

Research from the University of York

This research sets out the results of a small-scale project to monitor the establishment of a new urban local council in Blakelaw and North Fenham in Newcastle upon Tyne. The research draws upon the experiences of three other areas to illustrate the processes involved in trying to establish new local councils in urban areas: Headland Town Council in Hartlepool, established in 1999; Offerton Estate Parish Council in Stockport, established 2002; and Headingley in Leeds, which comprises a community group in the process of establishing a parish council.

The report describes the process of establishing and running new local councils from the perspective of some of the residents. A qualitative approach was taken to establish the views of a range of residents involved in the process. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with residents who participated in the campaigns to establish the newly formed local councils.

The full report, *New parish and town councils in urban areas* by Mark Bevan, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (ISBN 1 84263 003 2, price £11.95). Alternatively view the report on the [Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#) web site.

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The Essex Association of Local Councils Do's and Don'ts

Joy Shephard, county officer, Essex Association of Local Councils

1. Developing a community to want a parish or town council

In all my experiences both those that have had positive outcomes and those that I failed to convince, you need a person or group of persons to act as a catalysts.

In the very first instance you need to be positive and make the task seem attainable. Giving examples of others can achieve this. Otherwise, a need for confidence in the support that you will give is essential.

2. Forwarding with a catalyst

This is the system that I have always used. It works sometimes and sometimes it fails.

- a) Talk to a small group, sell the idea, and give them confidence in you as a person that you will support this.
- b) Give the group time to consider and then to contact you again. Don't push them or they will think that you are trying to achieve something for your own gratification.
- c) Meet with them again and draw up an action plan. It is really important for them to feel 'ownership' of the plan otherwise you are sunk!

3. The Action Plan

(Drawn up before point 2 – but don't tell them that!)

- a) Initial meeting with catalyst.
- b) The desire to proceed.
- c) A well planned public meeting to ascertain support.
- d) Creation of a 'development committee'.
- e) Start petitioning.
- f) Creation occurs – we hope!

4. Management of petition

The development committee needs to submit a petition and evidence to support the claim for a parish or town council. The district may not be willing to support so you must ensure that the evidence that consultation has occurred is included.

You need lots of publicity and plenty of consultation: public meetings, news letters, press releases, etc.

In one of my new parishes the petitioning followed this model.

- 1) Public meeting to tell them that the petitioning would start.

- 2) Each member of the development committee was given a number of roads.
- 3) Each house was delivered a letter saying that the petition had started and what it meant.
- 4) Followed by a visit within five days to ask for their signature!
- 5) The support of the Association in ensuring the petition and evidence was put together professionally.

Impressive – and it worked but it was a bit like a military operation.

5. Management of creation

- 1) There is a real need to work with the principle authority from the start of this process. In my experience, they are only to pleased to have your support, as they do not know about parish councils.
- 2) Develop a good precept. Include running costs, training funds, cost of employment and the cost of development (I will come back to this).

6. The role of development officer

I believe that this is a crucial role and that the right person must be found. This is normally an experienced clerk. This person is integral to the entire process and if you can have the person involved from the start of the process, right from the first stages of ascertaining support – so much the better. This is because the confidence of the development committee and the public is important. The Development Officer should be in place well before the election

The following is a list of tasks that need to be undertaken:

- 1) Preparation of books and stationary for the new members to include new councillor information packs.
- 2) Organise a training course for the council when it is elected.
- 3) Prepare books, minute books, declaration books etc.
- 4) Prepare a pack for the employment of the clerk: model contract, job specification, person specification, job advert etc.
- 5) Organise three banks for the council to select.
- 6) Place together a list of dates for meetings and provisionally book venue.

7. Another major role for the development officer with the county association

This follows on from point 3

- Public meeting to publicise first elections
- Press coverage – hopefully working in partnership with principle authority
- First election
- First meeting – The county association should be present ensuring the council is fully aware of the support available
- The development officer will stay in place until the new clerk is appointed.

