

Assessment of Existing Governance in Princes Risborough...

... and Recommendations for a Future Model

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1. Background

- 1.1. In August 2010 Princes Risborough Town Council contracted Action for Market Towns (AMT) and Retail Revival (RR) to propose some solutions to a number of key issues. This report addresses one of those issues; that of local governance.
- 1.2. Governance is the activity of governing, directing and controlling. In a town, a governing body often has the power to consult with communities, make decisions, set policies, create visions, define and strive to achieve goals and objectives on behalf of the whole community.
- 1.3. With power comes a set of responsibilities to perform in the best interests of the community, act honorably and have clear line of accountability, financial and moral.
- 1.4. It could be argued that Princes Risborough has two governing bodies; an elected body; the Town Council and a participative body; the Community Partnership.
- 1.5. Town Councils are a tier of local government and they are elected bodies, with discretionary powers and rights laid down by Parliament to represent their communities and provide services for them. They act as a focus for local opinion, and provide a way to get things done in a way that is best suited to their local community.
- 1.6. Princes Risborough Town Council is a body of 13 unpaid, independently elected councillors, who have statutory responsibilities for certain aspects of the town; these include street lights, public parks, grass cutting and maintaining some of the listed buildings such as the Market House. Other non-statutory areas the council is involved in are planning applications, forward planning for the town as a whole and as a community voice to Wycombe District Council and Buckinghamshire County Council as well as local business. The council has powers to raise their own funds through council tax. The Town Council has four paid officers: The Town Clerk, Deputy Clerk and two clerical assistants. The Chairman of the Council is Alan Turner; the whole council ends its term of office in May 2011.
- 1.7. The Government's Rural White Paper (2000)¹, emphasised the importance of market towns and the growing concern for their future. The Market Towns Initiative

¹ The Rural White Paper, Our Countryside: the future; a fair deal for rural England, DETR & MAFF (2000) www.defra.gov.uk/rural/ruralwp/default.htm

(MTI) was subsequently developed to help address these concerns by providing ring-fenced funding for over 70 towns in England. To plan and distribute this funding appropriately MTI towns were encouraged to form community partnerships and carry out Healthchecks, a recognised tool used to collect baseline information and provide a medium through which local communities can express both local and strategic issues.

- 1.8. Risborough Area Community Action (RACA) is the community partnership representing Princes Risborough and the surrounding villages. Set up in 2005, RACA's mission statement sets out its intent to 'bring together, in partnership, local volunteers who invest time and effort for the common good alongside representatives of governmental and non-governmental organisations at local, district, county and regional levels.'
- 1.9. Community partnerships raise their own funds through grants, loans and social enterprise activities. Membership is participative; anybody is able to join a community partnership. RACA is responsible for some successful projects in the town including the Community Bus and the Kop Hill Climb Classic Car event. A new Chairman, Peter Keen, was elected in 2010 and he has been focussing on the future direction of the partnership.

2. Introduction

- 2.1. Where a dual model of governance exists across the country, the relationship between town and parish councils and community partnerships is rarely straightforward or easy. Although some towns have managed to make the model work very well, many find it challenging.
- 2.2. The national debate about the feasibility of a dual model of governance is highly pertinent in Princes Risborough. The relationship between RACA and the Town Council is inconsistent and has been antagonistic at times. The organisations do not share a written and jointly endorsed vision for the future of Princes Risborough.
- 2.3. Some members of RACA and the Town Council have identified a need to work closer together; and with other smaller and single interest groups in the town. This report is a factor of this realisation.
- 2.4. This report was commissioned by Princes Risborough Town Council and funded by Wycombe District Council to assess:

- The strengths and weaknesses of the current model of Governance in Risborough
- What needs to change, if anything, to facilitate a more harmonious and productive working relationship between the town council and RACA.

