

Waggott, Margaret

From: Dianne Rickaby <dianne@billinghamtowncouncil.co.uk>
Sent: 30 October 2015 16:39
To: Bond, David; Waggott, Margaret
Cc: Colin Pollard; Gina McCall; Atkinson, Helen (Councillor); O'Donnell, Jean; michelle bendelow; Stoker, Mick; Olive Milner; Paul Smith; Peter Clark; Ray McCall; swdparry@hotmail.co.uk
Subject: Billingham Town Council's Governance Review Submission - Private & confidential
Attachments: Governance review submission October 2015 - BTC final submission.pdf

Dear David /Margaret

Please find attached Billingham Town Council's submission for the Governance Review. I will be delivering a hard copy to the council offices today (30th October) ahead of the deadline of 31st October 2015.

If you have any questions regarding the report please feel free to give me a call.

Kind regards,

Dianne

Dianne Rickaby
Executive Officer/ Responsible Finance Officer
to Billingham Town Council
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We have moved!. Billingham Town Council is now located in Billingham Library & Customer Service Centre, Billingham Town Centre, Billingham, Cleveland, TS23 2LN.



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BILLINGHAM TOWN COUNCIL

Governance Review

On Behalf of Billingham Town Council

10/29/2015

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Billingham Town Council Mission Statement

“To serve the people of Billingham enhancing services and putting the pride back into our community”



INTRODUCTION

Historic Billingham

Billingham was founded circa 650 AD by a group of Saxons known as 'Billa's' people. This is where the name Billingham is thought to have originated from. Anglo-Saxons conquered most of England but not Scotland, Wales or Cornwall and they usually settled close to rivers or the sea as they were easily accessible by boat.



Inception of Billingham Town Council (BTC)

After an initial meeting in September 2002 a steering committee was formed on a strictly non-party political basis. Over the next 7-8 months there was extensive consultation with a wide range of Billingham community groups and a petition of over 4,000 signatures (about 16% of the electorate) was handed in to SBC in May 2003. Also all households were informed via a leaflet putting the case for a town council. The end result was a referendum later in 2003 which showed a majority of more than 2 to 1 in favour, leading eventually to first elections in 2007.

"Local councils provide services to meet local needs and improve community wellbeing."

Town and parish councils are the first level of local government. They provide communities with a democratic voice and a structure for taking community action.

More than a third of people in England currently have a town or parish council, and the government is making it easier to set one up. (Gov.uk, 2015)

The last Labour Government was committed to the creation of Parish councils in its community cohesion agenda as is the new Government through Localism Act.

About Billingham

Billingham is located in the northern area of the unitary council of Stockton Borough and has a population of around 35,000 with 18,000 households. The town is represented by 15 Town

Councillors and 11 Borough Councillors and is divided into 5 wards; North, Central, East, West and South.

The town supports a vast industrial area of which play key roles in supporting community initiatives and bringing employment and economic growth to the area.

About Billingham Town Council (BTC)

Councillors

Our councillors are all elected members (recently in 2015) but the majority have been part of the council since inception (2007). Our members work voluntarily with no remuneration or expenses paid.

Staff

There is currently a team of 6 staff and 1 volunteer. (1 vacancy)

Our Executive Officer is Qualified in Certificate in Local Council Administration and is currently on year two of a five year degree course in Community Governance run through Society of Local Council Clerks and Cheltenham & Gloucester University. Our EO brings in a wealth of knowledge, experience and expertise in local council management and administration. Her visions around developing community engagement and cohesion is inspiring and her ability to attract external funding for community projects is proof that we have a strong staff leadership supported by a committed and dedicated team.

The extended team includes;

Office administration - covered by 1 full time member of staff (37 hours)

Events/PR/Youth Council Coordinator – post currently vacant (37 hours)

Community Development Coordinator (based in John Whitehead Park) – 20 hours per week

Facilities Coordinator (based in John Whitehead Park) – 18 hours per week

Cafe Assistants (cafe in the park) – 2 paid staff 30 hours & 20 hours and 1 volunteer

Precept – financial accountability

Budgets of comparable councils

There are currently 31 town councils in England representing populations of between 30,000 and 40,000. Billingham falls almost exactly in the centre with just over 35,000. In the current financial year the average precept of those 31 comes in at rather more than £750,000. Compared with Billingham's £215,000, which includes a government grant of around £24,000. Billingham's charge to Band D properties amounts to £22 per annum, compared with an average of the other 31 of just under £69.

