

Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) Leadership in Action Conference
held on Wednesday 7th and Thursday 8th June
at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Stratford-upon-Avon

The Town Clerk attended this conference and felt that it was very worthwhile update and informative conference where a great deal of networking with colleagues and friends also took place.

The conference was opened with a welcome from **Alan Blakeley, the SLCC President**, who spoke about his year in office and how honoured he was to be the President as well as how excited he was about the programme presented in front of Town and Parish Clerks for the next two days.

The first speaker of the day was **Patricia Marks, MD of Somerset Business Agency**, who spoke about **the difference between leadership and management**. She opened by asking who understood and knew the difference between leadership and management. She stated that leadership was about getting people to understand and believe in a vision and to work to achieve the goals connected, whilst managing is about administering and making sure the day to day things happen as they support the vision. She went on to speak about the job description of a good leader which included integrity, clear goals, setting good examples, the vision, clear communication, expecting the best, supportive, offering encouragement, recognition and stimulating work, focussing on the team interests and needs and offer inspiration. She felt that management skills pyramid included getting it done, the development of the staff, the improving of one's self through self-management and success. She carried on by speaking about the difference between a boss and a leader; basically the boss says go and the leader says let's go! She spoke at length about the leadership skills required to be a good leader and finished by saying that time lost cannot be regained.

The second session was about **devolved functions unlocking the strategic potential of local Councils in England and Wales**. This was presented by **Dr Tim Thorogood, the Research Fellow for Cardiff University and former Chief Executive of the Falkland Islands**. He was accompanied by **Mike Burton, the Editorial Director of the Municipal Journal** and **Linda Draycott, Corporate Director of Community Working and Environment at Wyre District Council**.

The first speaker, Dr Tim Thoroughgood spoke about potential devolution and power at a really local level. He spoke about how devolution facilitates engagement, reduces political disenchantment, provides local ownership solutions, usually allowing less opposition. It utilises and unlocks social capital and results in better tailor made solutions and it also helps the government reduce spending. He spoke about the philosophical and practical issues and about a survey that the largest 100 Councils would be invited to take part in about what is actually going on locally as devolution forges ahead in what ways, what are the barriers and how can they be overcome. He spoke about the outcome of the survey which included devolution from Councils which offered a varied response. Very few felt that it had not extended their role but the majority felt they had increased the precept to match the extensions, they had taken off services and taken on assets. Significant barriers to this were the concern with the financial implications, the principal authority having insufficient funding and insufficient time alongside a lack of staff time and an issue with capacity. His main conclusions were almost all large local councils would choose some devolution but they had concerns about capacity. The approach taken by the principle authorities is seen as the biggest barrier through a lack of willingness, budget, staff time and information that the local councils tend to be reactive to principal authority's initiatives but there are still concerns about finances, precept and referenda.

The second speaker in this session, Mike Burton, spoke about the bigger picture for devolution and the manifesto promises to government the town and parish councils in the bigger picture and devolution. The bigger picture included local government finance, such as business rate retention, the public finances, social care and Brexit. On the devolution agenda was new Metro Mayors which could enable a focus on devolution to parishes and devolution on your doorstep.

All three political parties had the pleasure to review the business rates, suggest that 5% went to parishes and one of the limitations was the Council Tax Support grant funding. It was hoped that the public finances would see the end of austerity, spending focussed on health, manifesto plans don't factor in demographic changes and local government budgets tend to be tight as powers are devolved. There is an issue for social care funding challenges, health and care integration and it was questioned if there was a bigger role for town and parish councils in this. They finished by saying that Brexit could see the transfer of EU functions locally, fallout on the GDP and regulatory issues.

Linda Draycott gave a very enlightening and entertaining speech about her role as Corporate Director and how they had worked in the Wyre Forest District Council on devolution and the pitfalls and positives out of it.

Before lunch, **Vicky Jacomb from Came and Company**, local Councils insurance, spoke about supporting the development of the Clerk's profession. Came and Company offer parish council insurance and are the largest independent insurance broker acting for 3,500 councils and not for profit/charitable organisations and they are pleased with being the SLCC's principle sponsor for a second term. They are the principal sponsor because they wanted to add value to SLCC membership by offering support, training, advice and information. She spoke about the risk of not protecting the good people she sees as friends and the necessity for risk management, inspections, asset registers, valuations and policy cover. She encouraged those with insurance renewals to have client meetings with Came and Company as it is an important opportunity to review the cover, discuss insurance needs and insurer requirements. The sponsorship to the SLCC provides bursaries for Clerk's to attend residential conferences, grants for Clerk's to attend regional conferences, scholarships for two Clerks to complete their Community Governance courses and sponsor the social media presentations and regional conferences and branch events.

