

ARTICLES FROM THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL COUNCILS' MAGAZINE BY MEL USHER.

Introduction: These five articles tell the story of iff from a different angle – written essentially for employees of local councils and councillors. They are light and an easy read – enjoy!

Article one

The election is over, the celebrations are a dim memory. A new day and new council dawns.

Ring, ring, “Morning Councillor Usher and congratulations.” chirps the receptionist. Oh my God what have we done?

We assure ourselves it doesn't matter, we have brought some fun back into politics (see <http://www.frome.tv/tag/flashmob/>); after all it's only a town council and we all know they can be mocked for their funny ways, lack of powers and Trumpton Mayors. If we screw up no one dies so lets get stuck in, create something novel and hope that our Mayor, who has a penchant for blue tutus and looks like Clarke Kent, stands out from the crowd.

But first some background.

In January 2011 a few slightly inebriated local pundits decided to stand for the town council. As Independents. No, don't be silly, not that type of Independent but as watermelonsgreen on the outside, red in the middle and juicily refreshing.

Later that month in response to a letter in the local paper 85 people turned up for a public meeting and within days candidates were selected to stand in all 17 seats. In May "Independents for Frome" (IFF) won 10 out of the 17 seats on an 75% increase in turnout.

Our first problem? What does it mean to be a brand new councillor in a brand new group at the very bottom of the local government heap? How do you relate to your constituents in a three tier, already crowded, member /elector environment?

We could just go along the traditional route: numerous clochemerle committees, twinning trips with unpronounceable Polish towns and believing that letters to the local rag are the high spot of policy development. It quickly dawned on us that the role was important, the people of Frome had put their faith in us to make a difference and there is something at stake here, something more important than our slightly unusual local circumstances. It's about democracy , it's about reaching out, its about being a platform or facilitator for others and it's about running a live local experiment where we don't have to worry about what the party will say or do or even what the next election will bring.

The philosophy we have adopted appears to swim against the local government tide. We want to do “**more with more**” rather than “**more with less.**” How? By adopting our very own form of “place based leadership.”

By concentrating more on governance than government we are keen to release the energies, skills and experiences of the town. If we can pull this off there will be more people looking at problems and issues, imaginative solutions will emerge from fresh approaches and, God forbid intelligent risk taking might become the staple diet.

In the end we believe this will strengthen local democracy, improve the quality of life and set a new course for the town. After all why shouldn't a town of 25k look after most of its own affairs and have a greater say in determining its own destiny..... it happens all over the world and life doesn't fall apart.

In any small town or neighbourhood most people will not be too interested in getting involved in civic affairs and why should they, they think they elected you to make decisions. However there are also scores, perhaps hundreds, of people and organisations, ever changing and swirling, who are the movers and shakers beavering away behind the scenes. We are slowly but surely identifying those people and organisations so that we can work with and through them in an effort to be more creative. This has involved giving away powers and decision making, increasing the amount of grants available to oil wheels by 50% and placing more emphasis on networking as decision making.

Will it work?

Of course not, don't be silly. How many times have you heard this type of apparently naïve optimism, commentators like me spouting on about an exciting chance to break out of the drudgery of local democracy? The pages of this magazine have been awash with such heady brews for years.

Why not?

The entrenched forces of conservatism are just the same as they always were. It seems that despite the fine words uttered in the name of the localism no one trusts the people. It's incredibly difficult to get other tiers of government to listen and to act and in the coming months I will give you a few examples. We have found that members and officers need more facilitative and collaboration skills than they ever considered necessary. There is very little to plagiarise as there is little research on the reality of locality leadership and the straightjacket of local government rules and processes is stifling.

Still as Woody Allen once said “80% of success is turning up.” And we have turned up and are willing to have a go.

Article two

First a confession, when I was a CEO I can't say I took too much notice of parish and town councils. Why would I? Far too many organisational things to deal with..... in a real council.

But times have changed and so have I.

Now I am passionate about people having greater control of their own future. We can only really connect with our destiny if we can smell/touch it in our village, town or a neighbourhood. "Place" is where we can really engage, finally breaking the stranglehold of the top down decision making that has bedevilled our society for so long.