3. Sources of Tension between Community Partnerships and Town Councils

- 3.1. The principle that a non-elected organisation can become powerful at a local level is one with which many local politicians fundamentally disagree. Town Councils can resent the reality that successful community partnerships earn their own income and assets, they become enduring and well known in their communities and their ability to flourish is not dependent on the support of the town or parish council.
- 3.2. Town Councillors are bound by procedure; and have a relatively fixed remit. Many do take on special projects but any innovative activity is restricted by often limited financial and human resources and a need to focus on statutory duties. They are accountable to their community, as they are spending public money they have to be rigid and highly responsible in their approach.
- 3.3. Community partnerships have more autonomy to be innovative and deliver creative projects. RACA has to demonstrate robust and transparent accounting procedures to attract grant funding but it has fewer bureaucratic procedures than the council and as a result it can respond quickly and be more flexible. RACA is accountable to the community as it attracts grant funding on the community's behalf. However because public funding is not a major source of income for RACA they have less to justify when making spending decisions. This can cause a degree of resentment.
- 3.4. The organisations have different working cultures; this often becomes apparent when the organisations try working together. In Princes Risborough RACA and the Town Council have at times struggled with the culture clash; in particular the speed of decision making has caused some frustration.
- 3.5. The culture of the organisation is influenced by the people attracted to become members. Research shows that nationally community partnerships tend to have a diverse membership, more representative of the community than town councils.² Community partnerships attract people who wish to participate but who are short of time; they are able to volunteer in a flexible way, focussing on activities that really interest them. It is an accessible form of governance for working people,

² The Framework for the Future of Market Towns, Tribal Consultants 2005

single parents, young people of school age and the self employed; four notoriously hard to reach groups.

- 3.6. Research has found that a specific ‘type’ of person is attracted to public office. A quote in an Enquiry report written by the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC)³ summed up the demographic of a town councillor as ‘male, straight, white, middle class and older’. Their research found this to be true, largely because the role and responsibilities of a councillor, and the time intensive nature of the post, suits this demographic.
- 3.7. In Princes Risborough the membership of both RACA and the Town Council is not necessarily true to type. The town council has a mixture of genders, some councillors are employed, some retired and the age range is quite diverse. RACA on the other hand comprises mostly white, middle class, retired citizens. RACA is currently working to attract a more diverse demographic.
- 3.8. A group of people have launched a public campaign to become Risborough Town Councillors in the May elections.⁴ They have based their campaign on the need for a ‘young, dynamic and professionally led’ council. Research shows that older people bring expertise, professionalism and experience to their roles as councillors and community leaders. A problem arises when they are not seen to be representative of the wider community and out of touch with local need.
- 3.9. Table 1 highlights the key differences between the methods of working and cultures of both Community Partnerships and Town Councils. It can be seen that their cultures are poles apart making tension between the two almost inevitable.

Table 1 Key Culture Differences between Community Partnerships and Town Councils

Community Partnerships	Town and Parish Councils
Have the autonomy to plan and manage activities, procedures	Need to follow procedures laid down by Parliament
Greater capacity to deliver a range of activities due to size of volunteer base	Bound by the capacity of the members
Have the ability to source an extensive and diverse range of skilled people to help them prepare and deliver projects	Expertise and experience is pre-determined as councillors are elected from a relatively small body of candidates

³ Participation Inquiry; Strengthening the Role of Local Councillors – Commission for Rural Communities

⁴http://www.bucksfreepress.co.uk/news/localnews/risborough/8803477.Group_formed_to_challenge_council_elections

Fast Acting	Bound by Procedure
Non-political	Councillors can have a political agenda
Do not tie people in for the long term. Although consistency is desired, members are able to join a community partnership for a very short time and they can participate only in projects that excite them. This attracts a wide variety of people who have time constraints, e.g. working mothers, business people and young people.	Council officers commit to complete a four-year term of office, meetings are held regularly and considerable preparation is required for meetings. Becoming a councillor is a large commitment and not something for the faint hearted.
Community partnerships focus on project delivery; especially quick-win popular local activities. Members often have fun and enjoy positive feedback from the community.	Town councils need to make important decisions which might be unpopular; they frequently face the public's wrath and receive adverse publicity.

