

Traditional local authority constitutions are rulebooks. They describe the structures, powers and procedures of councils. But they often say little about the spirit in which decisions should be made: the relationships between citizens and decision-makers, between councillors and officers, and between the institution and the place it serves. As local democracy is being asked to do more with less, and with public trust

increasingly fragile, governance needs to evolve. It will need to go from simply describing technical compliance to becoming a key part of how councils can establish meaningful partnership and connection with their communities and other stakeholders across a place. That means recasting the constitution as a living document that doesn't just describe power, but shapes how it is held, shared and made accountable.

What is a Relational Constitution?

A relational constitution is a prototype. It imagines how a local authority constitution could go beyond the minimum statutory requirements that a constitution satisfies, by defining how a council would:

- Practice openness, inclusion and participation
- Make decisions through trust-based relationships
- Embed learning and reflection as part of formal governance
- Share power in ways that are equitable and just
- Represent the lived realities of the people they serve

Councils may opt to formally embed a relational constitution through a constitutional rewrite, so relational principles are at the core of their governance. Or they could opt for a democratic supplement, to strengthen and clarify governance, making the informal visible, the implicit explicit, and the relational formal.

How it works: the prototype structure

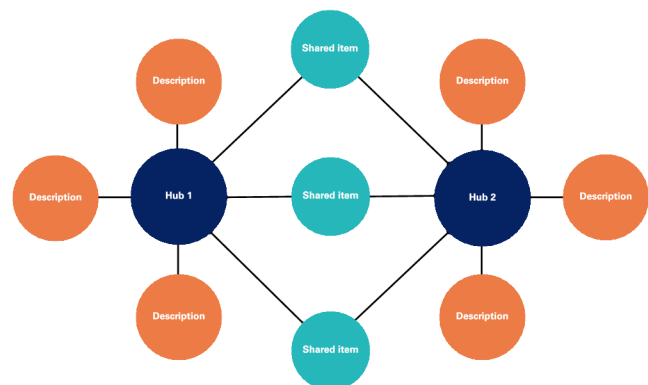
The prototype includes sections such as:

- Principles – defines values including participation, equity, transparency, care.
- Behaviours and commitments – outlines behaviours expected of all decision-makers. Not only what they do, but how they do it, likely to include how a council listens before deciding, welcomes challenge, and is accountable for relationships as well as outcomes.

- Democratic practices – describes practical approaches to embedding public involvement, including co-design and deliberation, sharing agenda setting and community-led scrutiny.
- Culture of reflection – builds in routines for reflecting and adapting through governance learning, peer review, and storytelling of success and failure.
- Relational agreements – optional space for written agreements between different parts of the system: councillors and officers, scrutiny and executive, council and community. Grounded in shared values and ways of working.

Example: Dual Hub-and-Spoke Governance

An approach that could be explored is a dual hub-and-spoke model for local governance. The two hubs are interdependent. The spokes describe the multiple ways people are able to connect to governance — so relationships help shape a system.



In this model:

The **first hub** is the formal governance centre – council, cabinet, scrutiny. The **second hub** is a civic centre of gravity – including community anchors, local networks, or participatory and deliberative spaces for public knowledge and voice.

The **spokes** are routes of participation, scrutiny and oversight, co-design and collaboration, public engagement mechanism and mutual accountability.

The **hubs** are not separate systems but interconnected. Power, knowledge and accountability flow between them through agreed relational pathways.

The Relational Constitution can outline shared roles, behaviours, expectations and protocols – not to control the system, but to give it shape and integrity.

Next steps

This is not a fixed model. It is a prototype meant to evolve through experimentation. We are seeking partners – councils, funders, national actors – to help test and develop relational constitutions in live settings. Together, we can reimagine governance as a space not just for rules and roles – but for relationships, reciprocity, and renewal.

Contact the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny: info@cfgs.org.uk