HAND HOLDING IS VITAL

8. Partnership is Important

I have assisted in the creation of a new council with the co-operation of the principle authority and without it. This partnership is important and should be encouraged, nurtured and developed. To achieve a seamless development the partnership is essential.

In my experience the principle authorities have been only too willing to ask and accept help from the county association, as they really do not know much about the parish and town councils. Please remember that your time is valuable and charge the principle authority and do not understate your role. Charge and charge properly

9. Finance

Finances need to be addressed as no county association can now afford to absorb such costs. When you consider the time it is fairly substantial and you need to recharge this.

In Essex the county association assists the principle authority in the creation of the new councils first precept. The cost of the work is added in along with the cost of the development officer. These costs are added onto the precept and recharged/ invoiced by the principle authority.

10. The development officer

In Essex there has been two ways of employing this officer.

Model 1

Employed by county association and monitored by county officer. The monitoring time is set up within the costs and included within the development and added to the precept.

Model 2

Employed by principle authority.

In Essex, model 1 worked and model 2 failed as the principle authority employed only to the point of the creation of the council. At this point the new council let the development officer go – to save the cost. Result – chaos

11. Other benefits from creating councils

- Brilliant community development builds skills within the county. Extends clerks whom act up as development officers. Builds skills within the county association.
- Good PR for county association with no costs as you charge the council!
- Builds partnership working within the tiers.
- Especially important at developing the county association reputation with the principle authorities.

- Keeps councils in membership, you precept them in, in their first budget – tell them it is essential.

12. Joy's View

Basically creating councils is simple.

- Follow the legal requirements set out in the legislation.
- Support and organise the community group.
- Work in partnership with the other tiers.
- Recharge – your time is valuable.
- Appoint a good development officer (vital even for a little council).
- Give the council good resources by setting a reasonable precept.
- Precept for books and equipment and buy it for them as part of the set-up costs (include it in the first precept).
- Don't panic once you have done it once – it's easy.

Talk to others that have done it – use their experience and you will succeed. You have bags of time, as the process is slow.

Plan plan plan

Enjoy it – as you can take the credit for another council in your county, but make sure you get and keep them in membership – make your association indispensable.

Frequently asked questions

New parish and town councils

Through new legislation local people can now demand a parish council where they feel that it will be of benefit to them and their community. The possibility of creating a parish council may well be exciting. However, there are clearly a few questions to be considered before starting out.

What is a parish or town council?

A parish or town council (which is essentially the same thing) is a local authority. It is part of local government and has to working accordance with the statutory framework of the law.

Although parish or town councils are local authorities they are very different to county, district, metropolitan or unitary authorities. They are small and locally accountable. They represent an identifiable community. All their statutory powers, the things that they can do, are discretionary so the council decides where it is important to act and use resources. They also have legal duties to perform such as keeping minutes and accounts etc.

So what can a parish or town council do?

Parish Councils have two roles:

- 1) They are involved in the provision of facilities, either independently or with other bodies. For example, the provision of benches, children's play equipment, village halls etc.
- 2) As a group for consultation. For example
 - I. The parish or town council has a statutory right to be notified if all planning matters within the community and a right to comment on them.
 - II. Many bodies look towards parish councils for their views on a wide range of issues.
 - III. Parish and town councils are entitled to appear at local or unitary development plan enquiries.

All this sounds like more bureaucracy. Is it just another talking shop?

Parish and town councils do not have high overhead costs. They employ a clerk to carry out the routine administration, often this is part-time. Even so, they can take effective action within their own communities, and have the opportunity to comment on issues affecting them, their district or their county. The parish or town council will be able to use its unique local knowledge to promote and protect the community, which it is there to serve.

How Are Parish Councils Accountable?

