

Bradford on Avon

Interview with Dom Newton, Ideal Bradford (IB) of Bradford on Avon council by Peter Andrews, November 2018

Background

Bradford on Avon is a town of about 11,000 people at the far eastern edge of the County of Wiltshire. It has about 8000 registered voters. It is a prosperous town with, in general, a highly educated population, though it is also post-industrial, having lost its last large manufacturing industry in the mid-1990s. It now supports a wide range of light engineering and IT firms, as well as retail and hospitality business. The council employs about 14 people divided between full and part-time. It has a capitation of around £800k pa, with reserves of about 6-months.

However it had a town council that many in the town considered to be underperforming. IN addition it was divided along party lines between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats plus a couple of Independents.

About Dom Newton and Ideal Bradford

Dom Newton, is a councillor with Bradford on Avon town council and was one of main architects of Ideal Bradford the new political party that took control of the council after the May 2017 elections.

Despite first class honours in Politics and International Relations Dom's background was mainly non-political - he had some to the Liberal Democrats in Cornwall through a family connection, but was less than inspired by the party structures and 'progression' and, although retaining a strong interest in politics, this confirmed a decision made at University to have nothing to do with party politics.

In 2013 he moved with his family to Bradford on Avon. In August 2016, after reflecting on the fallout of a town poll with friends, his wife showed him an article in the local magazine about what had happened politically in Frome, he bought a copy of Flatpack Democracy, read it, was enthused and decided that it could happen in Bradford too. In the October of 2016 he attended a Council meeting which in his own words he called 'a dire experience'.

The next stage was talking to friends and acquaintances about the shortcomings of the current council. They decided that with all the talent in Bradford they could do better. So Dom called a meeting in the largest hall in Bradford, St Margaret's, put out some publicity to explain what they wanted to achieve and waited to see what would happen. The meeting on 7 December 2016 was attended by over 100 people from which a core group of about 25 people emerged who pledged to join the adventure of trying to take over the council.

Interestingly, all bar one of the subsequent candidates were at that original meeting.

They then formed a small political party called Ideal Bradford and put out a manifesto. Interestingly the manifesto was less about what they were going to do, although areas they were going to address were outlined, but more about how they were going to do it and how they would behave when in power. They quickly realised that there were 2 aspects to the process of taking power. The first was to get elected and the second was once elected, to do all the good stuff they had envisaged.

As with all new parties they realised that publicity and communication was the key element to getting elected. They had to get themselves known to the good citizens of Bradford. Working with a very small budget they decided that Facebook and videos produced by volunteers would be a key means of communication plus the obvious leafleting to all houses in the town. Dom estimates that they spent about a third of their budget on Facebook advertising and he considers it money well spent. He said it enabled them to engage with a large number of people at a relatively low cost, and provide an insight into the demographic of supporters.

At the next elections in May 2017 saw 10 Ideal Bradford councillors elected out of the 12 possible seats. The reasons Dom thinks they were so successful rests largely on dissatisfaction with the performance of the existing council and the fact that they were able to tap into local contentious issues, without getting caught up in negativity

Ways Of Working (WOW) and the Standing Orders

IB have not formalised a WOW but they have taken considerable pains to deal with Town Council Standing Orders which they felt stifle good governance. The often deadening effect of the standing orders is the feeling they have in common with everyone else I have interviewed.

One example of how they have combated this is that they have done away with the 3 minute rule whereby a member of the public can speak to a motion, during the debate of that motion, for only three minutes. They have substituted this with a 30 minute open session at the beginning of the council sessions where anyone can speak for five minutes or even longer, if necessary, on a topic that is vexing them. At the Chairs discretion, the public can also comment on or ask relevant questions during the rest of the meeting too.

Dom took it upon himself to go through and rewrite the standing orders. He re-codified the Standing Orders by dividing them up into more relevant sections, stripping out irrelevant material, and making sure that what was said to be statutory actually was. That way new councillor can be presented with Standing Order file that actually makes sense and is relevant to their situation. He did add that it is important to keep Standing Order so that when a contentious issue arises they can be referred to and 'leaned on'

Ideal Bradford have taken a slightly different route from parties such as IFF in that they have a traditional party structure in that it has a chair, treasurer, secretary, executive committee etc etc. However one of the things Don pointed out was that he felt it was important to do was to keep IB's engagement going with the voters. This element of IB has tended to slip as they have concentrated on the act of getting their governance of Bradford Council organised, including recruiting a new Communications Manager. This has also seen a huge improvement to the Town Council newsletter this is necessarily apolitical although it does show that IB are getting stuff done.

DOM feels maintaining good contact with voters will be vital when the next elections come round or they will face the criticism levelled at the traditional parties that they are only visible when an election is due.

Hints and tips for others taking the independent route

Know your candidates before you put them forward for election. Talk with them about politics, socialise with them, and really get to know them. If you elect someone who does not understand where you are coming from, your values and the concepts of independents working together will cause massive problems later. For example 3 of the elected IB councillors had effectively left the party. Dom cited several reasons each different for the different individual but common threads are that their ego gets in the way of working together or they do not understand the democratic process. The latter is a common theme that is emerging when especially owners of small businesses get elected.

Social media is vital - get to know how to use it effectively.

Make sure individual councillors are not using their position to fight personal battles. Dom uses the expression 'best endeavours for the people of Bradford' to cover how people should approach the role as a councillor. He also like others I have interviewed would like to see being a councillor seen as a civic duty, like others see for example joining the Samaritans or other charity as a social duty.

Other political parties or so-called influential individuals will attack you. Try not to respond in kind. It is best to create a style sheet for your responses and make them positive

Have a robust Youth Strategy as they are the citizens of the future and a possible bulwark against the rise of the populist right.

Main Achievements

More than doubling turnout across both wards in the 2017 election - to 56%, one of the highest in the UK.

Championing through the Neighbourhood Plan (devised under the previous administration) with a 95% Yes vote, on turnout of 33% (pretty

good for a Town Planning document!), by assembling a coalition of local community groups (including the Lib Dems, who had to ask permission from their constituency office before coughing up their bit of the seed money for the campaign!)

Devising and starting to implement our Youth Strategy, under which we have commissioned a Youth Service (£144k over three years), and are looking to develop a Community Land Trust Partnership aimed at providing tenancies for young people in the town aged up to 30.

Modernising the back office – as well, as changing internal process and governance, moving us onto mostly digital platforms for meeting papers, etc., recruiting a comms manager and very strong Operations Manager to help us deliver change.

Changing the way the Grants process works, so that anyone can bring forward an idea, at any time of the year, and be considered equally – and to put more rigour into the process, by checking that it fits with Council strategy and policies and getting a councillor to sponsor each one.

Making meetings much more open and accountable.

Installing solar panels on St. Margaret's Hall, to actually deliver something more than words towards the 2050 Carbon Neutrality pledge.