These other councils are spread right around the country, and a striking comparison in the North East is the town of Blyth. Here is a council which started out 2 years later than Billingham with an initial precept of only £40,000. It now has a precept of over £1,000,000

and a Band D charge of £117 per annum. In terms of what we deliver from our comparatively modest income we provide value for money.

BTC Precept impact on residents

Billingham Town Council's precept was set relatively low from inception in 2007. As a newly formed council it wasn't really envisaged at this time how quickly the council would grow. With an officer in place who came from a background of working in local government and town councils we were able to identify the councils aims and vision from the onset and understood that the precept would need to meet with the services delivered.

Precept in 2007 was set at £ 80,000

Precept 2015 is £ 215,257 less LCTS grant of £ 23,509 = £ 191,748

Actual financial impact for residents of Billingham for council tax is identified in the table below:

Precept 2015/16	
Cost per year (in pounds £)	Cost per week (in pence)
Band A 14.67 ✓	0.28
Band B 17.11	0.33
Band C 19.56 ✓	0.38
Band D 22.00 ✓	0.42
Band E 24.44	0.47

The petition group is consistent with its approach about the precept increase when relating it to % increases. Although when working out percentage increases this is not a true reflection of how it hits the pocket of residents. EG 20% of nothing is nothing! We prefer to show our residents that the true financial impact is indeed pence per week.

Accountability

As all councils we at BTC have very tight governance and accountability and must adhere through audit processes with guidance and structure from the Audit Commission and Governance & Accountability. As stated in the "Governance & Accountability for Local Councils Practitioners Guide 2014 (Nalc, 2014))

Audit

Good governance, accountability and transparency are essential to local councils and a cornerstone of the government's approach to improving public services. Those who are responsible for the conduct of public business and for spending public money are accountable for ensuring that public business is conducted in accordance with the law and applicable proper practices. They must also ensure that public money is safeguarded, properly accounted for and used economically, efficiently and effectively. In discharging this

accountability, public bodies and those responsible for their management are required to make proper arrangements for the governance of their affairs and the stewardship of the resources in their care. They are required to report on these arrangements in their published Annual Governance Statement. As a safeguard to the proper discharge of this accountability, external auditors in the public sector give an independent opinion on public bodies' financial statements. They may also review, and report on, aspects of public bodies' arrangements to ensure the proper conduct of their financial affairs, and those to manage their performance and use of resources.

Billingham Town Council is responsible to its residents and Central Government for the ways it conducts its financial affairs. BTC complies with all Government legislation around financial risk management and utilising public money effectively.

BTC has a comprehensive risk management strategy incorporating operational financial procedures within its Financial Regulations. Regular internal controls are in place with internal audits carried out currently on annual basis by an independent auditor.

There is a Finance Policy & Resources Committee who review all financial aspects, processes and legislation on a monthly basis. At this meeting a full Income & expenditure , balance sheets, invoices for payment and salaries are presented by the RFO (Responsible Financial Officer) as laid out in Local Government Act 1972 Section 151 (legislation.gov.uk, n.d.) as a statutory appointment. All documents are recommended to full council if committee are satisfied and the Chairman then signs the accounts.

Once the accounts are signed and approved they are then posted onto the council's website for public inspection. (Schedule of accounts)

Cheques

As per councils Financial Regulations all cheques are signed by two members of the Finance Committee and this includes the Chairman of the committee, countersigned by the RFO.

Salaries

All staff salaries are paid via a Bacs payment procedure carried out by the appointed RFO (Executive Officer). All salary payments are approved by full council and amounts as stated in employee's contract of employment. The Chairman of the council signs the salary payments each month.

Annual Audit & public inspection of accounts

As governed through The Accounts and Audit (England) Regulations 2011 (legislation.gov.uk, n.d.), BTC's annual return is produced by the RFO and is presented to the council along with supporting documents and reports. Once the annual return is approved it is open for inspection to the public before submitting to the approved auditors (BDP LLP). Information for residents to inspect the accounts is displayed in all public places and on council notice boards and website.

On receipt of the accounts signed and approved by the external auditors (before 30 September) then they are made available to the public for further inspection. BTC fully complies with this legislation and provides a transparent approach.

Roles and responsibilities

Council as a body

The council holds 10 meetings a year (recess in August and December), it has several committees that look at the services and work of the council on a monthly basis these being;

Services & Amenities Committee

Finance, Policy & Resources Committee

Staffing Committee (meets when required)

As the council has a comprehensive events strategy there is also an events working group that feeds into both Services & Amenities Committee and Finance Committee.