- 1) The decision of parish and town councils are made by elected councillors. To be eligible to be a councillor you have to have a local connection. That means that the parish or town councillor must live in or work in the community. Being a parish or town councillor is not necessarily time consuming and generally is less about party politics than other levels of local government. That means any eligible member of the community may make a commitment to be a councillor if they get local support. If members of the public are unhappy about the actions of the council, they may stand themselves for election at the appropriate time. Elections occur every four years.
- 2) Meeting by law need to be advertised and members if the public may well wish to speak to councillors on issues to be raised at meeting, of if there is a public forum, comment then on issues or bring other matters to the attention of the council.
- 3) There is a legal requirement for a parish or town meeting to be held once every year and this is an opportunity for members of the public to have their say. The parish or town council is then obliged to consider requests from the parish meeting.
- 4) Parish and town councils are publicly audited and high standards of accounting are required by the 1996 Audit Regulations.

How Much Will This Cost?

No one will pretend that this all comes free. When raising a precept it must be remembered that the cost is transferred directly into the residents' council tax bills. A council may be required by the tax payers to justify the expenditure and the Auditor will ensure that funds are appropriately spent.

The experiences of Weston-super-Mare Town Council

Weston-super-Mare Town Council was created by Order of the Secretary of State in 2000. The Town Council has 31 Councillors and represents a population of approximately 71,000.

The creation of the Town Council followed a long campaign by local residents and by one independent unitary councillor (at that time). Over 7000 local people signed the petition. The unitary councillors, however, strongly opposed the creation of the Town Council. This naturally led to a difficult start between the new town council and the principal authority.

2000

- In May, 31 new town councillors were elected, most of which had not been councillors previously. The Town Council had no assets other than allotment land which was due to be handed over.
- In September, a town clerk was appointed. The process of appointment took some time bearing in mind the research, writing of a job description and arranging of interviews. The appointed town clerk had to work three months notice for her previous post and commenced work in December.
- One of the biggest issues for the new Town Council was the desire to reclaim assets previously donated to the 'people of the town' – in particular Grove House.
- These assets had (due to a series of local government reorganisations in the area) become vested in the unitary authority. As a result the largest Town Council in England had fewer assets than most small rural parish councils.
- Grove House had been occupied by the Charter Trustees (previous authority to the Town Council) and had a covenant on it stating that it had been donated to the people of the town for their use. The Town Council was using the building as office space and disputing the need to pay rent.
- The town mayor role continued from the Charter Trustees and approximate 500 engagements per year are carried out including large events such as the Ceremony of Mayor Making, Remembrance Day and Annual Charity Ball.

2001

- The allotment sites were finally handed over to the Town Council in 2001. A great deal of work was required to bring the allotments up to standard. For example, one site cost £5,000 to have fly tipping alone removed. The local joke was that all the Town Council did was allotments – but at least they did them well, and 400 tenants became considerably happier. The word quickly spread (with a little bit of PR) that the Town Council could provide cost effective improvements. The people started to ask why the Town Council was not doing more?
- The Town Council set out the following aims for its initial years:-

- I. Create an administrative and policy infrastructure to enable it to provide facilities and functions for the public in the future (i.e. standing orders, financial regulations, policies etc).
- II. Develop a Town Council Strategy setting out long term plans, in consultation with the local residents.
- III. Provide and promote a corporate identity, enabling the public to see what the Town Council did. This was done by adopting the royal blue colour for all facilities and literature.
- IV. Provide instant improvements to the town that were noticeable (i.e. installation of new bus shelters).
- V. Provide a home for the Council Offices which was not a considerable cost to the taxpayer. Transfer of assets still being negotiated.

2002

- The Town Council opened the first large wheels area (skateboard) in the town, following considerable consultation and involvement from young people, via the dynamic and active Youth Council.
- Improvements to the allotment continued and the transfer of assets were still being negotiated.

2003

- The second election for Town Council was held. There were 93 prospective candidates for 31 seats. Political control changed from Conservative to Liberal Democrat, and political control at the Unitary Council changed to no overall political control.
- Ownership and management of cemetery transferred to the Town Council. The Town Council was quickly able to make a considerable difference, which was gratefully recognised by the public. Several play areas were also leased to the Town Council and a programme of refurbishment commenced.
- The Town Council also achieved Quality Status.
- The Town Council hold a large tourist event that attracts 15,000 people.
- It also holds Extreme Sports Event weekend on beach which attracts several thousand young people on each day.
- Transfer of some assets still being negotiated.

