



Case study on a Community Governance Review

MORECAMBE TOWN COUNCIL (LANCASHIRE)

The context

This case study describes a Community Governance Review which led to the creation of a new town council in a previously unparished area. Morecambe Town Council, in Lancashire, was formed in 2009.

During the major reorganisation of local government which took place in 1974 the municipal borough of Morecambe & Heysham was abolished and Morecambe became a part of the Lancaster City Council area. This was unpopular in some circles and there was one unsuccessful attempt to press for a town council towards the end of the 1990s.

The desire to win back some decision-making powers for the town did not go away. This was fed by Morecambe's declining fortunes, as its seaside tourism struggled. People started asking whether the City Council should be doing more to reverse the decline. In particular, there was a growing sense of unfairness and a view that Council Tax paid by Morecambe residents was not coming back into the town. A group called the Morecambe Bay Independents was formed, led by some Ward Councillors on the City Council.

Morecambe is a seaside town, with a population of about 45,000 (or 51,000 if the adjoining port of Heysham is included). Its promenade, from where there are panoramic views across Morecambe Bay, has recently undergone refurbishment. This included the erection of a statue to its most famous son, the late comedian Eric Morecambe.

What happened in the review

The campaign for a town council was started by the Morecambe Bay Independents group on the City Council, led then by Evelyn Archer who had lived in the town all her life.

A public meeting was called in the town hall and a fact sheet was produced to let people know what steps would have to be taken if the idea for a town council was to get off the

ground. Given local circumstances, considerable care was taken to make clear that this was not about breaking away from Lancaster City Council.

The next step was to define some geographical boundaries for the town council. Initially the campaigners thought it might cover the five Morecambe wards. However, at a second public meeting someone pointed out that part of an adjoining ward in Heysham was also unparished, so this was added to the proposed area.

City Councillors and campaigners set up a stall within the local shopping centre to collect signatures for a petition. They were there on-and-off for the best part of a year, until – with some additional signatures gathered on doorsteps – the threshold of 10% of local electors was passed. This included a good spread of signatories from across the wards. The petition was submitted to the City Council in January 2007.

It should be noted that all this happened at a time when decisions about creating new local councils still resided with central government. Following procedures of the time, Lancaster City Council invited and considered representations from local people about the town council proposals. As a result of the petition and representations it decided to lend its support and in April it submitted the petition to the Secretary of State for Communities & Local Government stating its backing.

“It [the decision] hinged on the petition to be honest; that was what influenced the councillors.” – Lancaster City Council officer

In July 2007 the City Council consulted local people about electoral arrangements. Proposals for there to be 26 town councillors – between 3 and 5 per Ward, depending on their population size – were then submitted to the Electoral Commission for its agreement.

It was at this stage that new legislation came into force (the Local Government & Public Involvement in Health Act 2007), altering the review process and delegating responsibility for such decisions from central to local government. In 2008 Lancaster City Council agreed to take back the case and to make the decision about Morecambe themselves. In doing so they were advised by central government to treat the earlier petition recommendations as if they were recommendations resulting from a Community Governance Review.

Things now moved quickly. At a meeting in December 2008 the City Council agreed, in principle, to the establishment of a Morecambe Town Council. A Working Group was formed from relevant Ward Councillors to consider an appropriate first year budget and precept. This proposed a budget of £220,000 – a sum designed to give the new local council scope to ‘add value’.

Draft proposals: in summary, they recommended that an Order be made to:

- Create a new local council, with 26 Councillors, for a parish of Morecambe;
- Hold parish elections in 2009, 2011 and then every four years;
- Divide the parish into six wards, each with a specified number of councillors; and
- Transfer some allotments from the City Council to the new parish council.

Note that technically the principal local authority can only create a “parish council” and it is that local council, when it first meets, which can change the name to a “town council”, “community council”, “village council” or “neighbourhood council”.

At a meeting in February 2009 Lancaster City Council approved the Reorganisation Order to create a local council in Morecambe. It also approved the first year precept and decided to retain the Working Group to provide some continuity.

