NALC

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

ST AUSTELL TOWN COUNCIL (CORNWALL)

Background

St Austell is the largest town in Cornwall, with a population of almost 22,700 at the time of the 2001 Census. It is situated on the south coast, about thirty miles west of the Devon border. In the 1700's the area was found to be rich in the world's highest grade china clay, this provided work long after the collapse of the tin mining industry. It still employs people locally, although tourism now plays an ever larger part in the local economy.

Following the decision to re-organise local government and grant Cornwall unitary status, there was a realisation that St Austell and its surrounds, being the only unparished part of the county, would have no local democratic body (though it would, of course, have democratic representation from elected councillors on the new Cornwall Council). Councillors at Restormel Borough Council (which was due to disappear) believed in establishing *"a local voice for St Austell"*. In 2007, following a parish boundary review and a community consultation, the Borough put forward proposals to create four new local councils: St Austell Town; Carlyon Parish; St Austell Bay Parish; and Pentewan Valley Parish. This was formalised by the Restormel (Parishes) Order 2008.

Creating the new parish councils was a corporate priority for Restormel, and in 2008, four working groups were established, one for each of them. It called these groups 'temporary parish councils' (TPCs), to reflect their role in preparing the way. They had no legal powers, so any recommendations required approval by the Borough Council or the unitary Implementation Executive, as appropriate.

> *Role of temporary parish councils:*
>   i)   Ensure that practical preparations are made e.g. staffing and accommodation;
>   ii) Assess local needs and make recommendations on priorities e.g. parish planning;
>   iii) Draft a budget and recommend a precept to implement the practicalities of operation and ensure the parishes were fit-for-purpose on day one.

The Head of Governance and Performance at the Borough Council, and lead officer for the new local councils project, was involved in the set up process early on. TPCs reported back to him on decisions, issues and plans. He also became temporary clerk to St Austell.

There were huge issues with the electoral review, even though the Borough Council had been given management responsibility for the process by One Cornwall (the body formed to oversee the unitary re-organisation). There were uncertainties about election dates and difficulties in setting internal parish boundaries, to the frustration of local communities and those considering standing for election. Eventually, the order was made for local elections in June 2009, alongside those for the new Cornwall Council.

One Cornwall adopted a protocol for the governance of the four new parish councils between April 2009, when they came into existence, and the new parish councillors taking office (four days after their election). The temporary clerk and the County Councillors for the relevant divisions represented the new parishes in this interim. In practice, while the County Councillors were kept up-to-date with developments, they did not meet or take any decisions, as it was felt this should be left for the newly elected parish councillors.

The importance of the support and flexibility shown by Restormel Borough Council, One Cornwall and then Cornwall Council cannot be understated. Through its localism service Cornwall Council allowed two of its staff to spend a significant amount of time supporting the four new local councils until their clerks took over. This provided much-valued general support in liaising and co-ordinating with the local councils.

Key areas of learning

Setting the budgets

The Temporary Parish Councils considered appropriate budgets for the new local councils in a series of meetings during the period July to December 2008. Cost and budget estimates were based mainly on comparisons with existing local councils in Cornwall and the South West. Some much valued figures (for example, for election and accommodation costs) could be provided by relevant departments in the former Restormel Borough Council.

There were two key drivers considered when setting the precept, namely:
  i.   **Affordability**: the TPCs were conscious that the precept would represent a new charge for residents in the newly parished areas. They also had to consider the impact of the wider public sector financial situation;

ii. **Value for money**: they were determined that the new local councils should deliver good value and sought to achieve this by setting precepts which balanced affordability against ensuring there would be sufficient resources to make an impact from the first year of operation.

Town Council	Precept	Tax Base	Band D charge
St Austell	£201,550	6,334	£31.82

One Cornwall agreed that, as a one-off gesture to help the new local councils establish, it would not charge them for IT support, office accommodation or the hire of meeting rooms in 2009/10. St Austell Town Council have subsequently taken on the office accommodation costs themselves under a lease from Cornwall Council.

The incoming Cornwall Council also funded the initial Town Council elections, plus any by-elections in 2009/10, using funds set aside for this purpose from the Restormel project.

The precept in St Austell had been set at a good level and there was a small surplus at the end of the first year, so it has remained the same for the second year.

Role and recruitment of the clerk

The Head of Governance & Performance at Restormel Borough Council, and lead officer for the TPC's project, was made the temporary Clerk to St Austell. In that role, they managed the recruitment of the first permanent town clerk. This saved a considerable amount of money in the set up phase. Indeed, they wonder now whether that recruitment should have begun earlier in the process, but believe "*it is important for the Town Council to appoint its own Clerk*" and not to have someone imposed on them. The role was widely advertised and had a good response. They believe that they *"were blessed with extreme good fortune"* in recruiting David Pooley, who was previously the Director of Finance and then Chief Executive at North Cornwall District Council, with over thirty years of local government experience.