2004

- Following a long period of consultation the Town Council agreed to purchase the small community theatre (threatened with demolition) and develop an arts project.
- The future of Grove House is finally resolved to the delight of the Town Council.
- The Youth Council host National Youth Council Conference with support from British Youth Council.

Please see below for details of functions and facilities and annual precepts. Also please see www.weston-super-maretowncouncil.gov.uk

Functions, facilities and Precepts

2000 / 2001

Precept £250,000

Services:

Allotments	Bus Shelters
Charities (support via Town Mayor)	Christmas Illuminations
Civic Functions	Cleaning of Town Signs
Consultees (Planning, Highway etc)	Dog Faeces Bins
Grants to Local Organisations	Grove House restoration project
Literary Award	Marina Investigations
Street Naming	Town Centre Partnership
Town Clock	Town Promotion (including tourism)

2001 / 2002

Precept £264,340

Additional services

Youth Bus	Youth Council
Golden Jubilee Celebrations	Cycle Racks
Notice Boards	Monthly Newsletter

2002 / 2003

Precept £427,944

Additional services

Wheels Area (skateboard etc)
Wedding Facilities

2003 / 2004

Precept £517,000

Additional services

Website

Punch & Judy

Cemetery Play Equipment

2004 / 2005

Precept £701,265

Additional services

Blakehay Theatre

Britain in Bloom (Flower Power)

Ellenborough Park East

The experiences of Yorkshire Association of Local Councils

Yorkshire Local Councils Associations (YLCA) attended a special meeting for several new parish councils in the Bradford area, organised by the City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council.

Bradford MDC provided speakers to introduce the new councils to several key departments (Finance, Planning, Human Resources, Parish Liaison, Area Forums for example) and to explain how each department could work with parish and town councils.

The principal authority also invited YLCA to introduce its work for member councils, and recommended that the new councils join YLCA to benefit from both the county level, and National Association of Local Councils, services available. These include expertise on specific parish/town council tier questions of local government law and procedures.

Bradford MDC also funds each (existing or new) parish or town council's clerk to take the "Working with your council" training course designed by the Society of Local Council Clerks.

YLCA found this approach to be a good way of getting across much important information available through the principal authority, as well as through county associations and NALC, at the very start of the new councils existence. This should mean that the new councils will not lose time in their first few months of work finding out which organisations are able to offer help and advice. Bradford MDC officers from Area Forums have also been providing temporary clerk help at the outset of the new council's work.

YLCA has offered short term help before the councils are able to officially join, understanding that they need some time to set up accounts, make payments etc. "Whole council" training is also on offer to help all the new council's members and officers start on a level playing field of knowledge about their council's powers, duties and procedures.

Leeds City Council has offered similar support to several new councils in its area. This included arranging for YLCA attendance at the first meetings of the new councils there, to promote the benefits of membership. This was also useful as the LCA office was able to advise on a number of issues. It was also a good insight into the problems of holding a first meeting.

THE TOWN COUNCIL OF ROYAL LEAMINGTON SPA

BACKGROUND

Royal Leamington Spa is a vibrant former Spa Town which lies in the heart of Rural Warwickshire, being conveniently located both by road and rail to Regional Centres of industry and commerce of Birmingham and Coventry and nationally, London. With a population of 45,000, it is a Town with a rich heritage deriving its name from the fashionable Spa that once existed there during the Victorian period. The Town was granted the right to use the prefix "Royal" by Queen Victoria in 1838 in recognition of her visit there as the young Princess in 1830.

Leamington Spa is the largest of the Towns comprising Warwick District, of which it was made a constituent part in the shake up of local government in 1974. Following the abolition of the Borough of Royal Leamington Spa, Leamington was left as the only Town in the District without a Town Council, being instead accorded Charter Trustee status.