Most people now accept that we can't carry on as we have done, we know now that target models are of limited use. But where to turn? First we have to ditch the hackneyed adage "if it ain't broke don't fix it" and replace it with "if it ain't broke break it." Innovation through a new form of civic leadership is the key and innovation is "doing something nobody told you to do"

I recently suggested that we abandon the industrial scale cleansing of the town by the District Council. Why not divide it up into 20 cantons and employ a local person in each locality for a few hours per week to clean their area...it keeps money in the town, it fits the life styles of some who also need the cash and who knows the careless might drop less litter if they know who picks it up. The response? Well it's just as well there were no straight jackets to hand.

If Localism is to work we all of need to change our mindset and stop pretending. We need local leadership that promotes innovation and has clout. Where are the devolved budgets, the asset transfers, a fair division of the New Homes Bonus Funds? Protectionism, fear and even smugness reign.

From this end of the telescope I can tell you the promised land looks as distant as it ever was. I don't know whether I am coming to grips with this situation or just getting used to the pain of lost opportunities.

I am convinced that a renewed focus on empowering people within local communities is the best way to achieve social change and civic renewal.

But is it possible to unearth local community leadership with the right skill-set and frame of mind to make this happen? It's not easy. Here in Frome despite a common philosophy, a willingness to get stuck in and with a good fusion of the almost sane and downright weird it's still an uphill struggle.

We believe, that communities need devolution down to the micro- level, where politics and government most resonate with local communities; connecting real people in the real world with real politics.

In a rapidly homogenising world you can detect a yearning to safeguard and enrich differences in our communities; to live more sustainable lives, treasure our local inheritance and value 'place.' Local identities increasingly matter and are part of the complex, sometimes unfathomable, jig saw that amounts to our community DNA.

Our democracy should mirror this yearning for identity and not effectively close it down through remote and largely unaccountable systems of local government.

Outside the large towns and cities it is at the microlevel – of market town or village – that people recognise and expect local authority.

Sadly, many amorphous district councils often do not reflect these identities and are sometimes seen as disconnected, distant or even obstructive. The amalgamation of councils and sharing of management teams and chief executives into super districts will do little to alleviate this alienation.

Our experience is that people do want to contribute, its infectious, we have numerous examples of local people taking on multifaceted tasks and on the other hand offering vocal resistance when we make a wrong call. Perhaps it is our form of government that is not keeping pace with the public's desire for engagement? Maybe people are not disillusioned with politics but traditional politicians are disillusioned with people?

Giving away power takes courage but it must happen if local communities are to once again have some control over their own destiny and we are not to have analogue politics in a digital age.

Article three

The traditional British style of politics has been to leave decision making to the politicians and the professions/ bureaucrats with a periodic election thrown in. Indifference has become a deep-rooted part of our political culture, and judging by the recent local elections it is still flourishing. How long can we live with such a busted democratic flush?

We can of course build a more active, knowledgeable and engaged community, where citizens gradually adopt roles as movers and shakers rather than mere recipients of services. We have hardly scratched the surface in Frome with participatory grant making, citizen's panels, skill's networks et al but already intriguing enigmas are emerging

They will be familiar to many of you, a more participatory form of governance throws into immediate relief questions about representation, leadership, legitimacy, authority and archaic regulations. All questions which are as old as the debates about democracy itself but bizarrely more acute at this the lowest of tiers. Just where you would expect most flexibility there are constraints and hidden bear traps. Thanks god for the power of general competence, although even that is not quite the panacea it might have first seemed.

Secondly, can we ditch the idea that our council and all of its trapping and paraphernalia are the equivalent of a vending machine, you drop in your pound coin as taxes or fees and expect the machine to dispense at least £1 in services. When the machine inevitably malfunctions, delivering pop tarts instead of mars bars, the natural tendency like Basil Fawlty is to give the machine a "damn good thrashing". Ultimately, this model undermines people's confidence in, and their allegiance to local government

In fact the core business of localities should be solving problems, not delivering services. Providing services is only one aspect of an innovative, and at times risky, problem-solving approach that must engage citizens to be effective.

Perhaps the metaphor we are searching for is a stage where plays come and go, where success is judged by the quality of all performances and the actors don't start with the mindset "what can the producers do for us" but "how are we as team going to tackle scenes one to ten?"

Article four.

I am in a mild disagreement with one of my fellow councillors, Peter, about the recession. This has led us into some interesting discussions around the economy. I suspect such conversations take place in most larger councils although far fewer at a town level. My contention is that the recession will end sometime; the economy will never return to the pre-recession Brown Blair times but it will still be recognisable. Peter reckons it's over, that capitalism as we know it is finished, get over it and let's start finding a new model... now.