When the Order came into effect in April 2009 that Working Group was reconstituted as a ‘shadow parish council’, still consisting of the relevant Ward Councillors. The first elections then took place in May, with Morecambe Bay Independents winning almost all of the seats.

Lessons from the review

Timescale and process

The Review process for Morecambe was rather unique, being a hybrid between the pre- and post-2007 approaches. This helps explain why two years passed between the City Council seeking representations and issuing the Reorganisation Order. Things speeded-up once the post-2007 approach came into play. However, the timescale doesn’t appear to have caused much frustration among local campaigners.

“The set up was very straightforward. At the end of the day it was a good process.” – current Leader of the Morecambe Bay Independents

The advice from central government, when the case was transferred back to the City Council, is interesting. The implication is that central government was content the petition and the City Council seeking representations about it constituted sufficient public consultation. No more was expected under the streamlined post-2007 review process.

Involvement of local campaigners

This case illustrates some advantages of there being a campaign and petition prior to the Review. Local Morecambe people were deeply involved in the process, sounding out local

opinion, drawing up draft recommendations for a town council and proposing its boundaries. The significant effort required of the campaigners must not be overlooked. However, the benefits of such grass roots activism included more debate among the local community, more thought as to what they wanted from a local council and a better chance of identifying people willing to stand subsequently as councillors.

It is interesting that many of the campaigners were (and some still are) City Councillors. During the campaign and review those links with the City Council appear to have been used to advantage. Morecambe Bay Independents were in dialogue with other City Councillors encouraging their support for the proposed town council.

Principal local authority and other support

It is widely recognised that Lancaster City Council offered much practical support during the Review. Advice was freely given to the campaign about the processes it needed to follow with the petition and when defining proposed boundaries.

The City Council then provided resources to support the Working Group. It also laid on two information and training sessions for residents who may be thinking of standing for election.

“It [the Review] was done extremely well for them.” – County association of local councils

Two views have been heard about the Working Group. One is that, since it could call on City Council resources, it could have gone further in assisting the set-up of the town council e.g. drafting standing orders. The other is that the Group should have held back, leaving as much as possible to the town council when it commenced with a proper electoral mandate.

Other sources of support at this stage were Lancashire Association of Local Councils (the county association), who helped campaigners to understand the range of things a local council could do, and other established town councils, including Weston-super-Mare Town Council which was looked at because it was a seaside town of a similar size.

Geographic scope of the review

This was a partial review (covering part of the Lancaster City Council area). For the most part defining the town council boundaries was simple, since five wards were historically recognised as making up Morecambe. The more complex question was whether or not to include the unparished part of the adjoining Heysham North Ward. Decisions about new local councils must take account of community’s identity and their sense of place.

Various options for Heysham North were considered by the City Council, though each had disadvantages. Extra consultation was undertaken with residents in that ward, but the results proved rather inconclusive, with no obvious desire being voiced for their own parish council. So the earlier view expressed by residents, that Heysham North should be included within the Morecambe town council petition area, was allowed to go forward. That decision, however finely balanced at the time, no longer appears to be a particular issue.

Concluding comments

The Community Governance Review for Morecambe was clearly unusual, in that it started under one legislative system and was completed under another. It seems likely that central government would have agreed to the formation of the town council, but the change meant that decision had the advantage of being a locally-owned one.

It has given the community in Morecambe the scope to take more decisions about their own locality, using their own precept, and in that sense it addresses the issues which ignited the town council campaign. The hope is that it also brings greater community engagement.

“I’ve always believed that if people feel part of something they’re more likely to join in.” – former Town Council Chair

The life of Morecambe Town Council since 2009 has not been without its controversies. However, local Councillors remain positive about the fact that they now have a town council and can point to tangible benefits. These include a police community support officer in each ward, grants awarded to various local charities and increased support for local events. The ‘Light and Water Festival’ is being brought back into the town and the Town Council is promoting festivals throughout the summer months – the ‘Morecambe Top 20’ – in order to attract more visitors, which should assist the local economy.

Morecambe Town Council website: <http://www.morecambe.gov.uk/>

This document was written for the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) by Brian Wilson Associates and David Atkinson Consulting.

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