

OUR COMMUNITY MATTERS

Little Tinkleton and the Weavers

Down in Little Tinkleton, the parish find themselves at the coal face of our beleaguered local democracy - collared in the post office, harangued at the bus stop and besieged during a well-earned tippie in the Speckled Wig. And it just never stops. Phone pinging at all hours with the latest stinging posts on the village Facebook site and the councillor's WhatsApp group incessantly trumpeting the latest village disaster (or overflowing litter bin at the skatepark). And, through this never-ending democratic whirl, the redoubtable councillors go about their weary duty – sorting things out and keeping the community happy. It's as it has always been, and what, you may ask, is wrong with that? Well, absolutely nothing: nothing wrong with dealing with complaints promptly and effectively. But. Complaints often personal, and a Council deals with the needs of all residents. Chopping down a tree because it shades part of Mr Gavel's veggie patch, might then alienate 60 members of the local wildlife group. You see, things are not always straightforward in Little Tinkleton. And then, when the Clerk suggests the need for a strategic plan, eyes roll, yawns are stifled, and internet browsers mosey over to the latest sports scores. Not easy this parish clerking malarkey.

But let's just stop and think about that for a moment. Councillors pride themselves on resolving grumbles, right? So, why not find out what the locals are really bothered about? Not just the noisy few bellowing their views across social media or firing off poisonous emails to our heroic clerk, but everyone including the silent majority. Then, if there are things that a whole bunch of people are chaffed-off with, councillors can get stuck into resolving the things that most people want to see sorted out. That's the logic, and Clerks, don't tell the councillors, but it's the start of your strategy.

So far, we have talked about the trials and tribulations of life in Little Tinkleton; but how does this work in real life? Somewhere like, say, Haydon Wick near Swindon? Glad you asked...

Haydon Wick is a very progressive council with some very well motivated councillors – but were they really in-tune with the views of the whole community? The Clerk asked this question and some eyes probably rolled. But the leader of the Council backed the idea and the council agreed to appoint someone to help them with the process. Yes, that was me

It's important to understand that you can't just impose a strategy, it's got to be a fully inclusive and consensual thing. No matter how 'in tune' you think you are, you need to know what others think too. Your world view and your lived experiences are different from everyone else's, and unless you let others into the room, you hear only one voice – your own. So, let's talk about engagement.

At Haydon Wick the first step was to gauge the views of the councillors – it was critical to have them on-board. After all, they could make or break the whole process. A short member and officer survey was undertaken, and the results revealed areas of clear agreement as well as some areas of disagreement. Not unexpected, but there was just enough common ground to provide a foundation. The results were reported back to the Council, reinforcing areas of consensus, and allowing agreement to be reached on the next steps. What had emerged was a commitment to give residents far more say about the Council's direction – a genuine desire to put local people in the driving seat. Community leadership is often a slogan and very rarely a reality. So, finding a practical way to empower the community became the main aim of the project and is a process called 'Our Community Matters.'

It was agreed to focus on the things that the Council could influence the most – its own services and responsibilities primarily, but also social issues that the Council might address working with partners and others. A household survey was developed. This is harder than it looks. Your plan is as good as the information on which it is built, so get this bit right.

Here are some useful tips.

- **Tell People**

Makes sure people know about the survey. Yes, I know, but people can only take part if they know about it, so we must ask them. Leaflets, posters, social media and traditional print media, parish mag, emails – ‘scattergun’ is the word. Throw everything at it and get a buzz going.

- **Reach Out**

Follow up your media campaign with a household leaflet to every property and business in your patch. This should include a personal invitation to take part from the mayor or chair. It should also include a call to action to encourage people to be part of something exciting. Including a prize draw can be successful but check the rules carefully before you dive-in. Include clear links to the online survey – a QR code and web address. Make sure people know how to get hold of a paper or multi-lingual copy and where they can be collected or dropped off. Make sure you include cut off dates and provide enough time to get the survey responses back – four to six weeks is plenty.

- **Use simple words**

Keep the survey language very simple, refer to things in terms people will understand. Test out the survey with a range of people before you launch it on the world – they will find things you have missed.

