



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

CHESWICK GREEN PARISH COUNCIL (SOLIHULL)

Background

Cheswick Green is a village and civil parish within the Metropolitan Borough of Solihull, between Birmingham and Coventry. It was previously part of the civil parish of Hockley Heath, and lies approximately 3 miles south west of Solihull town centre. It is a planned settlement from the 1970s and is large enough to sustain six shops including a newsagent, post office and hairdresser, as well as a pub, village hall and school. There is also a recreation area, children's playground, open space and football pitch.

Cheswick Green is one the four new civic parishes formed on 1st April 2009 when the large parish of Hockley Heath was abolished. The precept was originally set at £50,000 but it has reduced in the second year to £45,000. It has almost 2,000 people on the electoral register and it has five elected councillors.

Former Hockley Heath Parish covered a diverse area with three clearly defined settlements, as well as a new development at Dickens Heath. This fourth community grew quickly and soon established its own identity, with facilities and a community association but no democratically elected body.

The initial request to set up a separate parish council for Dickens Heath came in 2005, in response to lobbying by local residents. The high precept that was being paid seemed disproportionate for Dickens Heath, as they didn't benefit from much of the green space and parkland maintained by Hockley Heath Parish Council. Initially, the Borough Council looked at creating three new parish councils in Dickens Heath, Tidbury Green and a single one for Hockley Heath and Cheswick Green. However, when the Borough surveyed local opinion residents in Cheswick Green and Hockley Heath felt they needed their own parishes. So four new parish councils were proposed and the Borough Council had to go back out to consult with the public again. Only 15 people attended the public meeting in Cheswick Green and, despite a few concerns over cost issues, there was little resistance.

Solihull deemed that a consistent approach to community governance, which followed the four village communities, would be appropriate and would meet with general acceptance. Members also felt that having separate parishes for each village would help to promote a sense of place and that the electorate for each could sustain a parish administration.

The Governance Committee considered representations that four smaller parish councils would lose economies of scale, but was of the view that they could be achieved by common arrangements between the new parishes.

In July 2008 the proposition was put forward that from April 2009 Hockley Heath Parish Council be abolished and four new parish councils created, with the authority for a Reorganisation Order being delegated to the Acting Chief Officer, in consultation with the Chair and Group Spokespersons of the Governance Committee. A Transition Council was established for the purpose of the reorganisation and Dickens Heath Parish Council – one of Cheswick Green's new neighbours – was named as the 'successor' council.

Key areas of learning

Recruitment and role of the clerk

The Clerk was previously clerk at Kingshurst Parish Council and had years of experience of the sector and its issues. She came initially as a temporary clerk to all four new parishes and was formally appointed Clerk to the Transitional Council in the period running up to elections in June. She was supported by the Head of Democratic Services at Solihull and by Warwickshire Association of Local Councils (WALC). Six Borough councillors 'stood in' as temporary parish councillors (in the relevant wards) and regular meetings were held to deal with ongoing liabilities, the setting up of bank accounts, invoices which had to be paid, maintenance contracts and so on. The Project Officer put together a plan for dealing with the ongoing contracts (grounds maintenance, dog bins, litter picking, etc) and it was agreed these would continue for 12 months to provide some stability during the start up phase of the new parish councils.

The Clerk continued as temporary Clerk to both Dickens Heath and Cheswick Green until both the jobs were advertised later in 2009. She applied for both roles and was offered the role at Cheswick Green on a 12 hours a week part-time basis. Her experience as a clerk, CiLCA qualification and positive relationships with WALC and the Borough were tremendously helpful in terms of establishing the role (and that of the Parish Council).

During the transition period the clerk was paid by the Borough Council, who then invoiced the former Hockley Heath Parish Council. When they subsequently worked for both Dickens

Heath and Cheswick Green, they were paid by the Borough Council with the cost split evenly between the two new councils and charged to Dickens Heath as the successor council. For a while Tidbury Green and Hockley Heath Parish Councils employed locum Parish Clerks, who assisted their recruitment process for a permanent clerk.

Managing finances and insurance

The Transition Council and Project Officer put in place detailed plans for the financial transition, which led to the initial precept being set at £50,000 and the agreement of terms for ongoing contractual obligations. Funds from the former Hockley Heath Parish Council were made available to the Transition Council.

Election costs were covered by Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council where they were combined costs with its own elections (e.g. the polling station), but specific parish costs were charged locally (e.g. local ballot papers, parish postal vote packs and parish counting) again from allocated budgets agreed by the Transition Council and Project Officer.

Obtaining insurance was an issue, as that for the former Parish Council ran until June 2009. In order that cover was current in the transition period, arrangements were made for it to continue in the name of Dickens Heath on behalf of the four new parishes. Each of the new parishes has now negotiated their own insurance.

A major issue that the Clerk had to deal with was the opening of new bank accounts, which were needed not just for the four new parish councils (current and savings accounts), but also for Dickens Heath to hold funds from the former Hockley Heath plus another account for Tidbury Green Village Hall. There was a surplus from the village hall management committee which needed to be reallocated. That process became very convoluted with the signing of indemnities and so on, but was eventually resolved.