We ruminate over "how green can this place be and can that be part of our usp?" Much will depend on political will but in the end local communities and businesses will decide. Interestingly when interviewing for a CEO of a unitary council recently not one candidate majored on a green future, most were as confused as Yogi Berra when he said, "You've got to be very careful if you don't know where you're going, because you might not get there." Anyway it looks like we are edging towards an agreement, a green knowledge economy with a dash of green collar jobs.

At the same time we are still mulling over, “How local can you get?” Can we choose aspects of our lives to be sourced locally and which parts(if any after the bank scandals) can we trust to the global economy? Perhaps if we think locally we will take far better care of things that we do now (and I strongly believes that applies to all walks of life; whether its care of the elderly, recycling or youth provision). Maybe the right local questions and answers will be the right global ones. The Amish query, “What will this do to our community?”, may be the important starting point for all of our decisions. So for example we would like to support the development of a new initiative called “Edventure: Frome” for the unemployed, taking a group of 15 younger folk for a year and giving them skills, life and work, as well as handing the group a significant task determined by the community to complete in 12 months.

Working at a very local level I am increasingly convinced that success or failure depends upon “goodwill”. I don’t mean that in a soppy way, confrontation can be invigorating and disagreement is often the precursor of consensus. However it might be beneficial occasionally to ask ourselves; “am I genuinely searching for a solution?”, “can I put myself in somebody else’s shoes?” , “am I playing games here?” or “am I so attached to my own view of the world that I fail to see the bigger picture?”

Foolishly I had forgotten that local engagement is often riddled with entrenched negativity.

Let me give you some examples.

You will recognise the local politician who never sees anything in an affirmative way. He carps, criticises, finds fault, undermines by look and deed. She opposes because that’s all she knows and that’s what life has taught her. I would rather have my experience where a rightly frustrated leader once turned over a laden coffee table on us officers before storming out.

Or how about the one trick pony activist who attends every meeting, nowadays with an ipad, who comments acerbically during meetings.....one recently called be obese and badly dressed....how far from the truth can you stray...everyone knows I am just delicately plump.

And of course there is the officer, so hideously hidebound by rules and their own status that they suck the life out of an organisation. As paranoid as the Stasi he sees plots, slights, danger in every turn, returning always to the womb like comfort of standing orders and regulations.

The lack of goodwill can even extend to organisations. You can still find some councils that are institutionally ill willed. Who don’t want to be challenged, who have lost sight of their purpose and who generally just want you to go away so that they can serenely carry on as always.

This may all sound very negative, that's because it is and I am glad to get it off my chest. The only thing that keeps most of us temporary politicians sane are those who ooze "goodwill", thank God there's plenty of them, and that's who I want to talk about in my next article.

Article five

Every community depends on those who unselfishly contribute hours of time without any thought of recognition or reward. There are hundreds of them in your community.

There's David, ex military, several times failed electoral candidate, incredibly organised. Always willing to produce another paper or diagram. David battles away attending most meetings as a voice of reason, even if occasionally he calls the rest of us civilians.

There's Jim, nominally he's a plumber (who likes to quote Chomsky) but really he is an activist. He puts on music gigs for our edification but his real interest is in the environment, with plays about fracking and deriding (usually with canny prescience) the next woes of the capitalist economy.

Hans is a recent arrival to the town, attracted by its vibrancy. Interested in young people, he is plotting with 10 others, how to give them lasting life skills whilst completing projects for the community. He's a catalyst, young himself but willing to live on virtually nothing.

There's Karen, a refugee from the district council, she's a champion for the local built environment, carrying around more history in her head than the local library. Feisty and pushy she knows how to get things done and that's why people fear her name.

Fran is a young woman, she doesn't even live here any longer but insists on organising the Xmas dinner for 100 lonely or skint people in a local hall. She has 30 helpers but is partnered this year by a 19 year old, Lizzy, who will organise the cooking

There's Judith who teaches in the local prison, she's into community education. When the county pulled out she stepped in, created a social enterprise company which now has a turnover of over £25k with hundreds of participants and 25 tutors, all local residents.

And finally there's Anthony, he's 84 and "likes to look after the old people", he runs the day centre providing lunch for 80 people every week. He's been doing this forever but also still manages to be treasurer of a local football club.

How does local government identify and foster this goodwill? Generally, not very well. Few, if any, of our budgets focus on supporting such people. And perhaps more importantly, our strategy is unlikely to be about giving them more of a voice, or

genuinely involving them in decision making. Perhaps that's what localism should be more about?