



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

STANLEY TOWN COUNCIL (DURHAM)

Background

Stanley Town Council was created through statutory instrument on 11th April 2007. It set its first precept during the later stages of 2008/09 and became officially operational on 1st April 2009.

Stanley is a former colliery town in County Durham, centred on a hilltop between Chester-le-Street and Consett. The town now stretches into what were formerly neighbouring villages and towns, such as Annfield Plain to the west, Tanfield and Tantobie to the North, and Beamish and Pelton to the east. The local council area comprises, what is called, the 'wider' Stanley area beyond the town and has a population of more than 31,000 which makes it the largest local council in the county.

The creation of the council came about as a result of a public petition. For many years there was a strongly expressed local view that Stanley had a separate geographic and historical identity from the other settlements which comprised the former Derwentside District Council. The public campaign for a local Stanley town council grew, based on a desire for representation closer to the town's population and greater local accountability. However, this was not supported by the District Council.

As the campaign gathered momentum, the support of a local MP became important. This was seen as crucial when the case for the new council was finally approved by the Secretary of State. National policy also played a key role at that point. The Government had put into effect a process to create a number of unitary councils in certain parts of the country. Durham County Council was to become one of those councils, which meant that Derwentside District Council would be disbanded. Although Stanley was not created as a direct result of the unitary process, its story is closely linked and the debate about unitary governance helped to change perceptions in favour a new Town Council.

Prior to vesting, a town council steering group was drawn from among the council campaign activists. Elections were then held, nine months before the council was formally operational, with the first members for Stanley all being from that campaign group.

Key areas of learning

Managing relations with the principal authority

Stanley's relationships with both the outgoing Derwentside District Council and the incoming Durham County Council have not been straightforward. Derwentside opposed the creation of a new town council for Stanley on the basis that existing arrangements were working effectively and losing Stanley would have a significant negative impact on its tax base. Relationships at political level became strained, because some of the group that spearheaded the Stanley Town Council campaign were also District councillors.

However, the situation began to improve once the decision had been taken to create the town council. Derwentside's Head of Democratic Services fulfilled many of the initial town clerk functions. Once Stanley recruited its own town clerk there was a platform to build more effective and constructive relationships at officer level with the new unitary. This officer contact was seen as very important and it helped to overcome some of the political tensions.

Relationships with the outgoing district were also complicated by the introduction of the unitary council. The main elements of Stanley's creation were completed before the process which created the new Durham County Council and abolished Derwentside District Council. Nevertheless, many of Stanley's early challenges revolved around that re-organisation of governance arrangements. There were difficulties with transitional arrangements arising from the disappearance of key contacts in one council and the emergence of new structures in another. Then there were boundary changes in May 2008 which made the seven wards in Stanley coterminous with four of the electoral divisions at the new unitary.

The extent of these changes meant that a stable relationship between the new town council and new unitary authority took some time to emerge. The town clerk sees this as inevitable. Over time that relationship has become much more solid. For instance, Durham County Council's local councils support team now provides helpful day-to-day liaison and there are good individual relationships with a number of its service teams. The clerk has recent principal local authority experience, which is considered an advantage in understanding the bureaucracy and workings of Durham County Council. They have also

been able to tackle some of the residual political tensions by emphasising the members' valuable local role in partnership working between the tiers of government.

Building its local identity

These organisational relationships have had an impact with the local community. The campaign for a Stanley Town Council had been quite high profile, so there were already good connections with residents. The new council feels that it enjoys a high profile locally and that it is not confused with the old (district) arrangements.

Nevertheless, after vesting and local government re-organisation Stanley Town Council had a different sort of communications challenge, to distinguish between its functions and those of the new unitary. The clerk believes that after a period of six to nine months the Town Council achieved a good level of local distinction, even though there is still some confusion among residents about which provides what service. Stanley considers its corporate identity to be important and it has developed an informative website. It also has a Communications Committee whose role is to establish strategy. But there is always room to improve communications and Stanley would welcome initiatives by Durham County Council to promote the role of the Town Council. It thinks this would help to create better clarity about their respective roles.

It feels that one of the most successful things it did to connect with residents was developing the Stanley Strategic Town Plan 2009-2014. This was partly based on a series of public consultation events held during 2008. There were also meetings with the County Council and other service managers. The completed plan was launched by the local MP and reaction to it from residents has been positive.

Stanley Town Council: Strategic Town Plan 2009-14

Aim:

The Strategic Town Plan provides a picture of the communities living and working within the seven Town Council wards, in a document which examines the demographic profile, the views and aspirations of residents, and the services and facilities which are available to them.

Objectives:

- To carry out a socially inclusive consultation process with the residents of the area;
- To provide Stanley Town Council with evidence of local need, adding substance to its overall strategy, and;
- To demonstrate the rationale behind the development of a realistic, outcome-focused and consultation-based 'Action Plan'.

Recruiting a permanent town clerk

Recruiting a full-time town clerk proved to be the turning point in defining Stanley as a fully functioning town council, in establishing good relations with partner organisations and in building a stronger profile. The initial operational arrangements in Stanley were slightly unusual in that members had been elected nine months before its formal vesting date. As noted above, the town clerk duties were initially undertaken by Derwentside's Head of Democratic services, though this had to be alongside their other duties which meant insufficient time could be devoted to the role.

The town clerk recruitment process was aided by County Durham Association of Local Councils, whose technical support helped define the specific role of the clerk. They gave presentations to the steering group. An action that proved particularly useful was to appoint a recruitment consultant to oversee the process. The specific advantages of this approach were being able to develop the right salary and supporting package, and to manage the advertising and head hunting. Costs for the recruitment consultant were about £5k, on top of the £3k of other recruitment costs e.g. to advertise the post. The town council believes this proved to be a very effective use of resources.

In hindsight, members have accepted that they were rather slow to appoint a full-time clerk and in the early days underestimated the scale and volume of the administration required to move the council forward. One reason for this is seen to be the transition of some councillors from a principal local authority role, with its extensive officer support, to a parish council role, where those resources are simply not available.

Next steps

Stanley Town Council acknowledges that the set up phase took them longer to get through than anticipated. The moves to establish unitary governance within Durham may have changed local perceptions in favour of a town council for Stanley, but they also brought about delays in putting the Council onto a firmer footing.

That period is now essentially over. The Council has made good progress on the compliance and governance procedures that were outstanding, it has developed a range of protocols and structures for managing the council and it has established a strong local presence.

The Town Plan and related action plans now provide a strategic framework for them to move forward. They will help Stanley Town Council to deliver its responsibilities as one of fourteen Area Action Partnerships (AAPs) which have been set up across the unitary local government area of County Durham. Its assumption of this important role illustrates that it has made progress at a strategic policy level, as well as within the local community.

Web address for Stanley Town Council:

<http://parishes.durham.gov.uk/stanley/Pages/default.aspx>

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.

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