



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

SHREWSBURY TOWN COUNCIL (SHROPSHIRE)

Background

Shrewsbury Town Council was established in April 2009, when local government in the county of Shropshire underwent re-organisation. A new unitary – Shropshire Council – was created, with its headquarters also in Shrewsbury. The former Shrewsbury & Atcham Borough Council was disbanded and the town of Shrewsbury became a single parish.

Shrewsbury Town Council serves a population of about 70,000, employs around 60 staff and has a budget of approximately £3.2m per year. This makes it one of the largest local councils in the country. It operates a number of important services which transferred from the borough council. These include parks, markets, entertainment and cultural venues, sports pitches and recreation grounds, together with a range of community facilities. Horticultural services are particularly important. The town has successfully represented the UK in recent international horticultural competitions and it sponsors the annual Shrewsbury in Bloom competition.

The Council comprises 17 members elected from 17 wards. The former principal local authority Councillors remained as Shrewsbury Town Councillors until the first elections were held in June 2009. There has subsequently been one by-election. The Council elected a Town Mayor to continue Shrewsbury's proud civic traditions, upheld formally by Borough Mayors. The Council's offices are within a new Guildhall, constructed in 2004, beside the River Severn.

Key areas of learning

Relations with the principal local authority

One of the most important lessons that Shrewsbury learned was to have a good working relationship with both the outgoing and incoming principal local authorities. Shrewsbury & Atcham Borough Council had initially opposed the creation of unitary governance for the

county (and hence its own demise). Nevertheless, once those decisions were taken, it established a working party to oversee the vesting of the new Shrewsbury Town Council. This involved agreeing services, assets and staff to be transferred and deciding on a realistic first year budget and precept. This was crucial to ensure the council was viable and sustainable in its first years.

The extent and scale of changes that the new Shropshire Council had to undergo meant that Shrewsbury Town Council initially didn't have the regular contact with them that it would have liked. Access to the major decision makers was difficult, but the Town Council is pleased that it recently had its first meetings with the Leader and Chief Executive Officer.

As both Shropshire and Shrewsbury have begun to emerge from their set up phases, there has been much better progress, including changes to the Shropshire Parishes Charter to recognise the size and scope of Shrewsbury Town Council as the largest local council in the county by some margin. Shropshire Council also has a commitment to "community working and parish councils" in its strategy.

The staff and members at Shrewsbury have worked hard to develop good engagement with Shropshire's liaison officer and with the portfolio holders. Interestingly, Shrewsbury doesn't meet Shropshire representatives alongside the other parishes. The issues are simply so different that it wouldn't make sense.

One valuable development has been the impact that Shrewsbury has made as a statutory consultee in the planning process. The Town Council now has its own planning committee which has developed some local influence. In a number of cases Shropshire Council has taken on board Shrewsbury's views about projects before going out to public consultation.

The county's local joint committees have become an important way of engaging with the principal local authority and other public sector stakeholders. There are 28 local joint committees in Shropshire and Shrewsbury Town Council is represented on six of them. These are partnership bodies with an average budget of £35,000 to spend on community projects.

Shrewsbury Local Joint Committees

Membership:

- Shropshire Council and Shrewsbury Town Council councillors
- Officers from health, police and fire services
- Representatives of community organisations
- They are open to the public

Annual budget:

- £35,000 for community projects

Funded projects:

- Sports and recreation activities, plus cultural, learning and arts events

Shrewsbury Town Council has also established good contact with neighbouring local councils. Initially some of them were wary, fearing a take-over. But more recently local councils in the county have begun to see Shrewsbury as leaders. Often they await Shrewsbury's reaction to an issue and then either follow suit or react appropriately. There is no formal structure for relations with neighbouring local councils but there are some informal joint events. A trend that underlines the different nature of Shrewsbury's status as a local council is the increasing number of agency arrangements it has with its neighbours. For instance, Shrewsbury grows plants on behalf of other parishes in its nurseries.

Governance and operation

Some of the most significant and time-consuming issues have revolved around establishing governance and operational arrangements.

One of the most frustrating experiences has been the audit process required of the Council. Shrewsbury Town Council is above the threshold of £1m turnover that requires a full audit by the Audit Commission. Nevertheless, the council is at the bottom of that scale and it found the external auditor prioritised other bigger organisations in the area – often for understandable operational reasons. The result is that the Town Council felt it experienced a rather disjointed and protracted audit, arranged around the needs of bigger clients. The fee of £17,000 for this service is substantial for a local council, even a larger one like Shrewsbury. The town clerk shares the views of many others, that the threshold for full audits should be raised so that relatively small organisations (in auditing terms) like Shrewsbury Town Council are not over-burdened.

On the other hand, the town clerk has found that the Council is often too big for certain processes. For instance one of the quirks of local council governance is that invoices cannot be settled by electronic transfer (known as the BACS system). For large councils with many bills to pay, having to sign off bills by individual cheque transactions results in a time-consuming and inefficient process. Shrewsbury is pleased to see that this requirement is due to change shortly.

Both these issues highlight that councils of the size of Shrewsbury do not quite fit with existing guidance, legislation and practice. Indeed, the town clerk has found that the best way of getting advice and support is to develop an informal network outside the usual structures. For instance, discussions with Salisbury City Council, established at the same time and through the same mechanisms, have been particularly fruitful.

Staff recruitment

Negotiations with the outgoing Shrewsbury & Atcham Borough Council identified the need to transfer a large number of staff to Shrewsbury Town Council from the horticultural, outdoor play and ground maintenance teams. Whilst the TUPE process that applied to a number of these staff transfers was not contentious, the bureaucracy that surrounded it was very difficult to negotiate. It would have been helpful for Shrewsbury to have had specific advice or guidance on both this and health and safety issues to signpost a way through the requirements.

On the other hand, payroll, IT and internet responsibilities – which can often be onerous, particularly in the initial phase - have been handled by Shropshire Council. Shrewsbury developed a service level agreement for these functions with the principal local authority as one of its first tasks. This has worked well.

Next steps

The two years of Shrewsbury Town Council existence have been dominated by setting up processes, establishing relationships and building a profile. Most of this has now been achieved. The budget has been spent wisely and the Council has been able to build up a small reserve, which has underpinned its short term sustainability.

Together with a recently completed Medium Term Plan, this now provides a platform to implement a more ambitious vision for the town. This includes expanding the range of services available to local residents and undertaking a capital expenditure programme for vehicle and equipment replacement.

Looking back on the initial phase, the town clerk underlines the importance of ensuring policies and procedures are set up as early as possible so a crisis can be avoided if an issue blows up.

“Policies and procedures are often the last thing to be addressed and yet can be the most important in terms of preventative work.”

The Council is now looking forward to becoming a Quality Parish Council and it sees opportunities for closer working with the town’s residents, given national policy debates about localism and building the Big Society.

Web address for Shrewsbury Town Council: <http://www.shrewsburytowncouncil.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