At the Annual General Meeting held in May of each year the council appoint representatives to attend external groups to give updates of the council business/services and indeed to engage with the community and partner groups. Engagement with voluntary/community/residents groups is paramount for the council to ensure that it represents the people of Billingham effectively. Members and staff who attend the meetings bring back to full council a detailed record of discussions of the meetings they have attended, identifying areas the council can support the groups.

Some of the group members and staff attend on regular basis are;

- Northern Locality Forum
- Billingham Environmental Link Programme (BELP)
- Billingham Legacy Foundation
- Billingham Voice
- Residents Associations: Low Grange, Billingham North, Cowpen Bewley.
- Sport in the Park Steering Committee
- Billingham New Life Resource Centre (integral partnership)

Other groups the council engages with and supports are;

- Billingham silhouettes Jazz band (world champions)
- Billingham bowls club - we have given extensive support to this group over the years.
- St Cuthbert's community group – we have assisted in attracting a large amount of funding to enable the group to renovate their building so that they are able to extend their reach to diverse groups (DDA compliant etc).
- Billingham Juniors football group
- Billingham Synthonia Juniors Football Club
- Billingham Folklore
- Billingham Carnival & Garden show

- JWP youth ambassador group (set up with BTC guidance).

This list is an indicator of who the council support and engage with but have also supported many other groups financially through donation/sponsorship. The list is not exhaustive.

The council as a body represents the town as a whole when making decisions and fully complies with all legal powers/legislation, adhering to code of conduct, standing orders, employment law (as employers), health & safety, financial regulations, data protection. The council can support this by implementing and facilitating a comprehensive council policy strategy, all of which are posted on the council's website for residents to view.

Councillors

Their functions consist of;

- Representing the interests of the town, delivering services to meet local needs.
- Encouraging community participation in the democratic process

Working as a team whilst representing the council, adhering to government law that no one councillor can make decisions on behalf of the council, must be majority decision.

Ensuring that as an individual and representing the town that code of conduct is followed at all times.

Be an effective employer respecting the staff team at all times and giving guidance and support when needed.

Respect data protection and confidentiality.

Sustainability accountability and transparency

Sustainability

BTC has proven over the past 8 years that it can sustain growth through having a robust infrastructure in place. Having a cohesive and collaborative council, dedicated and experienced staff and an ever growing vision to give residents a happier and safer town to live in. The council has nurtured and developed fundamental partnerships not only with the community sector but with businesses and investors.

Through the council services/projects and events there has been over £ 100,000 of external funding brought in as investment by BTC for community projects, and very recently an additional £ 35,000 has been awarded to develop new projects in 2016, with more to come!

BTC has a passion for supporting the youth of Billingham

In 2013 our Youth Council was formed which presently has 8 very dedicated and enthusiastic youngsters, who have also been successful in attracting £ 27,600 from Heritage lottery (young roots) to deliver a restoration project at one of Billingham's former

beauty/heritage locations, Harrington's pond. The youngsters identified this as a project that could encourage the community to be involved with and to help look after in the future. This is sustainability at its best, these youngsters are the future of Billingham, they are the way forward they are the future anchor of our community.

Accountability

The council are accountable to every single person in Billingham, and encourage public participation through many mechanisms;

- At council meetings - dedicated time slots for residents to ask questions, give updates, and request for future agenda items.
- Through our social media and website, we engage with residents through surveys and feedback.
- We maintain high levels of communication and engagement with our residents as this is a requirement of our continued Quality Council Status Award. Recently the accolade of "Council of the Week" recognised BTC for the work it does for the community of Billingham. This is recognition from the overarching governing body for local councils – NALC (National Association of Local Councils)
- The council has an open door policy and now that the office is situated centrally in Billingham Library & Customer Service Centre we are very much a first port of call for residents, assisting with queries and services.
- Display notices, information and news on all public notice boards and in community buildings throughout the town.
- Robust financial and procedural mechanisms in place which are reviewed regularly.
- Comprehensive external audit process (outlined earlier).

Transparency

BTC ensures that it adheres to all legislation around transparency and in late 2014 adopted the changes made in Government Policy with regards to filming and recording of meetings.

Extract from the council's adopted policy states "The council is committed to being open and transparent in the way it conducts its public meetings. The Council acknowledges that it is required by legislation to allow any member of the public to take photographs; film and audio record the proceedings and report on all public meetings. The Council acknowledges that no prior permission is required but asks that any person wishing to film or audio record a public meeting let Council staff know in order that all necessary arrangements can be made for the public meeting. The Council will provide "reasonable facilities" to facilitate reporting. The Council will provide a space to view and hear the meetings, seats and a table. This will not be part of the seating arrangements for the Council itself or an area required by Council staff or invited guests."