- **Get personal**

The survey needs to gather some basic demographic information – respondent age range, gender, postcode, how long they have lived in the village. The essentials only. Correlating demographic data with survey responses can give much deeper insight. Include an option to provide an email contact so you can keep in touch – along with your GDPR policy statement, of course.

- **Look Both Ways**

Make sure you have a way of validating responses. I mean here, ask maybe two questions that might elicit different responses on the same subject. For example, ask how important something is to someone – say the allotments, and then ask, perhaps, how much they feel the allotments need improving. A respondent might think the allotments are very important, but that they are just fine as they are: bonus! You can use this data to cross-correlate an overall priority ranking – if something is very important to local people and they also feel it needs improvement – it ranks high on the ‘to do’ list.

- **Consistency**

Make sure questions provide comparable results, if every question you include has a

different scoring scale or ranking system then you will have no idea of the relative value of anything. So, if you are asking how people rate your services give them a simple rating scale and keep it consistent. Believe me, you will be glad that you thought about this. Try and keep the survey brief, it is just too tempting to chuck in the kitchen sink, but please spare a thought for the poor devils completing the thing. It's not about what you would like to know, it's about what you really, really need to know. Oh yes, and always avoid double barrelled questions such as 'please rate the allotments and the village green.' Get as many respondents to complete the online version of the survey as possible. This makes analysis way simpler. But, you must provide paper alternatives, with a post out and collection point service for those who don't have access to tech. Just remember, you will have to manually enter all the data from the paper copies – leave plenty of time for that as it can be excruciating. There are lots more secrets but too little space here, you can email me if you want to know any more.

The very wonderful clerk at Haydon Wick was in this very position, wanting to get a clear strategic focus for the Council over the next three years to steer a course through choppy waters. So, the survey was launched, and things started to happen. Within 6 weeks the results were in, and the Council waited with bated breath to see what the community had said. The survey results were published, and clear priorities were obvious: obvious, but not simple. For example, locals were upset about litter in the village, but what should the Council do about this? What actions would best address the concerns? Where would money be best spent? This is where the next step in the process was crucial.

A community conference was convened (Our Community Matters) to discuss the priorities and agree actions. Again, residents were ushered into the driver's seat. Four themed discussion groups looked at the priorities and the ideas submitted by respondents. Around 100 ideas were examined, each written on an 'idea card.' Each idea card was placed on a priority sheet, and each given a low, medium, or high action ranking. By the end of the session, the community had agreed the actions they felt would best address the priorities identified by the survey. But our superstars at Haydon Wick did not stop there, oh no indeed.

The four groups then flipped over their priority sheets and placed the top priorities onto a scoring grid. Each priority action was given a score according to three parameters - cost, time, and ease of implementation. By totting up the three numbers a final score was achieved indicating those actions most likely to be delivered, in the shortest possible time at least cost. And, as pens were put down and the last few chocolates snaffled away, the community could reflect proudly on its own community action plan - priorities agreed by everyone and actions approved at the conference. My role included writing up the outcome and presenting a very simple community action plan to the Council, which was adopted on the nod.

Work turned to implementation, and, in the spirit of the process, the community came together as co-producers of their own wellbeing, by stepping up to help deliver the agreed actions. Some of the juiciest low hanging fruit was picked first and celebrated as evidence that the delivery plan was rumbling into action. Volunteers came forward, discussions were kick started with partners and budgets for future years were recast to reflect the new priorities, and so the process began to deliver on the priorities with projects, campaigns and actions agreed by parish residents.

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Of course, this is a simple summary of an amazing process. There is much more to tell. Community engagement is sometimes a much derided Aunt Sally (thought of as 'the fluffy stuff'), but if parish and town councils are to reclaim democratic legitimacy and move away from the Vicar of Dibley and stereotypes highlighted by Jackie Weaver the 'Our Community Matters' approach is a jolly good place to start. My hat is raised loftily to the good burghers of Haydon Wick for walking the talk.

The 'Our Community Matters' parish action planning approach has been developed by the Local Government Resource Centre and is available for use anywhere in the UK. The methodology is tried and tested, simple, and highly cost effective. If you would like to follow in the groundbreaking footsteps of Haydon Wick Parish Council, please contact me

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The Local Government Resource Centre (Employee-Owned Trust)

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