



## Case study on the experience of newly established local (parish and town) councils

### ALWOODLEY PARISH COUNCIL (LEEDS)

#### Background

Alwoodley Parish Council was formally established in 2008 and contested elections were held in May of that year. It was the outcome of public meetings, great effort by a residents' steering group, a public petition and then a governance review conducted by Leeds City Council. What spurred the creation of this local council was a wish to develop more sense of community and to have a body which could represent the whole of that community.

Alwoodley is on the northern side of the city of Leeds. It is part suburban and part green belt. The area is one of the most prosperous in the city. It has an electorate of over 7,000 and is home to a large share of the city's Jewish population. Alwoodley is the first local council created inside the Leeds built-up area and its suburban nature means it often faces different issues to those in more rural parishes within the City Council boundary.

Indeed, being called a "parish council" initially caused difficulties. For some "parish" had a misleading rural feel. For members of the Jewish community, in particular, there was early confusion with parochial (or church) parishes. Had the governance review taken place a bit later, changes to national legislation would have allowed them to be a "community council".

#### Key areas of learning

##### *Finding out about local people's priorities*

Soon after being established the Parish Council conducted a survey of residents, to find out more about people's views of the area and where they wanted the Parish Council to assist. The Chair considers this to be, without doubt, one of the most important things they did.

Questionnaires were hand delivered to each of the area's 4,000 or so households, together with a postage paid envelope. This added to the cost, of course, but was felt to be worth doing. Alwoodley is a fairly spread out suburban area and they could not realistically expect

people to put completed questionnaires through their door. The result was that a fairly healthy 27% of households responded – more than they had been led to expect. Another survey form was targeted at young people and distributed via local secondary schools.

***Priorities identified by the residents' survey***

- Traffic issues, including poor parking, speeding and the state of roads
- Fear of crime and support for a neighbourhood watch scheme
- The state of some local footpaths and passageways (known locally as “ginnels”)
- Tidying up at certain locations, including litter and a rundown playground
- Flower planting and support for ‘Alwoodley in Bloom’
- Pedestrian issues, including overhanging trees and dog mess

The findings from the survey helped the Parish Council to focus quickly on certain actions which they knew would hold widespread support. One early piece of action was organising a public meeting in order to set up an ‘Alwoodley in Bloom’ group, an initiative which has since seen volunteers planting 13,500 bulbs along roadsides and footpaths. The survey also led the Parish Council to arrange a presentation by the Police and subsequently to support the setting up of neighbourhood watch schemes. Another outcome was the City Council resurfacing a road which was in particularly poor condition.

As a newly established local council they were able to demonstrate a sense of purpose, with Parish Councillors who have always had ideas for projects they wished to see progressed. This was strongly informed by the residents’ survey. Those ambitions have not diminished over time and as early projects have been achieved they have moved on to others. Once a year the Councillors have held an awayday, during which they revisit the findings from the residents’ survey, reviewing progress and reminding themselves what is outstanding.

A similar survey may well be repeated in 2011, after the next set of Parish elections.

***Developing the role of the parish council***

In its initial period, at least, Alwoodley Parish Council has not sought to play a major direct role in service delivery. Instead, it has seen itself more involved in facilitating and enabling local community action.

The exception is the lengthsman service, which was one response to the finding that people had concerns about the state of the local environment. A visit was made to a neighbouring parish (Shadwell) to learn about their lengthsman service. Mike, the lengthsman in Alwoodley, started work in March 2010 and has a contract with the Parish Council (rather than being its employee). His work is additional to the environmental maintenance carried out by Leeds City Council and, as such, it is paid for out of the parish precept. Flexibility is important, so tasks can be tackled when and where they occur. The Parish Council website

encourages residents to suggest things which need doing. Typical tasks are grass cutting, tree pruning, hedge trimming, footpath clearance, litter clearing and graffiti removal.

As noted above, one thing this Parish Council has facilitated is the setting up of the Alwoodley in Bloom group. Similarly, in 2009 it helped establish the Friends of Adel Woods. These woods, which adjoin the suburban area, are called “a local jewel ... but which need a bit of TLC.” The Friends are volunteers who have since improved the woodland environment, supported its wildlife and encouraged people to enjoy the facility. A further initiative which has been enabled is a local crime prevention panel, to help raise residents’ awareness and encourage them to reduce the risk of becoming a victim of crime.

The Parish Council operates an innovative small grants scheme, offering up to £250 to local groups or organisations, the basic rule being that applicants must say how they will be of benefit to the people of Alwoodley. Paperwork is minimal, though those awarded a grant must show proof of expenditure. Amongst other things, grants have paid for a ramp for the disabled at a local church, special equipment for the elderly at a bowls club, litter picking equipment for Adel Woods and for some local Girl Guides to attend World Guides Day. The scheme also provided start up funding to groups like Alwoodley in Bloom. It has proved popular and the Parish Council generally considers one or two applications at each meeting. According to the Chair this is about giving back to the community; showing them direct benefit from the precept.

### ***Employing a Parish Clerk***

After the Parish Council formed in May 2008 there was a relatively lengthy period where they did not have a permanent clerk. The post was advertised that Summer, but for various reasons it was November when the current clerk started in post. During those five or six months one of the Councillors acted as a temporary and unpaid clerk.

Everyone acknowledges that the appointment process took longer than intended. This was less than ideal and some momentum was lost. The various systems and processes required to run a local council were mostly put in place (including sound financial management systems) and thankfully nothing major was overlooked. Nonetheless, the incoming permanent clerk had quite a bit of work to do to put things on a stronger footing.

With the benefit of hindsight the role of the clerk was also initially under-estimated. It remains a part-time post, but the hours of employment have been increased to 45 per month as the size of the role became clearer. They now appreciate the volume of paperwork and financial management, not to mention the time that goes into contact and communication with local residents (including responding to e-mails). The clerk has been

provided with a laptop so she can work either from the Parish Council office – rented within the local community centre – or from home.

*“Until you get a clerk you don’t realise what one does ... we should have got one earlier”.*

The permanent post-holder had some prior knowledge of the parish clerk role. They were already a part-time clerk at a parish in Bradford and had been undertaking the Society of Local Council Clerks’ training course on ‘Working with your council’. As such, they did not arrive with specific training needs. The Chair believes it would have been a steep learning curve for anyone without some previous experience, though equally they value the fact that the clerk has been able to grow into the role as the Parish Council developed itself.

## Next steps

Alwoodley Parish Council considers that it took them around two years to get through their set up phase, but that period is now essentially over. More than that, they have a number of tangible achievements they can now point to.

They are in the process of developing a Strategic Plan. They thought about going through a more substantive process of working with their community to create a Parish Plan, but concluded they were not yet ready for that step. However, the Strategic Plan will map out where they want the parish council to be in a year’s time, in three years’ time and in five years’ time. It is hoped it will prove a useful document for future councillors.

This is relevant, as there will be another set of elections in May 2011. These will bring in new blood, since (for various reasons) some current Councillors will not be standing again. The parish council elections will take place on the same day as those for the City Council and will, in future, happen on the same four yearly cycle.

At a very practical level, Alwoodley Parish Council is now helping to establish an allotments association and is trying to help them find a suitable site. They also have the City Council working with them on plans to refurbish a local playground during 2011, a project into which they will invest around £5,000.

Web address for Alwoodley Parish Council: <http://www.alwoodleyparishcouncil.org/>

***This document was written for the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) and the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) by Brian Wilson Associates, with David Atkinson Consulting and Ellie Stoneley.***

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