The council endeavours to publicise as much information it possibly can in relation to its services and finances. We are the people's council with their interests at heart and welcome public input at all times, however we will continue to learn their needs and grow.

Governance Review

The Governance review of Billingham Town Council has been called as a result of a petition from 7.5% of the electorate to abolish the town council. Although the council reaches out to residents there are the minority we feel that we may not be able to reach. Billingham hasn't really had its own voice since 1967 when the Urban District Council disbanded. But 40 years later they regained their voice through hard work and determination and a vote to form the Town Council was successful.

We appreciate that not everyone will like various facets of how council makes its decisions as it may not always suit individual preferences; however we encourage residents who feel very strongly on how it should operate, to join us, either as an elected councillor, member of staff or indeed a volunteer.

"Whether the change would reflect the identities and interests of the community in the area"

Yes we believe it would have a fundamental affect on changing the town's identities and interests for the following reasons;

- There will be no democratic voice through an elected body with sustainability and who can work on behalf of the community- taking action when required.
- Unbiased personal views the council represent the community as a whole body not individuals therefore omitting any personal agendas and gain.
- Reduction of grass roots interaction.
- Less support for residents from a body with good governance, transparency and accountability. – *BTC has this structure in place*
- First port of call- who would be available to do this? Who would have the resource to signpost to principal authority and other service providers? *BTC support many residents on a daily basis with an array of diverse queries and if staff/councillors of BTC are unable to resolve they will then direct residents to someone who may be able to do so.*
- Who would raise the precept? BTC are accountable to residents and have always shown best value practices whilst utilising public money.
- External funding – BTC has a proven track record of attracting inward investment into the town for community projects. We do not solely rely on precept demand the council endeavour to compliment this by working on funding applications to hopefully one day match fund the precept.
- Statutory consultee – BTC is the statutory body to be consulted with on matters relating to Billingham.

"Would the change be effective and convenient?"

BTC's primary concern would be how the change would affect the town and its residents. Of course it would not be convenient for the council to be abolished or changed dramatically but the concern is with the community. It would not be effective if the council was abolished, however if there was an identification for change within the council structure and this was for the positive effect to the residents then this would be received. Outlined below are the reasons the council feel it would not be effective and convenient:

- Loss of Community voice
- Reduced community cohesion
- No statutory organisation to raise precept and funding for investment in the town
- Delivery of grass roots services would stop, with Government cuts principal authorities would not be able to deliver the non statutory services and functions the Town Council delivers.
- Diminished ownership in town's facilities and services by residents- Investment in people is investment in better lifestyles and well being.
- No elected body – no voluntary residents to represent the people
- No accountability/transparency – no other organisation in Billingham has the robust accountability the Town Council has in place.
- Loss of expertise and success in attracting investment into the town.
- Job loses – adding to the burden on society and the economy.

It may be considered "convenient" for the small percentage of residents who would like to see BTC abolished; however we do not believe this would be in the whole town's best interest.

Why would this group want to see their voice lost, opportunity for public participation – gone? Why do they not want to engage? Help to make changes? Be proactive not reactive?

"The impact on community cohesion"

An extract from our Executive Officer's recent assignment in Community Governance Course

*"Good governance involving local people has many benefits, helping residents develop their own vision for an area, and giving them a sense of ownership of their neighbourhood's future. It will help steer a community towards the desired outcome of a successful, **cohesive and sustainable future**" (future communities, 2009)*

Community cohesion is paramount to enable people to put forward their views it also promotes an array of lifestyle positives. It has been BTC's aim and vision to promote community cohesion through its projects services and events. We have been successful with this. Below are examples of how this has been achieved, loss of these services would contribute towards social exclusion and destabilising community participation.

In appendix 1 you will see a list of the council's achievements since inception but the most fundamental community engagement and participation has been over the past 3 years. Of course the early years saw the Council build up its structure to enable the next phase to be implemented with success. We did deliver our first ever community event in 2008 – Traditional Christmas event which is part of who we are now.

In 2013 BTC was approached by SBC to form a partnership in service delivery and to take a more managerial role on their behalf within John Whitehead Park. This came after BTC successfully ran a 6 week summer project based/delivered from the café at JWP in 2012; in addition to the well establish working partnership between the two authorities.

