



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

SALISBURY CITY COUNCIL (WILTSHIRE)

Background

Salisbury City Council was established in April 2009, when local government in the county of Wiltshire underwent re-organisation. A new unitary – Wiltshire Council – was created with its headquarters in Trowbridge. The former Salisbury District Council was disbanded. Those parts of the county which had not previously been so, were parished, including the city area of Salisbury.

Salisbury City Council has a population of about 45,000 making it one of the largest local councils in the country. Indeed, it contains roughly ten per cent of the county population and that despite having a boundary which is tightly drawn around the built-up area. The cathedral city recently celebrated its 750th anniversary and civic tradition, like the twice weekly charter market, plays an important part in the new Council's role.

Because of its size Salisbury City Council has chosen to distinguish the roles of its councillors and officers along lines more typical of a district council. Councillors take the more strategic decisions, setting policy direction, while decisions about service delivery take place at an officer level. Officers also have financial delegations set at a level high enough to match the broad remit and working model.

Key areas of learning

Deciding which services to manage

Prior to local government re-organisation the City Clerk was a manager at Salisbury District Council. When the formation of a City Council was announced, in 2008, he was seconded to a Working Group whose job was to plan for the new local council.

It was decided that Salisbury City Council should take on a mix of services, some of which cost money to run and others of which generated an income. This would ensure the

precept could be set at a reasonable level. Open days were held at the Guildhall and residents' surveys were conducted so they could find out what local people thought.

The Working Group came up with some costed options for the appropriate package of services to be transferred. Its proposals included:

- Some obvious very local services, such as parks maintenance;
- Others which local people wanted the City to manage, like a community centre; and
- Some services which made money, such as the crematorium and car parks.

These proposals were put to the Implementation Executive at (the then) Wiltshire County Council, who took a pragmatic line and largely agreed them. A few things were removed so, for instance, only two of the pay-and-display car parks were to transfer. The view was that it might be appropriate to revisit this in two years to consider further transfers. The outcome was that by December 2008 the list of services to be run by the City Council had been settled and in January 2009 they could calculate what precept was required for the first operational year.

Services managed by Salisbury City Council

- 33 parks and open spaces (including sports pitches)
- 12 play areas, plus skate parks, sports walls and youth shelters
- 12 allotments sites (approximately 700 plots)
- 9 cemeteries and churchyards
- The crematorium
- Memorial trees and benches
- 2 of the pay-and-display car parks
- 7 public convenience facilities
- A community centre (Bemerton Heath Centre)
- Community development
- The twice weekly charter market, plus farmers and continental markets
- An annual charter fair
- The City Carnival, Armed Forces Day, the Food & Drink Festival, Christmas lights and other special events
- The Guildhall
- A caravan and camping site
- Various shops, offices and flats within an asset portfolio

Some staff who had been delivering these services at the District Council transferred to the City Council (under TUPE arrangements) and other posts were filled on the open jobs market. In all Salisbury City Council has 46 full- and part-time staff, the largest contingent being those who maintain the parks and open spaces. Given this number and the complexities of modern employment law they employ their own part-time HR manager.

On having an HR manager: "You can't afford to lose the confidence of your staff early on."

Total expenditure on services in 2010/11 is £2.9 million gross and £1.2m net. In other words there is an income from services of £1.7 million. There will also be an extensive capital programme over the next five years.

Salisbury City Council holds the view that if a local council is going to be created it should be sufficiently viable to do things or it risks being seen as a lame duck. However, it recognises that its strong remit derives partly from having come about as part of local government re-organisation. Formation of the City Council was a condition of the agreement about the unitary.

Raising the profile with the community

In such circumstances there is always the possibility that members of the public cannot distinguish between the former district council and the new City Council. Not to mention scope for confusion about which services the City now provides and which ones the unitary provides. The City Clerk realises that this is, up to a point, inevitable and understandable.

The City Council have taken some measures to overcome this. For instance, anyone phoning their switchboard number first hears a telephone message re-directing them to Wiltshire Council if they are enquiring about matters such as planning, housing or schools.

Things like the newsletter help to address this too. City Voice is distributed four times a year to every local household. The right the City Council has gained to use the formal City status and its historic coat of arms means that it can build on the place's historic tradition.

Their profile should be further boosted in 2011 when the City Council is due to move into part of the refurbished Guildhall in the market square. This will be a much more visible site than the temporary offices (given to them on a short-term free lease by Wiltshire Council).

Wiltshire Council has always been keen to retain a presence in the city and has held on to certain flagship buildings like the City Hall and leisure centre. However, it has now co-located all of its own locally-based staff into a one-stop-shop.

Trowbridge, where Wiltshire Council has its main base, is quite some distance away. The unitary operates an Area Committee structure and one of these covers Salisbury. These committees exist primarily to bring the unitary closer to residents and engage with them. The City Council has a place on the Salisbury Area Committee, but does not feel this structure is one liable to cause public confusion, since it is not directly delivering services.

Vesting and taking on assets

The transfer of assets to Salisbury City Council, to go with its service responsibilities, has been a long and complex business. In all, hundreds of assets have been involved.

The former Salisbury District Council decided that it wanted to keep things as simple as possible for itself and so would transfer all of its assets to the new unitary. The intention was that relevant assets could then be transferred again, from Wiltshire Council to Salisbury City Council, at a later date. This process has proven bureaucratic, frustrating and expensive. It has involved the City in negotiations with individual service departments at the unitary, in some cases trying to ensure that restrictions (covenants) were not added to transfer agreements. Having the title deed transfers processed through the Land Registry Office has also taken longer than expected and involved much form filling. Plus the issue has consumed much management time and required solicitors' fees.

A further issue has been that some assets were simply overlooked at the time of vesting. War memorials were among these. No-one was disputing that the City Council ought to maintain them, but they had not been on any transfer list.

The lesson from Salisbury is that transferring the assets directly to the new local council would have been far easier than the double-transfer which actually took place.

Next steps

Salisbury City Council has been in existence for less than two years. The City Clerk says they have now completed most things which needed to be put in place to get the Council up-and-running. But a few things, such as introducing a staff appraisal system, remain to be done and it may be two more years before the Council's establishment is truly complete.

"We're now coming out of set-up mode and coming into the doing phase."

The City Council has plans to apply for Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme status. What particularly attracts them is that QPS status makes it easier to use the legislative power of well-being (or the planned general power of competence), which permits them to take wide-ranging actions of benefit to their community.

It would not be surprising if the City Council took on some additional services over the next few years. This is being primarily driven by financial pressures faced by Wiltshire Council and an ambitious City Council. Some City Councillors would like to see an expanding role. In light of recent Government announcements about principal local authority funding, negotiations with Wiltshire Council have already begun. This, though, seems likely to be

matched by a sober assessment of what is practical, recognising that growth brings its own challenges and the precept must remain acceptable to residents.

Web address for Salisbury City Council: <http://www.salisburycitycouncil.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.

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