

The Haswells

Interview with Chris Hood of Haswells Community Party (HSP) and chair of The Haswells Parish Council

Background

The Haswells are two villages within the County Durham unitary authority area. There are 180 other parishes within the area.

Over the years they have seen consistent neglect from central authority. In the 1960s they were designated a category D village which effectively meant they were to be starved of resources until the people left to move to the urban conurbations. They have continued to suffer since. Out of a population of about 2000, 20% of the residents of working age are out of work and drawing benefits and 40% children are judged to be in living in poverty.

The Haswells, despite being two villages, have a single parish council. There had not been an election to that parish council for 20 odd years. They have a precept £90K.

Haswells Community Party

Chris Hood - who is the current chair of the parish council - had applied to be co-opted onto the council six times but had received no reply at all from the existing councillors.

As the election time was close he decided to stand himself but was persuaded by an independent councillor on County Durham council to see if he could find others to stand with him. Using personal contacts he convinced another nine people, whose views were aligned with his, to put themselves forward for election. Chris's views and those of the Haswells Community Party are that party politics has no place in the local council which should strive only to do the best for their villages. At the May elections they won all nine seats from the incumbents with a hugely increased turnout.

Interestingly the timescale from thinking about it to standing and to winning the election was incredibly short. On February 1 was the first meeting of the Haswells Community Party (HSP), the party formally constituted as a Small Political Party March 1 and won the election on May 4. During that time they put out a manifesto which set out how they would work, how they intended to give power back to the people of the area, leafleted the area and knocked on many doors.

Chris thinks that this narrow timescale worked to their advantage in that their approach was fresh and dynamic, people didn't have the chance to be bored by what they had to offer.

Chris had read Flatpack Democracy which he said had helped his thinking enormously however it had to be adapted to local circumstances.

Way of Working (WOW)

Chris said that there was no formal WOW but that the elected councillors behaved as they would in life. A case of 'do as you would be done by'. They did set out in their manifesto pledge to be open about everything they did and are very much taken that idea into their governance. Like many other groups they are adamant that there is no place for party politics at parish level.

This chimes well with some of the other interviews I've done where the new councillors or the impetus for the new party has come mainly from people working in the voluntary or community sector. From my limited experience, generally people working in that sector have a way of going about things, which is much more in tune with the way of working set out Flatpack Democracy. Contrast this with the traditional top-down way most councils operate.

They didn't get into any slanging matches with the opposition – but did highlight the things they did that weren't too good.

Some of the things that The Haswells parish council have done that they're proud of.

Firstly they did not take the money that was due to them as sitting members of the council, in this case £500 each. Instead the money was put towards community activities like a village show. Their motto is 'its your money – we'll spend it on you.'

Stopped a quarry from going ahead

Got community groups together and enabled them to carry out all sorts of activities for example; a free programmes of activities for children in school holidays to include a free lunch.

Published the Parish Patch – a 20 page magazine with activities that are going on in the village funded by advertising from local businesses.

Spent 1/5 of the precept on community engagement. Council tax may have gone up but in The Haswells they are paying less but getting more for their money

By asking the residents what they wanted in the village they made sure that when it was installed it was looked after. For example the previous council had said there was no point in replacing the community noticeboard because it would just get vandalised. However at a meeting the parishioners said they wanted a noticeboard, so one was erected and has remained vandalised. Again - 'its your money – we'll spend it on you'

Top Tips

1. Don't try and do it alone. You need support of like-minded people who want to stand because not happy with the way things are.
2. Get a grip of your standing orders. Standing orders have to be interpreted to fit the situation; they are not cast in tablets of stone. They need to be applied with common sense and where too prescriptive ignored. People are not stupid they know when you're using a standing order to be deliberately obstructive
3. Be regular in your contact with your parishioners don't do as what happens traditionally i.e. nothing for three years and 11 months and then come round asking for a vote.
4. Deal with things you can control but have ambition to do more and better
5. Have a thick skin – 99 people don't care but the one who does will give you a lot of grief.
6. Always tell the truth and you can't get tripped over later. If you make an accusation against another official make sure it is backed up with documentary evidence before you go public.

Quote

With community consultation – do it – then act on the result as soon as possible.