Queens Park Community Council (QPCC)

Interview with Kevin Harris Chief Officer of QPCC by Peter Andrews, November 2018

Kevin Harris is the fourth director of QPCC. He has been in place since May 2017. He works part time together with a part time community officer.

Kevin has read and 'thoroughly enjoyed' Flatpack Democracy though he found it a bit 'scatty'. What he really liked was the narrative.

The Technical Bit

Queens Park is the first Parish or Community Council to be set up in London following the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007

'The Queen's Park Community Council was established on 25 June 2012. This decision was the culmination of the year long Westminster Community Governance Review.

'Under section 86 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, the City Council brings into effect the Review recommendations by making a Reorganisation of Community Governance Order.' Queen's Park Community Council | Westminster City Council https://is.gd/eLh85f

WCC 'ran a four-month community governance review, following a petition by Queen's Park residents that contained 2,181 signatures, seeking a community council for the area. The review received 408 responses, 87% in favour of a new council.' Westminster votes yes to parish council referendum | Public Leaders Network | The Guardian https://is.gd/dGGaN0

'A total of 1,100 Queen's Park residents voted in support of a parish council, while 508 voted against it, in a referendum held by Westminster Council.

About 20% of the 8,000 residents eligible to vote took part.' Queen's Park parish council gets go-ahead - BBC News https://is.gd/umB2P2

This was a direct result of about 10 years of high quality community development work by the Paddington Development Trust.

It is challenging to evolve from a community group to a formal council. In this case, some of the challenges were experienced as seismic.

Since inception QPCC has had 3 directors. Over the years there has been lingering turmoil, some personality clashes and stormy relationships with individual councillors. While things have clearly settled down now, we were told that even four years on, two councillors walked out of a council meeting because a vote didn't go their way.

About the QPCC area

The QPCC area has about 14,500 residents with an electorate of 8216. Queen's Park is within the 10-20 per cent most deprived in the UK for the average overall rank on the Index of Deprivation and yet lies within Westminster, the wealthiest borough in England. Nonetheless, Kevin was at pains to point out that Westminster council has been very supportive throughout. He said that he thought one of the reasons was they took pride in hosting London's first parish. He said the council also received good support from the 3 ward councillors

The last election was on 3 May 2018. The QPCC area is divided into 4 zones each with 3 councillors. There were thirteen nominations from residents seeking election. In 3 of the areas it meant the candidates were returned unopposed. All potential candidates were standing as independents. That there only needed to be an election in one of the areas reinforced the fact that can be hard to find people to stand for office at the most local level. Councillors are unpaid but can claim limited expenses.

In order to find candidates, QPCC ran open community events to raise awareness of the election, but it took a lot of hard work and explaining what a councillor was and did. As Kevin pointed out it is very hard to demonstrate the value and purpose of a community council to people who face many challenges in their day-to-day lives.

There is still much to be done to raise awareness of the community council among residents, and to distinguish it from both the principal authority (Westminster City Council) and, for many residents, from their housing association.

Every household receives hand-delivered a copy of the local newsletter – the Queen's Park Voice – but for many this seems not sufficient for them to appreciate what the community council does.. This problem is accentuated by a widespread mistrust of politicians and the problem of conflating the actions of Westminster Council

with QPCC. Although sited on the far edge of England's richest borough Kevin felt that people here feel marginalised from the success of London as a whole.

In order for the QPCC to have more effect Kevin had several thoughts – some general some specific.

Despite having a relatively small budget and no special expertise, the QPCC has 'convening power' – in other words by their very existence they can get people and organisations to come together to address issues and make things happen. The council is in effect acting as a trusted enabler, a catalyst for helping to bring about change. Kevin feels that this power could be used more often in Queens Park to address big issues like housing. He thinks this is the one single issue that most affects many people's quality of life.

Upgrade their website - QPCC recognise the importance of an informative and inviting website and theirs is receiving a long-overdue overhaul!

Move to more accessible offices – it is important for them to be visible from the street and accessible so that residents are encouraged to drop in, for coffee and a chat or whatever. The conversations that might ensue could be very time-consuming but in many cases worth every minute in the long term.

Get an admin support worker -with plans underway to engage a part-time admin support worker from January 2019

Break down barriers to the everyday practice of democracy itself. For example making the council meetings less formal where possible, so that residents feel like going along and when they do they can engage easily with the process and get something positive from it, .

Standing orders should not be allowed to get in the way of open debate or hinder the residents' access to the council.

Kevin feels that they need to do more work on volunteer development by promoting the idea of voluntary civic action. It may seem obvious but democracy at this level simply cannot function without the engagement local people.

It takes really hard work by committed people, a suitable demographic and topography, , and a supportive principal authority, to bring about the change that is envisaged. QPCC may not yet

have had the impact some would have hoped for, but the direction is becoming clearer and the aspiration more realisable.

Hints and tips for others following the independence/parishisation route

The best councillors are busy people, you have to accept and make allowances for that.

Personal relationships – with residents, councillors, other agencies, businesses, everyone - are fundamental.

Acknowledge and be prepared to address issues of empowerment. You can be talking to people who have little experience of personal or collective empowerment – in their country of origin, in their workplace, in their family, school or religion. From such a perspective, empowerment takes a bit of getting used to.

The council should have a premises that is visible and accessible

Build a thriving volunteer network

Kevin firmly believes that Party Politics as currently practised has absolutely no place in local government at this level

Three main things QPCC has achieved:

Just surviving: the council has survived its tempestuous first few years and is getting stronger

Running successful large-scale local annual events
We are just beginning to achieve the third, please be patient(!)... it
will be a platform of resident-facing administration comprising
settled, committed staff; appropriate office space; motivated and
active councillors; a new website; and an expanded stable of
volunteers who can be mobilised at times of need.

Quotes from Kevin

"In community politics don't wait for the ideal solution –accept what is workable and good enough... then keep improving it"

'In the early years of QPCC it was not so much a problem of 'consultation fatigue' as 'confrontation fatigue''

Footnote – Kevin no longer works for QPCC