AWARD OF TOWN COUNCIL STATUS

The Charter Trustees responded to public demand for the restoration of an authority for the Town. Using the provisions of the Local Government and Rating Act, 1997, a petition signed by over 4,000 people was presented to the Secretary of State and, after a long campaign, Leamington was subsequently declared a Parish and restored to the status of a local Government body April 2002. After considerable lobbying of the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions, the Council was allowed to continue using the word "Royal" in its title.

KEY OBJECTIVES OF THE NEW TOWN COUNCIL

The Town Council was first elected at the elections in May 2003. The following key objectives were set by Members and have provided the corner stone of progress in the period since inception:-

- To work with local residents, amenity groups and voluntary organisations to make life better for all our residents;
- To represent the views of the community when consulted on a wide range of issues;
- To develop good collaborative working arrangements with other organisations in the Town;
- To encourage and promote the participation of the public at all Meetings of the Council.
- To support and sustain all aspects of the Civic life of the Town through the office of the Mayor of Royal Leamington Spa.

- To develop a dialogue with the County and District Councils with a view to taking responsibility for the provision of services where it is cost effective and efficient to do so.

Progress against these objectives has been translated into actions and targets. An extract from the Annual Report for 2003/04 is included.

KEY OBJECTIVE 1

To work with local residents, amenity groups and voluntary organisations to make life better for all our residents.

Action	Target	Achieved By
Introduce a Community Grant Policy	In 2003 develop a Policy and application process for considering grants to Community Organisations By January 2004, review Policy and allocate grant funding according to demand.	Policy approved by Council 3 rd June 2003 Budget £24,000 approved 20 th January 2004
Identify suitable locations for renewal of the tree population and allocate appropriate funding	1. Establish dialogue with resident and amenity Groups. 2. Agree specific programme of sites appropriate for tree renewal by April 2004	Milverton Group established October 2003. Tree replacement scheme for Warwick Place agreed March 2004. Discussions with District Council Leisure and Amenities Department on going.
Ensure concerns of Central Leamington residents are expressed on licensing issues, crime and anti-social behaviour within Town centre	Arrange meeting of residents, tenants associations and amenity groups and statutory agencies. Continue to work through Crime and Disorder Partnership for measures to combat crime and the fear of crime.	Public Meeting held on 1 st July 2003. On going through work of representatives on Partnership Groups, including Town Centre Management Partnership.
To support Agencies providing support to the Community	Consider requests for partnership arrangements and funding, where appropriate.	Appointment of Member to Trustee Board of Citizens Advice Bureau. Revenue Grant of £3,000 approved- Jan 2004.

KEY OBJECTIVE 2

To represent the view of the community when consulted on a wide range of issues.

Action	Target	Achieved By
To respond to all Planning applications within the statutory period for consultation (14 days)	Introduce Planning Committee with delegated powers	April 2003
To respond to the Licensing Justices and District Council on all matters relating to applications for licensed establishments	1. Introduce amended Terms of Reference for Planning and licensing Committee. 2. Arrange Member or Officer attendance at Magistrates Court/Regulatory Committee as appropriate.	Licensing function delegated by Council to Planning Committee 31 st July 2003. Implemented with effect from 7 th August 2003.
Respond to review of the Conservation Area of Leamington Spa	Consider potential locations for inclusion in revised Conservation Area	Revisions agreed by Council 24 th November 2003
Review of District Local Plan	Provide opportunities for residents, civic groups etc to attend Meetings of Council to express views. Consider options for enhancing District Local Plan to maximise opportunities for sustainable development and protection of the built environment	Extraordinary Council Meeting 14 th January 2004. Invitation sent to Resident Associations, Civic Groups etc. Meeting attended by 21 members of the Public. Endorsement of revised policy suggestions and support for significant policies on protection of amenity and primary and secondary retail frontages.

KEY OBJECTIVE 3

To develop good collaborative working arrangements with other organisations in the Town.

Action	Target	Achieved By
To act as a link between the Community and other key agencies	Appoint representatives to the key partnership bodies.	Appointments to following:- Town Centre Management Partnership; Christmas Lights Working Group; Parade Safety Demonstration Working Party; Leamington in Bloom Committee; Crime and Disorder Partnerships; Trustee Board – Citizens Advice Bureau; Local Strategic Partnership – (Warwick District). made by 24/11/03.

