



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

CANVEY ISLAND TOWN COUNCIL (CASTLE POINT, ESSEX)

Background

Canvey Island Town Council was created in 2007, after a public petition which precipitated a decision by the Government to agree the designation of this new parish within the borough of Castle Point.

The campaign for a new town council for Canvey Island had been running for many years. Local campaigners saw the area as a distinct geographic entity, because the island is physically divided from mainland Essex by a channel of the Thames Estuary. Many people remembered when Canvey Island Urban District Council had been the local government body, before the major re-organisation of local government in 1974, and the campaign drew on the feeling that Castle Point Borough Council did not represent well the concerns of local residents.

Castle Point was opposed to its creation, partly because it would move forty per cent of the borough's electors into a single local council. This was unprecedented at the time and Essex Association of Local Councils had to establish with the relevant Whitehall department (then the Office of the Deputy-Prime Minister) that such a move would be constitutionally lawful. The order was made to create Canvey Island Town Council in 2006 and the first elections were contested on 3rd May 2007 for its eleven seats.

Canvey Island Town Council represents a population of over 40,000. The area has been extensively developed since the early part of the 20th Century and the majority of the island is urbanised. However, the western side is dominated by gas storage facilities and oil refineries. Conservation and flood defences are two significant concerns for the Council. The whole island sits within the large-scale Thames Gateway regeneration initiative.

Key areas of learning

Practical and logistical issues

The early role played by the Essex Association of Local Councils (EALC) is an important part of the Canvey Island Town Council story. Since the year 2000 EALC had developed significant expertise in helping new local councils to become established across Essex. Pre-creation, EALC was the link between the campaign group and the principal local authority, helping with petitioning arrangements and consultation on the island.

Once the order to create the new council was made, EALC provided advice to Castle Point Borough Council about setting an initial budget and precept, and about what would be needed to establish the Council. This included estimating the costs of the establishment tasks. On that basis, Castle Point made available a grant to EALC of £7,500. This was used to employ a development worker (usually someone who knows the job well, such as a former parish or town clerk, or a clerk loaned from another council) to undertake many of the initial set up functions. It proved crucial in ensuring that the Town Council was prepared for elections and ready to do business immediately after them.

Based on previous experience, EALC's development worker prioritised bank accounts, payroll arrangements, insurance and the town clerk appointment process. Other important functions revolved around the operation of the Council, so early tasks included securing a venue for its meetings, clarifying the roles of Councillors, setting a schedule of meetings, preparing the first meeting agenda (including a code of conduct and declaration of interest issues), considering the committee structures and organising Councillor training.

These actions ensured a very smooth start to the Council's life. Nevertheless, there were some practical difficulties to overcome. For instance, there were no offices suitable as a base for the Council which could be met from its budget. The former Canvey Island UDC office and meeting rooms were vacant at the time. However, Castle Point Borough Council was reluctant to release them, because of plans to turn them into a health clinic. Currently, Canvey Island hires the community centre (owned by Castle Point) for their meetings and events.

There were also – and continue to be – problems accessing support for specific policies that the Town Council is required to have in place. For instance, following an inspection by the local fire service, Canvey Island Town Council was advised to write a full fire risk assessment and to develop a fire safety policy. Finding advice on this issue that addressed the specific needs of a local council was difficult and time consuming. It would have been helpful to have drawn on a template or some guidance. There was, though, some valuable information from NALC on employment and legal issues for local councils, which the town clerk has found helpful. Even so, often the detailed requirements of particular local councils go beyond what is readily available.

There have continued to be other small frustrations, all which have taken some sorting out. This includes finding – and affording – the right level of reliable IT support. The town clerk has found that a network of other clerks, established informally through training and conference events, continues to be valuable in sharing experience and practice on these and other council set up and development issues.

Recruiting a town clerk

Finding a suitable clerk to take the establishment of the council forward became an unexpectedly protracted process. There were no responses to the first recruitment advert placed in the local press. Subsequently, the post was re-advertised at a higher salary and was successfully recruited to. However, that town clerk was only in the role a short time before deciding to move on. The position was advertised for a third time and, once again, there were no applicants. At this point the Councillors looked closely at the role description and its remuneration, and they decided to re-advertise at a significantly higher rate with enhanced terms and conditions. This resulted in a successful appointment from among six good quality applicants.

The current town clerk feels that some potential applicants may have been put off the role because of difficulties getting on and off the island. Access is very difficult, particularly in the rush hour, as there is only one decent road crossing over the estuary. As a result, the role is more likely to appeal to local people and this means there is a smaller pool of potential applicants.

These recruitment issues led to some loss of impetus on the early strategic goals of the Council, together with inevitable delays around a range of practical establishment activities. Plus, of course, there were the additional recruitment costs. The experience has led to the Council absorbing some important lessons about developing an attractive job package, based on benchmarking and well targeted advertising.

Communicating with local people

Even though the Town Council came about as a result of a public petition, communication with local residents had initially been low-key. The successful petition was part of a well organised and focused lobby, which did not extend particularly widely across the island's population. There were 3,500 signatures from an island population of over 40,000. The town clerk reflects that this meant there was a surprisingly low awareness of the existence of the new Council and its role.

The Council has prioritised communications since its establishment and has been rewarded for doing so. Canvey Island has invested in a new website which provides up-to-date details

about the Council's business and organisation, together with extensive information about the local area, organisations, services, events and useful links. New notice boards are being well used and there is a full colour newsletter distributed throughout the island. The town clerk concedes that a remaining problem is some confusion among residents between the role of Canvey Island and that of the Borough Council. One thing they would like to see is more information about the Town Council and its role being placed on the Castle Point Borough Council website. It would also be easier to signpost residents to the right contacts for their queries if Canvey Island and Castle Point shared the same telephone switchboard, as happens in some places.

Next steps

Having one town clerk in post full time from the date the Council was created would have helped with a swifter establishment after vesting. The town clerk accepts that some of those early delays mean the Council is not yet where it wants to be. Nevertheless, there has been some excellent progress.

The Council has in place a wide range of transparent policy and procedural arrangements (available on its website) and the budget position is conservatively healthy. It is now looking to build on these solid foundations and to deliver on ambitions detailed in its recently completed four-year plan. For instance, an Events Manager has recently been recruited who helped to organise an enthusiastically received Armed Forces Day on the island. The Council is also able to offer some grants to local community organisations and for community projects. It is looking forward to undertaking community led planning work and is actively considering becoming a Quality Town Council.

Canvey Island is also developing a stronger relationship with Castle Point. Initially the relationship struggled because Canvey Island was the only local council in the borough and there was no precedent for establishing support or communications channels. Those channels do now exist.

For a local council that is towards the larger end of the scale in population terms, Canvey Island has surprisingly few assets. Shortly after establishment the Council received the allotments as a permanent transfer and it has now taken over Canvey Lake on a 99 year lease. Negotiations are also underway for a tidal bathing pool. The town clerk would like to explore more asset transfer options with the principal local authority.

Web address for Canvey Island Town Council: <http://www.canveyisland-tc.gov.uk>

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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