

Presentation to Bromsgrove Area Meeting

BEING A QUALITY PARISH COUNCIL

In some ways it can be likened to climbing Everest except that it is not worth doing for the view. We still get the same 'bottom of the pile' view as all the other parish councils in the district. But we are as a council fitter, *not* note, necessarily as individual councillors but as a whole.

We are a young parish council formed in 1993; we have no appreciating assets, only liabilities. Our only income is from the precept. We are small, having only 728 dwellings with 1425 registered electors. But we do have a thriving commercial centre and are used as a focal point for many of the surrounding areas. This brings pluses and minuses. Being young may have helped us.

We didn't have much baggage.

Why did we strive?

We like many parishes, I am sure, knew we had to be able to face the challenges being thrown at us from the ODPM. But how? What was considered good? The QPS give us a goal.

When did we start?

In June 2003 when this Document arrived, I flagged it up as being potentially very important. I posed the questions:-

1. "What will happen if we do not apply nor get accreditation?"

Possible answers-it may be asked-why did they not? If they are not quality what are they?

2. "What will happen if we do"

One of two things-

Nothing

If we chose *not* to take up any initiatives that may be offered, but having QPS will demonstrate that

- we have reached and in many instances gone beyond the best standards as specified by the ODPM
- we have raised our status and profile
- we could/should be in a good position to form closer partnerships with other tiers
- We are an effective, representative and active Parish council.
- We are properly managed
- We articulate the needs and wishes of our community
- We uphold high standards of conduct.

Something

We have the ability to take on other services, and to have a specific charter (contract) with the other tiers.

All documents from the ODPM were circulated to all members and they were told to read it every night before they went to sleep, so that they were well informed about the QPS initiative. As you can see mine is dog-eared and coffee stained I think that is a good sign of being well used.

We compared where we were in 2003 against the Quality Criteria. I plotted a course to get us to meet those criteria over the next twelve months. Some criteria we were already moving

towards, for example the qualifications of the clerk, others we were very close to meeting, for example our newsletters and web site. Others we needed to address, for example our annual report.

To be honest it could be said I dragged them kicking and screaming, or that I gently nudged here and there, or that sometimes we arrived by stealth, or by default, or I could say they embraced the concept with open arms. Some changes were easy and gentle- the content of the newsletter (although I have to say when back in 1994 the idea of a newsletter was first broached and it was said "we don't want any of *that* in Barnt Green", perhaps it has been quiet an achievement) some changes nearly caused apoplexy with much dissent-for example the ToRs for the working groups, the length of the agenda. But whatever, we got there.

When I was sure that we fulfilled all the criteria, I informed the council that we had arrived at a point when they could *choose* to apply for accreditation or not, the cost would be £25.

In April 2004 the decision was made to delegate the Clerk with the Chairman to apply as soon as all criteria were met, by this time we were only waiting for our clerk to obtain her qualifications, and there was no doubt in our minds that she would.

This decision was announced to the community at the APM in May 2004. In all there are only four or five references to QPS in the minutes, and the community had updates in the newsletter re our progress. In July 2004 the application was submitted. In November we were awarded the QPS.

What does it mean-to us *nothing* has changed, but having good foundations new changes are easier to incorporate, for example section 17.

Is it worth doing? Yes, we had clear goals and as a result we are as a council fitter.

Did it hurt?-not really, but some were 'reluctant'

How will we keep our status? That is the next challenge- to maintain 100% councillors, to have a trained executive officer and by reviewing our procedures at least annually.

Parish Plans-as with **Quality Status** the time is **right for us** to produce a Parish Plan, it is a step further than the village Appraisal we did in 1998. The Parish Plan will incorporate our VDS and steer our actions and resources over the next ten-fifteen years

Closing-like with Everest you don't have to climb it but you will be healthier if you do. Was it worth it -yes; was it painful-not really; has it made a difference-honestly not yet. The other tiers will have to adjust their perception of, and attitude towards, Parish councils. Maybe in the past difficulties were there because of the variety amongst the Parishes but if all parishes achieve QPS then whatever their size whatever services they provide for the community all will be accredited as being capable of doing so. We are at the moment fine tuning a contract with the District council re the 106 monies. Much of it is unnecessary and hopefully in the future the district and other tiers will accept our status and this should simplify the process of partnership.

We were unaware that there was an accompanying financial 'reward' so that was a very welcome surprise. The confusing thing was that we were told we *had to spend it by...* this perplexed Judith, Debbie and me, why make a statement like that? I was fortunate to be invited to dine at the House of Commons and I mentioned this to our MP again a lady she said "don't worry, that's 'man speak'" as if we would have any trouble spending! We laughed so loud that I feared we may be thrown in the Tower.

Cllr Mrs Elaine Buckett of Barnt Green Parish Council

December 2005