After lunch, **Jonathon Flowers, the Independent Chairman of the Improvement and Development Board for Local Councils** and a leading local government commentator presented delivering innovation in local Councils. He initially spoke about Max Bygraves and how he always said "I want to tell you a story". He continued by reflecting on leadership and the implications for innovation and the what it is, what is it for, how do we do it and how do we help each other. He felt that the truth about leadership includes it all depends, it is situationally dependent and there is one overarching theme, that generally great leaders can tell the story of their organisation and their place. He felt that the role of a leader is to shape and share a vision that gives point to the work of others. She quoted directly from Charles Handy. He carried on by saying that the fierce sovereignty locally and in a parish and town and acknowledged that all places are different. He stated that innovation was the process of converting ideas into invoices and into impact and into improvement. Service transformation sees bolder, braver and better Councils who question why we need deals to save public services. Service transformation have found very little that the themes for co-location, customer focus and collaboration. The best innovation was local. Innovation isn't about a massive idea or something that you and only you have thought of.

This presentation was followed by **Rob Smith, the SLCC Chief Executive** who shared his previous experience of management within public and private enterprises in an entertaining and enlightening presentation entitled Managing Future Change. Rob has worked on cruise liners, the London Underground and the Great Western Railway and he shared his experience of management, the issues, privatisation and how he had to motivate his staff to take on these changes and present a united front.

After a short refreshments break, **Tim Walden, Programme Manager for Network Rail** gave a presentation on the Iron Triangle, delivering rail projects on time, cost and quality objectives. He started by saying that Network Rail ran and maintained and developed Britain's rail tracks, signalling, bridges, tunnels, level crossings in many key stations with 30,000 staff; 6,000 of which were on infrastructural projects. The 5 year funding from 2014-2019 was £38billion and the capital expenditure pot from the same period was £25billion. His personal projects included the redevelopment of Kings Cross, the CNGE Alliance 441, HS2, Euston Station for 2027, the redevelopment of the rail approach into Kings Cross. He carried on by saying that he felt a project was the unique endeavour undertaken to achieve planned objectives which could be defined in terms of outputs, outcomes or benefits as written by the Association of Project Management. Again, they had also stated that project management is the application of the processes, methods, knowledge, skills and experience to achieve the project objective and a key factor that distinguishes project management from just management is that it has a final deliverable and finite time span unlike management which is an ongoing process. To meet these competing demands, you need to understand the roles and responsibilities, that project life cycle and the management of estimating and risk. He gave a few examples of his experience of managing projects and managing risk and he ended his presentation at Platform 9 ¼ on Kings Cross Station.

Day 2 was opened by **Councillor Baroness Scott of Bybrook OBE, Leader of Wiltshire Council** and **Reg Williams, Clerk of Salisbury City Council** who spoke about **devolution and Wiltshire's experience**. Baroness Scott spoke of all the positive things Wiltshire Council have done and how they'd worked succinctly and efficiently with town and parish councils; Salisbury City Council being the largest, to devolve many services and how they worked in partnership with the town and parish councils. Reg Williams, the Clerk of Salisbury City Council, gave a different view point on it and outlined all the things that Wiltshire Council had not thought about in the devolution of these services. Salisbury City Council was only established in 2009 and serves a population of 45,000 with a £4.85million revenue budget, now with a £50,000 devolution budget and £1.74million precept income. He said there was an devolution drive in 2015 due to the logical natures of the various services split between the two authorities, lack of investment as a result of funding cuts at principal authority level, the desire of the City Council to take on more and to take control more locally, a desire and willingness of Wiltshire Council to resolve noticeable downturn in the standards of maintenance of public areas and a marked increase in complaints from local businesses, visitors and residents. There was a political will on both sides but the City Council had been blamed for most of the issues in any case but they did note that devolution is the basic underlying principles of the Localism Act. The initial stages certainly caused some controversy and difficulties because there was a need to identify all the services and facilities which they could in theory transfer and be devolved, followed by identifying what could practicably be and realistically be transferred before identifying the key members on both sides. He felt that it was essential that the Council is aware as to why the Council members wish to commence the process and there has to be an identification and agreement with the key officers on both sides and clarity in the communication lines. The biggest challenges were the ownership issues, budget information, resources, legal assistance and trust issues on both sides. The expectation pitfalls included the transfer being cost neutral, at least for a year or two, the change could be implemented immediately after transfer, the impact of investment would be seen straight away and that the parish council could just absorb the assets and services into its structure without the precept being impacted upon. So for Salisbury City Council, the impacts include that it cost them more than they thought it would, the revenue and capital budgets were needed to be well thought through in the medium and long term, financial planning was required, the transfers took longer than expected, and the risk and exposure on those transfers may change, the City Council had to delay some of the previously agreed project work and there needed to be closer working relationships between the contractors and the in house staff which is developed over time as a result of devolution. Salisbury City Council will see a 25% increase in turnover of the council, which is now closed to £5.75million per annum. There needs to be a clarity as to who was responsible and this has now occurred and the downward trend in maintenance standards is finally being reversed.