4. Reputation, Legitimacy and Power

- 4.1. The legitimacy and power of an organisation is strengthened by community endorsement. This research found that RACA has positive image in the community due in part to their delivery of two highly regarded projects; the community bus and the nationally famous Kop Hill Climb. Their profile could be greatly enhanced, however, as many residents and businesses interviewed were quite vague about the exact nature of RACA's activities.
- 4.2. Although the town council has a much higher local profile, the community is also vague about the town council's specific role. It is assumed that the council has greater powers and areas of responsibility than it actually has. To some degree this has negatively affected the council's reputation because they are blamed for some contentious issues including car parking charges and traffic warden patrols, which are not their direct responsibility.
- 4.3. Two further issues have negatively affected the public's opinion of the town council. The introduction of the town's one-way system has been controversial. The council has not provided tangible evidence that the system has alleviated the issues it was designed to solve. A review of the system that was promised in the winter of 2010 has been delayed until February 2011. The results of the review and community consultation will inform the final decision to keep or overturn the one-way system. The outcome will be announced before April 2011.

- 4.4. Secondly the council has been very publically divided over key issues including the town’s controversial one-way system. Some Risborough councillors have a notoriously difficult relationship with one another. This internal animosity has been very public and divisive and risks alienating the community who may lose confidence in both the individual members and in the council as a whole.
- 4.5. RACA members represent their organisation responsibly but they are free from local politics. They may appear to be less likely to have hidden agendas because their continued role is not dependent on them receiving the public vote. This potentially enhances their reputation in the community.
- 4.6. Because the community expects nothing from RACA, RACA is in the enviable position to be able to exceed the expectations of the people it serves; the Town Council however has to meet considerable public expectation and as a result often fails. When both organisations are performing well and delivering needed projects and services RACA is seen to ‘add value’ whereas the council is seen to be merely ‘doing its duty’.

5. Roles and Responsibilities

- 5.1. It is widely believed that no single organisation would want, or be able, to take responsibility for every aspect of a market town. Activities and services are plentiful and diverse. Table 2 below lists just some of them.
- 5.2. Table 2 also illustrates whether it is the Town Council or the Community Partnership that tends to lead on these activities when a dual model of governance exists.

Table Two: The Roles and Responsibilities of Councils and Partnerships

Community Partnerships	Town Councils	Greatest Areas of Overlap
Events	Street Cleaning	Markets
Festivals	Allotments	Leisure Facilities
Local Youth Projects	Traffic Calming Measures	Community Transport
Tourism Activities	Open Spaces	Environmental Projects
Heritage Trails	Litter Bins	Strategic Planning
Business Networking	Crime Reduction Measures	Research
Arts Projects	Car Parks	Community Consultation
Food Fairs	Public Lavatories	Inward investment
To Lobby and Campaign	Bus Shelters	
To apply for grant funding	Children’s Play Parks/Areas	

Social enterprise	Community Newsletters	
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- 5.3. If there is a lack of communication between organisations then projects can be duplicated, overlap or there can be gaps in delivery.
- 5.4. The waters can be furthered muddied when other community organisations exist in a town. As well as RACA and the Town Council, Risborough has several other community groups. These groups tend to operate in silos, focussing on their areas of interest.
- 5.5. One key example of duplicated activity in Risborough is business engagement. Risborough Market Group has responsibility for the Charter Market, the Festival Committee runs the festivals, Risborough Area Business Group focuses on business networking functions, RACA runs the Kop Hill Climb, the Town Council has responsibility for traffic flow and other town centre related issues - all impact greatly on businesses. They all need the support of local business; yet there is very little communication between these five groups despite them all working with the same target group.
- 5.6. This method of working fails to maximise the resources available to each group. It also means that businesses are being approached by five separate groups and there is no agreed action plan or vision for business engagement.
- 5.7. The dual governance model works best when:
- The roles and responsibilities of each organisation are clearly defined, documented and shared and although they may overlap, they do not duplicate the activities of the other organisation
 - Both organisations understand and accept their own roles and responsibilities and endorse those of the other party
 - Clear, open and honest channels of communication exist between both organisations
 - Both organisations involve and respect each other and meet regularly to evaluate their relationship
 - Both organisations publically support the other in a professional manner
 - When inevitable contentious issues arise between both organisations, they are discussed immediately and openly with the aim to resolve them
 - Where single interest groups also exist in a town they become part of the community partnership where appropriate unless they have a clear and historic identity of their own e.g. the Rotary Club

