

Article for The Villager Magazine

The Clerk of the Parish Council was asked to research information on advantages and disadvantages of Town Status at the last Full Council meeting on Monday 5 March 2012. The Clerk has produced a report that has indicated that in the key areas of responsibility both a Town and Parish have the same powers and can provide the same services. Being a Town does not give any more opportunities for additional funding or appear to give any additional status to the community in the eyes of other bodies. The only difference appears to be that of a Town is known as a Town Council instead of a Parish Council with a Town Clerk and has a Mayor and Deputy Mayor instead of Chair and Vice Chair. There are also cost implications in becoming a Town – at the very least there would need to be change of signage and other areas of communication.

A recent press release by the Chair of Bayston Hill Parish Council stated that the Parish Council will make a decision at the Annual Council Meeting on Monday 14 May 2012 whether to remain a Village or become a Town. The press release also stated that the Chair would be proposing that Bayston Hill remained as a Village.

The full report prepared by the Clerk is available on the Parish Council website or a hard copy can be obtained from the Parish Office.

Report on Town Status

In my last report I explained about the Pomp and Ceremony involved assuming the status of Town and the cost involved. Also, even if a Town Council does not pomp and ceremony, there were other costs involved associated with re-branding, re-signage costs and the role of and functions of the Mayor and Deputy Mayor.

I have undertaken some further research based on comments by Councillors on my first report as follows:

NALC/The Electoral Commission – All about Parish and Town Councils states:

What's the difference between a parish council and a town council? *Not a great deal. They both have the same powers and can provide the same services. The only difference is that a town council has decided that it should be known as a town council instead of a parish council, and has a mayor.*

I sent out a questionnaire to some Local Town Councils:

- a) To what extent do you feel your Town Council influences at : Local, County and National Level?
- b) Are you happy with the level of influences at – Local, County and National Level?
- c) How does your power of influence effect: The way you deliver your services? The way others deliver their services?
- d) What do you consider are the key areas of influence for your Town Council?
- e) To what extent do you engage with your neighbouring Parish Councils in terms of: Your service delivery? The general running of the Town Council? Collaborative approaches to outside consultation (eg Place Plan)?
- f) To what extent has your role as Town Clerk changed over the last few years? Has it changed for the better or worse?
- g) How do you think the Town Council's role might change in light of localism and the Big Society?
- h) Are you affected by cuts in Local Government Funding, if so how?
- i) What do you perceive as being the top 3 turning issues that are sitting on your desk at the moment?
- j) Is the Town Council invited to civic functions etc, if so, what, who goes and how many per annum?
- k) How does the Town Council's Civic role impact on: The Mayor, Other Councillors, Staff.

Their replies depended on the size of their town council, but all came back with the same answer that there is no difference in benefits or funding between a Parish and Town Council.

I contacted Shropshire Council Area Director, Clive Wright, and this was his reply:

- 1) I don't think there is any particular advantage in being a town or a parish in either in terms of greater influence or funding, except to say that by extent of population there are potentially more voices and economies of scale. There may be equally effective ways of achieving this as I suggest below.
- 2) Influence is much more likely to be greater where a parish or town is performing well or where there is notable innovation. Focusing on purpose, outcomes and achievement will help. Sometimes an outstanding individual or leader can also corral influence and, or, resources.
- 3) Given the above, parishes are much more likely to gain in influence when they collaborate or cluster with other neighbouring parishes or towns. Similarly there could be gains in economies of scale. This has the advantage of maintaining identity.

In summary, personally, I don't think there is any advantage in Bayston Hill pushing to be a town. Indeed this could take up a lot of effort and resource with little or no benefit.

Without wishing to imply that this is not already the case, my advice would be to think more about how you could increase influence by being relevant to all of the local electorate, attracting inspired and dynamic leaders, collaborating with others and producing innovative approaches that deliver the right outcomes. To be clear, I mean this to apply to all parishes everywhere, not specifically Bayston Hill. Having said that it would be fantastic to see Bayston Hill leading the way in Shropshire and this could be an opportunity for you to consider.

Clive Wright had also copied in Gwilym Butler, Michael Hyatt, George Candler, Chris Edwards and Helen Ball into his e-mail to me and asked them to comment. They all responded that they felt he had covered all aspects of the question of the difference between a Parish and a Town. None whatsoever.

.....

Summary of the Report: There is no difference in benefits, funding or advantages from changing from a Parish to a Town.