Alan Mellor, who is currently Town Clerk at Newark Town Council was a former District Chief Executive and Director of Finance. He spoke about the role of the RFO and the strategic management of a local council. He spoke about the financial management plan, asking what any council is trying to achieve, the opportunities and threats in financial plans. He openly admitted that town and parish clerks were jack of all trades; the day job is looking after services, staff and councillors, council meetings, agendas, reports and minutes, finance stuff but asked if anyone had any long term aspirations for the role but then queried whether there was time to plan long term aspirations. He queried whether there had been any council goals; have you as a Clerk been told what they are, is there an election manifesto, do you have a corporate strategy, do you have a medium term financial plan and then he queried about political group structure versus independence. A district council will have a starting point in an electoral manifesto; senior councillors and officers will meet at least twice a year to look at strategic plans. The officer role is to identify and assess councillors' aspirations, advise them what is possible, advise them what it costs, how they can be achieved and the impact on the council so medium term financial plans are key. Going back to Newark Town Council, they have been looking at how the council sees itself playing in the future, does it wish to expand the range of services it provides and is it content with its current level of performance. They also queried whether they wished to play a bigger role in the shaping of the town centre and the environment and if it has any spare financial resources, what does it want to do with them. He went on to speak about local council opportunities and strengths through devolution, getting closer to the community, being a trusted and respected part of the public sector and encouraging a good reputation with the community. He felt direct pound for pound financial accountability to the council tax payers was essential and councils shouldn't be reliant on the council support grant. He went on to speak about capping and what government have proposed as town and parish councils have the same capping criteria as shire and district councils. There was a possibility that it was going to be aimed at the largest 120 parish councils whose Band D charge above the lowest district £75.46 and a precept of at least £500,000. An increase in Band D less than 2% or £5 whichever is the higher. It is vital to understand that the measure is based on the Band D council tax charge not the precept.

The government has also said a large proportion of parishes are of a small size, for example 4000 parishes have precepts of £25 or less, however the government is aware that the increases in the precept continue to concern local tax payers and is therefore prepared to consider extending referendums to all parishes. So he posed the question "Is Localism dead?". Devolving decision making etc to the lowest possible level is a policy all governments propose and then they try to maintain control over all local government. The Secretary of State has finally said we'll keep precepts set by town and parish councils under close review, expect all town and parish councils to clearly demonstrate restraint when setting increases which are not a direct result of taking on any additional responsibilities and also actively considering with the sector ways making excessive increases more transparent to local tax payers. He advised local councils to pay heed to the same limit 2% when considering its council tax rate for 17/18. He reiterated that medium term financial planning is a vital tool for town and parish councils against this background and they should aim to explore the potential pitfalls and traps that can trip you up. As RFO, they have a key role to provide advice and he felt that this was even more vital now.

After a refreshment break, **David Preston Town Clerk of Oswestry Town Council** spoke about preparing and delivering a successful Corporate Plan.

Before lunch, a **panel explored the issues of how to manage sickness absence, facilitated by Andrews Smith, National Employment Advisor SLCC.** It was stated that it was essential to have a sickness management policy, which include the reporting and absence monitoring, sickness and holidays, return to work, occupational sick pay, persistent absence and long term sickness. She spoke about stress as the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them and encouraged Clerks to understand stress triggers, putting things into perspective and to stop searching for the things that are wrong and concentrating on the things that are right. She spoke about sickness certification, fit for work forms, return to work and they spoke about the options long term. They answered many questions relative to individual councils needs and understanding on sickness absence.

After lunch, **Andrew Towlerton, National Planning** Advisor, facilitated a discussion with leading external experts on the Community Infrastructure Levy and how it is working. He spoke about lots of facts and figures and about how it is working in different places and the gross development value on various sites in various parts of the country and how it is being treated by principle councils. He did feel there was some inequality in that.

To end the conference, **Andy Cope**, one of the most popular speakers ever at an SLCC Conference, returned to share **his unique stance on ensuring successful and brilliant leadership.** For a whole hour, he had the entire conference either on their feet joining in his presentation, laughing until tears came down your face or trying to understand his unique method of encouraging leadership ideas and his unique way of getting people to take part and listen. He spoke using shadows, single words, group speaking, thought provoking text, enlightenment, in quizzes and all sorts. It certainly was a unique end to a conference!

Anne Wilson
Town Clerk
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