The permanent Town Clerk was appointed in September 2009. Their salary level and role were budgeted for by the TPC and then voted on by the new Town Council, this degree of accountability proving essential when the local press questioned the amount paid by the new Town Council. The Mayor of St Austell said publically that he believed the role was worth the sum offered and continued, "*People have this perception of a town clerk pushing a quill pen around behind a Victorian desk, and these days they are more akin to a council chief executive with a huge legal and financial responsibility.*" Despite the noise in the media, the former temporary Town Clerk recalls only "very *low degrees of opposition*" on

the ground within the local community and only three comments were made back to Cornwall Council via their blog site.

The Town Clerk feels that their years of experience in North Cornwall gave him a good understanding of processes and structures, and this knowledge has proved invaluable in building relationships within the new unitary council. He has a clear grasp of the role of Councillors and of the need for good communications. The Clerk is currently supported by 1.4 staff - a Deputy Clerk and an Administrative Assistant. St Austell Town Council has 20 Councillors all of whom were elected.

The current Town Clerk and former temporary Clerk believe it is crucial to understand and establish the role of that post, both internally with the Councillors and in relation to the wider community. *"Is it strategic or admin?"* Both also reflect on the sheer amount of hard work involved in the early stages of setting up a new local council and the importance of ensuring that governance detail is worked through before *"saving the world"*.

> *"The role is lobbying, acting as a champion ... helping to create vision and leadership and establish co-ordination in the area"*

Communications and building local identity

Good communication has been crucial in a variety of ways throughout the set up process.

Restormel Borough Council created a circulation list, comprising over 500 individuals and organisations, for keeping people up-to-date about the new local councils project via post and e-mail. The public were also informed through Restormel News, the local authority website, the local media, mail-shots and public meetings.

The Town Clerk maintains strong channels of communication with the Clerks in the other three new parishes in the St Austell area and with the Cornwall Association of Local Councils (CALC). On the latter the feeling is that they "*couldn't have done it without ... the support and knowledge of the CALC".*

They have a number of Town Councillors who were formerly members of Restormel Borough Council. Work has been done to clarify understanding of the difference in roles, not least between the Cabinet and committee styles of operating. In this the support of the County Association of Local Councils has been crucial.

The clerk's existing contacts within the new unitary, and the fact that four Town Councillors also sit on Cornwall Council, has helped in terms of communication with a principal local authority which is still coming to terms with *"change upon change upon change"*.

It was proposed early on that IT systems, the website and e-communications should be funded, in the first instance, by Cornwall Council using the budget established by Restormel for the new parishes project. That website is now established and much visited.

Communications and engaging with the community is something that feeds through into the Town Council's work, such as councillors and staff taking part in the Clean Cornwall activities and the Torchlight Carnivals in November 2009 and 2010, which were put on in response to public demand expressed in a survey.

The regular Council meetings are attended by the public and over 100 people went to a recent public meeting on planning applications. Raising the profile of the Town Council and its work for the local community is seen as crucial against the backdrop of public service cuts and pressures on local taxation. In addition to the Town Council's newsletter, they ensure articles in local newspapers, take regular slots on local radio and the Town Mayor places videos on the Cornwall channel website, all to inform local residents about what's going on.

Next steps

In the early stages of the process, the St Austell Town TPC recommended that the new local council should base its town plan on the St Austell Market & Coastal Towns Initiative Community Strategic Action Plan. A household survey was conducted on this basis in early 2009 and the results from this are now informing the Parish Planning process. According to the Town Clerk, *"There currently is no local development plan ... we are working on that with Cornwall and feeding information into it"*.

In terms of taking on service delegations, there are not yet sufficient levels of trust established. This is partially down to the new Cornwall Council establishing itself and the transition process, as seven former principal local authority services are merged together with the prospect of some significant cutbacks. There is concern from St Austell and other local councils about asset stripping. That said, St Austell automatically took over the running of local allotments when it was formed and it expects to take up wider delegated service delivery in due course.

The Town Clerk is working to complete their CiLCA qualification and once that is done the Town Council will have almost everything in place to go for Quality Parish Status. They believe that will gain them respect from Cornwall Council and others, establishing themselves as a leading local council in the county and gaining them wider recognition.

Some do's and don'ts from those involved in the process	
• Do keep the formal processes as informal as possible (use simple language). • Do use the County Association and SLCC – getting re-assurance is vital. • Do prioritise on certain key issues and manage Councillor expectations. • Do communicate with the public, your councillors, other local authorities, etc.	• Don't underestimate the level of bureaucracy you will have to deal with. • Don't be too ambitious too early on and get the governance right. • Don't under-value the role of the Town Clerk – think mini-Chief Executive. • Don't allow anyone to think 'Vicar of Dibley'!

Web address for St Austell Town Council: http://www.StAustellTownCouncil.com