6. The Future

- 6.1. In August 2010, Peter Keen, Chairman of RACA, drafted a proposal for a new model of governance for Princes Risborough; an umbrella organisation with the working title of RAP (Risborough Area Partnership).
- 6.2. RAP Members would work together to pool resources and deliver a vision for the town, it was intended that every group in Risborough could meet, communicate and work together with equal status. Individual organisations would remain but a greater synergy between them would be achieved. RAP would have a solid and high profile in the community and joint projects could be branded RAP.
- 6.3. Members of the Town Council have been open to this proposal and have come close to agreeing the model of governance; other organisations have been more tentative though not closed to the proposal.
- 6.4. Some key issues threatening the success of the new governance model have influenced the recommendations of this report; they include:
 - The proposed RAP constitution and activities (appendix 1) are too similar to that of RACA. Other organisations, including the Town Council, suspect that RACA would dissolve and the key members of RACA would take over the leadership of RAP. To make an umbrella model of governance feasible, every member organisation would need to give up some of its local identity and power including RACA.
 - The issues of over complicated local delivery that RAP was invented to solve would only be solved if the majority of local groups joined. There is evidence to show that many local groups would not be prepared to join RAP for fear of losing autonomy.
 - Members of community organisations tend to be very active and their time is valuable. It is difficult to see how they would find the time to attend a set of RAP meetings in addition to their own organisation's meetings.
 - Any new governance model needs to rationalise the present governance structure rather than add to it. The public is already confused by the volume, structure and role of local organisations without introducing another.
 - It is possible that the Town Council will have new councillors after the May elections. Any agreement that RACA forms with the Town Council now will be subject to review in June 2011. If all current councillors agreed to a new model of governance this could be revoked if enough new councillors were against it.

7. The Recommendations

7.1. This final section brings together the main findings from the previous chapters, in the form of a set of recommendations.

Recommendation 1

RACA re-structures to become more representative of the community

It is recommended that RACA adopts the constitution written for RAP and refines its membership. The draft RAP constitution is attached as appendix 1; the following elements are seen as key to success:

- RACA has the following five sub groups: Community, Economic, Culture and Heritage, Marketing and Events and Communications
- Each sub group has an elected leader, these leaders and three other elected members form an overarching management committee
- Two Councillors sit on the management committee
- A leader is elected from the management committee to serve a three-year term
- A Vice Chair is groomed to become leader when the three-year leadership term expires

Recommendation 2

The Town Council continues to focus on its statutory duties at the same time as endorsing and supporting the work of RACA. RACA involves the Council as an equal partner and publically supports the vital role they play in the town.

It is recommended that RACA and the Town Council make a compact to support the work and activities of each other's organisation. This research found that there was not a great deal of overlap between the activities of both organisations and there was room in the town for both to operate in harmony.

It is felt that both organisations need to understand each other's culture a little more so that they can accept the vital part each plays in Princes Risborough and the challenges they face. Three councillors are currently members of RACA but only one officially represents the Town Council. All three tiers of council need to be invited to officially represent their organisation on the RACA board.

It is understood that over time there will be necessary friction between both organisations as local government plans for Risborough may be contentious. It is recommended however that if RACA decides to lobby council decisions they do so in a respectful and non-personal manner; conversely the council should accept that RACA has a right to lobby their proposals and accept their feedback in the spirit of democracy.

Both organisations need to make an effort to maintain a positive working relationship and keep channels of communication clear and open.

Recommendation 3

The Princes Risborough Festival Committee becomes part of the Marketing and Events Sub Group of RACA and the programme of events is expanded to attract footfall throughout the year

Princes Risborough Annual Town Festival was established in 1996 by a small group of local people under the guidance of the Town Council. Its aim, as stated in its constitution, is to promote and enhance the profile of Princes Risborough, its clubs, businesses, associations and inhabitants, and to bring a week of entertainment and general enjoyment to all who wish to participate.

The festival is held during the first full week of July. The Festival Committee also arranges the Christmas Lights evening when the town's festive lights are formally switched on. The committee receives a grant of about £8k from the Town Council and it raises further funds through private sponsorship.