Active Promotion of the Town through jointly funded schemes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provision of Summer Band Concerts with Warwick District Council. 2. Organise and promote Canal Carnival in partnership with British Waterways, Warwick District Council, Regenesis and others. 3. Funding for provision of Information Boards and seating at Leam Valley Nature Reserve. 4. Leamington in Bloom entry funded jointly with Warwick District Council. 5. Christmas Lighting Scheme – Warwick District Council and private Sector. 	<p>Funding of £2,000 approved for season from 26th April.</p> <p>First Canal Carnival and Street Festival 3rd -5th May, 2003.</p> <p>Funding £950 Installed April 2003</p> <p>Funding of £ 5250 approved.</p> <p>Funding £10,500 approved.</p>
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KEY OBJECTIVE 4

To encourage and promote the participation of the public at all Meetings of the Council.

Action	Target	Achieved By
Introduce public question time at Council meetings.	Public question time procedure at all Meetings of the Council and its Committees	Introduced by Council and embodied in Standing Orders 24 th July 2002.
Promotion of Annual Parish Meeting	Invitations to Community Groups and residents to participate in Annual Parish Meeting	Effective from March 2003
Action	Target	Achieved By
Invite wider public input to Meetings	Dissemination of information via Council Web site, Press and Council Newsletter	Website "live" September 2003 All meeting details circulated to press. Newsletter to be distributed May 2004.

KEY OBJECTIVE 5

To support and sustain all aspects of the Civic life of the Town through the office of the Mayor of Royal Leamington Spa.

Action	Target	Achieved By
Manage the Mayoral Diary	Confirm all requests for attendance of Mayor within 14 days prior to public appearance.	Achieved and On-going.
Promotion of a range of events in support of the Mayor's Charity	In 2003, organise and promote each of the following:- <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Theatre Evening 2. Themed Event 	22 nd January, 2004 30 th January 2004
Organise key events in Civic Calendar	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mayor's Civic Reception and Dinner. 2. Civic Service 3. Remembrance Day Service. 	6 th March, 2004 28 th September 2003 9 th November 2003

Review provision of Mayoral Transport	Conduct value for money review of in-house Chauffeur service	Review concluded 8 th October and acquisition of new vehicle approved 24 th November 2003.
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KEY OBJECTIVE 6

To develop a dialogue with the County and District Councils with a view to taking responsibility for the provision of services where it is cost effective and efficient to do so.

Action	Target	Achieved By
Transfer of responsibility administering all publicly provided Allotments.	Completion by March 2004.	Negotiations with District Council completed January 2004. Report to Executive Committee of District Council May 2004.
Continue to develop dialogue with County and District Council's for implementing a "Parish and Town Charter".	Development of Charter for Warwickshire through the Warwickshire Association of Local Councils.	On-going (This action dependant on response from Principal Authorities)
To work toward achieving the award of "Quality Status"	1. Completion of Portfolio by Proper Officer leading to award of Certificate in Local Council Administration	On-going. Target date August 2004.

FUTURE ASPIRATIONS

As a new authority within a long established structure of local government, the Town Council has faced both financial and operational constraints. It has nevertheless worked hard to establish an awareness of its role and a potential for contributing to an improved quality of life in the Town. In 2005 it will become responsible for the provision of four allotment sites and will be working in close partnership with Allotment Associations and the Action 21 (a sustainability Charity) to promote and enhance the contribution of allotments to healthy living. In 2005 the Town Council will also:

- Achieve Quality Town Council status
- Launch its new Website
- Contribute to the 60th Anniversary Celebrations top mark the ending of World War 2
- Achieve Fair Trade Town Status via the Fair Trade Foundation
- Support and finance the replacement of Street trees via Warwick District Council
- Provide limited new public seating in areas of the Town
- Award over £30,000 in grants to the Community via its Grant budgets.