BTC had a successful funding bid to Landscape (Bradbury Park) funding for the renovations to the cafe in the park and to the disused building behind the cafe into a community hub. £30,000 external funding was invested along with officer time and support by BTC.

Before renovations



After renovations



The hub and cafe provide a safe and fun environment for residents it's the foundations of our focus to encourage community engagement through sport, health & wellbeing, learning, training, social inclusion and cross age group/gender participation.

BTC supported the youth group who lobbied for the skate park and in 2013 this was installed in JWP.



As part of the community cohesion we encourage youngsters to participate in cross age group activities promoting family engagement.

Health & Well being – promoting better lifestyles through community participation and cohesive approaches through services.

BTC have worked on tackling worklessness in Billingham and employed an outreach officer through the Governments Community Fund back in 2009/10. This project identified the level of support that many of our residents needed, particularly in the more deprived areas of the town; Billingham Central and Billingham East both of which rank within the top **600** for health deprivation in the UK. Being unemployed and on a low income is a catalyst to many of the social/health problems that we can face in our lives.

Billingham Town Council from inception has identified the need to help tackle Health & wellbeing challenges within our community working with partner groups in various capacities and specified projects.

In 2014 working in partnership with ward councillor Ann McCoy (Central ward) through submitting a proposal to SBC we were awarded £ 5,000 to help promote health & wellbeing through our services in John Whitehead Park.

Some of the measurables identified within this programme is to reduce health issues such as obesity, self harming, poverty, alcoholism and engaging with young women to participate in sport.

Within our services and projects in John Whitehead Park working with partner groups such as SBC Youth services, CFYA, Youth for Christ, New Life Resource Centre and recently introducing our American gap year students we are now delivering on all of these areas. The cafe provides low cost healthy meals for low income families, and promotes through cookery classes social and life skills. There is a comprehensive sporting strategy and happy to say that our aim to encourage young women into sport is now being delivered. This is a breakthrough in community engagement and participation in our town.

Phase three is to increase community ownership/engagement and we plan to do this by developing the vacant bungalow in JWP into another community space by working with a community group called "Together" who petitioned to Stockton Borough Council for space to create a Community garden. BTC have been successful in securing funding for this project and working closely with the representatives of the "Together" group to progress with the garden project. It is envisaged that this will commence in Spring 2016.

The above gives you a brief overview of the services in JWP. The council also delivers 4 major events each year; Easter event (picture on first page), Summer event, Halloween event and Traditional Christmas event (appendix 2) (this is delivered in Billingham Town Centre working with St Modwen's owners). This promotes community engagement, social inclusion and enhances partnership working

"The size, population and boundaries of the Town Council"

Billingham is ranked in the top 30 largest out of 10,000 Town & Parish councils in UK. As a council we are recognised as part of the larger council association. The comparable

precepts outlined earlier in the report gives an indicator of the level BTC should be at financially but we have tried to keep it as minimal as possible. The size of the town does not impede whatsoever in what the Town Council can deliver. The town is supported by the correct proportion of elected members and an experienced and dedicated staff team.

If the boundaries were under consideration for change i.e. if the wards were all separated or indeed if there was an indication that perhaps one ward is to move away from BTC boundary then we would ask that the following be considered:

- There would an increased cost for administration for numerous wards (duplication of staff)
- Multiple election costs for one town
- Increased workloads on electoral staff and democratic support at Stockton Borough Council
- More competition for external funding for projects
- Less opportunity for devolved services as the infrastructure would be weakened. Presently it is a very robust Town Council infrastructure.
- Diminished identity as a town- fragmented

Extract from DCLG (Department for Communities and Local Government)

117 While the Government expects to see a trend in the creation, rather than the abolition, of parishes, there are circumstances where the principal council may conclude that the provision of effective and convenient local government and/or the reflection of community identity and interests may be best met, for example, by the abolition of a number of small parishes and the creation of a larger parish covering the same area.

119 The abolition of parishes should not be undertaken unless clearly justified. Any decision a principal council may make on whether to abolish a parish should not be taken lightly

121 Where a community governance review is considering abolishing a parish council we would expect the review to consider what arrangements will be in place to engage with the communities in those areas once the parish is abolished.

Conclusion

As stated above we are a focused, strategic, community minded, forward thinking Town Council, with a robust established infrastructure in place. Our dedicated councillors and staff have worked avidly to ensure best value practices have been and continue to be implemented in all of our services/ projects and events.

BTC is confident that it can attract more investment/funding and to continue to make a difference for the people of Billingham.

For more information about BTC please visit our website: www.billinghamtowncouncil.co.uk