Research illustrates that local people respond to themed days and special events and it is recommended that a whole programme of events targeted at specific markets is delivered throughout the year. This will extend the tourist season and bring increased footfall to the town centre.

RACA's Kop Hill Climb team and the Festival Committee both deliver successful events and both have professional expertise. It is recommended that they join together as the Marketing and Events Sub Group of RACA. Here they will be able to pool creative talent, resources, contacts and expertise and maximise resources. The Kop Hill Climb and the Festival will become key events in a well-planned, considered and promoted annual programme of events and activities.

It is recommended that the Chairman of the Festival Committee, Richard Stevenson, has a RACA leadership role.

Recommendation 4

The Risborough Area Business Group becomes part of RACA's Economic Sub Group

Risborough Action Business Group began in 2005 as a business vehicle which seeks to attract inward investment, influence local development, disseminate key information to businesses and promote enterprise to young people. Our research shows that attendance to meetings is now low and local retailers felt that the group was not adequately meeting their needs. The group has some valuable functions which in our opinion need to be maintained.

As consultants we were tasked with kick-starting a business network and we achieved some success with a series of themed business meetings attended over a period of twelve weeks by 65 local businesses. This informal business network is motivated to continue meeting and delivering activities.

It is our recommendation that the RABG and the informal business network feed into an Economic Sub Group of RACA. Some potential leaders have emerged from the business community to represent their interests at RAP sub group level.

Recommendation 5:

Elect strong and capable leaders to manage the proposed changes

During a period of change community leadership needs to be strong. The people that are elected as leaders of RACA, the sub groups and the Council will be key to successful Governance in Princes Risborough. Leaders must have the time and desire to facilitate change. It is recommended that they receive training to fill skills gaps.

Recommendation 6:

Both RACA and the Town Council Address their Weaknesses and Maximise Opportunities

It is recommended that both organisations complete a SWOT report to identify their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. A very brief, and incomplete, version of a SWOT for RACA and the Town Council, developed as a result of this research, is provided in tables 3 and 4 below.

A SWOT is traditionally a business planning tool and is now regularly used by community organisations to help them achieve sustainability.

Table 3: SWOT RACA

<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong focus on some key projects which are delivered utterly professionally • Ability to generate high levels of income from the Kop Hill Climb • Members with business expertise and corporate business experience • Ability to second people with expertise for a short time when needed • Good range of contacts from all three sectors – public, private and voluntary • very strong business acumen and accessibility to business expertise where it does not exist within the partnership 	<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor website and branding • Not widely known in the community • Not tied to key projects in the community’s mind • Donated a large proportion of income from Kop Hill Climb to charity rather than using it to build a secure financial base to ensure sustainability • Membership demographic is not representative of the community • The villages and rural areas do not participate and are not included in the majority of the partnership activity
<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunity to retain the income from the Kop Hill Climb to seed fund other potentially income generating activities • Opportunity to recruit members from the less represented groups in the community; young people, BMEs, those living in rural isolation • More effort could be used to engage with the rural hinterland; hold events in village locations etc. • Increase brand awareness 	<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduction of grant funding from local authorities to community partnerships • Cessation of funding and partnership support from the Regional Development Agency when it dissolves in 2012

Table 4: SWOT PRINCES RISBOROUGH TOWN COUNCIL

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengths • Some highly competent councillors with valuable experience • A more representative demographic than many councils comprising younger councillors, men and women, retired and employed • An active council with a broad remit focussing on local need; the Day Care Centre in particular • Councillors are individually active, attending events and helping to organise activities • Good communications through website and newsletter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weaknesses • The one-way system is controversial. This research shows that people want a final decision, is the one-way system staying or going? This decision needs to be backed up by evidence. • There has been some very public conflict between councillors which has weakened their image in the town.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities • Opportunity to attend some training sessions to address weaknesses particularly public relations and teambuilding • Opportunity to develop a shared community strategy with RACA and identify which organisation will be responsible for each activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Threats • Existing councillors may not be re-elected in May, as a result the council will lose some consistency and experience • New candidates may stand for election in May to fight one particular issue. If they are elected there is a strong chance that they may resign soon afterwards when they begin to understand the time intensive nature of the role and the lack of actual power they have to influence their key issues.

Appendix 1