During this period the guidance (particularly on legal issues) from WALC and the appointed Project Officer was crucial and the Clerk wonders how a new clerk would get through if they personally didn't have experience of how the sector and its processes work.

Communications and building local identity

Good local communications have been crucial to the setting up of Cheswick Green (and the other 3 new parish councils). From the start letters were sent by the Borough Council to every household (twice, due to the change in legislation), public meetings were held and information was disseminated via the Borough Council website. After the formation of the new council, newsletters have gone out to the community and its own website has been launched. The last public meeting was attended by over 60 local residents and a recent

meeting about bus routes attracted 130 residents. The Clerk, who was introduced to the community by the Chairman at the public meetings, operates an open door policy whenever she is in the Parish Council office and welcomes in members of the public.

Cheswick Green Village Hall was built with money raised by the residents and with contributions from the Parish Council. There are currently a number of other open spaces throughout the village, maintained (via a locally negotiated contract) by the Parish Council including the archaeologically important remains of the Mount. These activities help to keep the public aware of the work of the Parish Council.

They have set up a website which they are able to manage and update themselves, at negligible cost, and the Chairman is looking to train the Clerk in how this is done to ensure its sustainability. They publish news, local information, council information, updates on issues (such as allotments) and have already started to receive enquiries through the website. It has been advertised, not just locally, but online, via Wikipedia, the local authority and other sites, and has been well tagged to ensure good search engine exposure. The Chairman recommends <http://www.parishcouncil.net> for their reliable, efficient and easily customised platform.

Communication with the Borough has also been maintained in a positive manner, following on from 'new parish council' meetings with its Head of Democratic Services. Cheswick Green Parish Council Clerk and Chairman both know that they can always pick up the phone for support and advice. The Clerk also feels that the encouragement and information available from WALC has been invaluable from both a personal and council perspective. Over the first year, the Borough Council held regular meetings with the four new Parish Council chairmen, and offered support and training on chairing meetings and understanding roles/processes. The communication channels developed during this process have helped ongoing relations with the Borough, particularly where it had been felt that Members hadn't always had a clear understanding of the role of local councils did and how they worked.

Next steps

In response to requests from local residents, the Clerk is working with Royal Mail to resolve an issue with the local postal address. The address currently includes the place name of Shirley, rather than Cheswick Green. Whilst seeming a trivial issue, the Cheswick Green community has an increasing pride about its identity; as well as building the community brand, by addressing this issue the Parish Council has enhanced public perception about the value of its work.

With elections coming up in May 2011, the Councillors will be elected for a four year period,

which the Clerk says will mean that Cheswick Green Parish Council will be able to start working in earnest towards the Quality Parishes Scheme.

The Parish Council is also looking to take on the management of local allotments from the principal local authority. Their recent survey produced 40 requests for allotments from local residents. They are currently searching for a two acre site with a water supply and have identified four possible sites, though nothing has yet been resolved.

Cheswick Green is considering taking on other delegated services, but is keen to ensure that governance details and all 'operational' matters are dealt with first. For example, the Clerk's contract has just been finalised, and Freedom of Information documentation and financial regulations have been organised. With the Clerk working considerably over their allotted 12 weekly hours, there is still much to be done before Parish Planning and consideration of further delegations will take place.

Cheswick Green Parish Council supports the idea of parishing more of the unparished areas of Solihull, as many places only have one level of formal representation - resident's associations don't have the same legal status and public accountability. The Parish Chairman says that, "*Where reorganisation takes place, there should be uniformity of structure, this needs to be symmetrical across the Borough to ensure that the public (and local and Borough councillors) understand what is going on and the precept issue is resolved [double taxation]*". He hopes the experience from these four parish councils will help to further such understanding and lead to the formation of more new local councils.

<i>Some do's and don'ts according to Cheswick Green Parish Council</i>	
<p>Do realise that the set up process is a lot for one person, even in a smaller parish.</p> <p>Do encourage pro-active councillors, once roles and responsibilities are sorted.</p> <p>Do use your CALC for support, advice and guidance.</p> <p>Do keep talking to your public, the principal local authority and neighbouring councils.</p> <p>Do believe that you can do it!</p>	<p>Don't rush too far into policy and planning until you have sorted the governance.</p> <p>Don't ignore any local concerns about double taxation, given the current financial climate.</p>

Web address for Cheswick Green Parish Council: <http://www.cheswickgreen-pc.org.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.

The authors would like to thank Chris Borg, the project manager at NALC, and Adam Lavis, Senior Policy Adviser at the CRC, for their helpful steers and advice. Sincere thanks also go to project steering group, who were: Louise Ashmore, Bedfordshire Association of Parish and Town Councils, Helen Ball, Town Clerk at Shrewsbury Town Council, Sue Lake, Norfolk Association of Parish and Town Councils, Russell Morgan, Town Clerk at Stanley Town Council, Sam Shippen, Town Clerk at Seaford Town Council, and Reg Williams, City Clerk at Salisbury City Council. Many other people contributed knowledge, examples and views during the course of the research. This document does not necessarily represent their views and any errors are the author's.

January 2011