

Harborough TalkBACK2000 Headline summary of Focus Group findings

Background

As part of the TalkBACK2000 Consultation process Sharp Focus, a Harborough based Independent Research Consultancy, undertook six Focus Group discussions. The groups, which were held in Bushby, Market Harborough and Lutterworth (2 groups per location) on 8, 9 and 10 May 2001, were attended by people who had volunteered themselves by ticking a box when completing the questionnaire in the TalkBACK newspaper.

For each of the six discussions, 15 letters of invitation were sent to volunteers with the objective of achieving six to eight people attending each group. In the event, between seven and nine people attended each group with the exception of the second one at Bushby where just one person presented himself. In this case, a one-to-one depth interview was undertaken. Each of the groups took between 1½ and 2 hours to complete – respondents certainly had plenty to contribute to the discussion!

One of the early indications about those who attended the groups (and, judging by the reasons given by those who contacted Sharp Focus to offer their apologies for not attending), is that the people who volunteered their time to take part in the focus groups were rather busy people, many of whom devote time to other community projects – a substantial minority being current or former Parish Councillors, Town Councillors and County Councillors.

Main Findings

A more detailed report will be produced in due course; the purpose of this short summary is to appraise councillors of the headline findings:

- **Role:** The perceived role of the Council was seen at two levels: The functional purpose is that of providing services (many of which are thought to be statutory requirements) such as waste collection and grass cutting. A significant minority insisted that these functions should be carried out as cost efficiently as possible. However, in addition to its functional responsibilities, many respondents also saw the Council as having a more emotional role in facilitating a feeling of 'wellbeing' among residents – to 'do its best' for all the people; to organise and enable things to happen for the good of the area and its population
- **The District:** There is very little evidence that people relate to a 'District'; it is, perhaps, inevitable that people will relate to the issues that effect them most directly, but the degree

of parochial thinking is very high (down to the positioning of a litter bin on a lamp post, in one case!). The groups at Bushby and Lutterworth found it difficult to relate to Market Harborough - indeed, few claimed to visit Market Harborough very much if ever ("You have to go there for death certificates, but that's all..."). Clearly, the geographical positioning of these three population centres at the corners of a triangle are not helpful in creating a natural 'centre' for the District. There is a substantial view that the Council is 'Harboroughcentric' and that an unfairly disproportionate amount of the Council's expenditure is concentrated on Market Harborough.

- **Performance:** The Council is seen to perform its functional duties rather well. Although there were some examples of inconsistency, in general, waste collection is felt to be very well managed, playground and open spaces well maintained, recycling is, at least, being worked on, parking is free, and so on. It was also felt that, when a matter needing attention was brought to the Council's notice, something positive was generally done about it.

The Council was thought to be less good at communication and planning. Flowing from the communications issue, it was very apparent that only a minority really understood what the HDC is actually responsible for. Even some of those who serve- or have served- as Local/Parish/County Councillors were not always certain who does what and most of the other respondents were more than somewhat confused. Many recognised that they had just received a Council Tax Bill that had various leaflets enclosed and most acknowledged that they had not done any more than look at the size of the bill and discarded the leaflets unseen. In mitigation, they suggested that the leaflets are not user friendly, being written in difficult language and not particularly well presented for consumption by 'ordinary' people.

The TalkBACK newspaper idea was extremely well regarded by the substantial majority as a communications medium and was to be encouraged. However, even here, people found it very difficult to penetrate 'meaningless' statistical tables ("What's the difference between an estimate and a target; 98% of what compared with 15 similar councils? And so on)

Of all the issues raised as 'could do better', planning was the only area where 'open season' for raising major dissatisfactions was declared. Criticisms embraced both planning policy ("why so many new houses?") and planning control ("why do people continue to get away with illegal developments?") It should be noted that there is recognition by respondents that few appreciate the complexity of the planning process and the District Council's role in it (for example, few 'ordinary' respondents realised that there is a cascade down model of housing provision from Central to Regional to County to District government). Clearly, this

criticism has strong linkages to the adverse comments about the Council's ability to communicate clearly with residents.

- **Big issues** The big issues that it is felt the Council needs to pay most attention to were, predictably, expansion and development and all of the infrastructure issues that surround development – schooling, health, libraries, museums, traffic, crime, and so on. After the realisation for some that many of these services were not the direct responsibility of the District Council, residents felt that, nevertheless, HDC should work at ensuring that whoever is responsible puts infrastructure in place before crises arise following development.

On the list of more 'emotional' big issues that respondents feel the Council should address was the strong wish that the area must maintain its individual charm and character as well as its unique feel. Residents are, with no notable exceptions among our volunteers, rather proud of where they live and earnestly wish to retain the market town feel of Market Harborough and Lutterworth as well as the rural environs.

- **Decision making structure:** In spite of the fact that the focus group volunteers were, *ipso facto*, among the most interested in the topic of the decision making process, it was very evident that many were confused about the Options before them or felt inadequately informed. Much of the discussion about the structure Options (which, typically, took around 40-50 minutes of the whole focus group) was taken up by trying to understand some of the processes – from such basic misunderstanding, for example, of not appreciating the difference between a 'leader' and an 'elected mayor' – through to major differences of opinion as to what the phrase 'day to day decisions' means.

Consequently, although respondents were able to discuss the relative merits and perceived shortcomings of each Option, some of the key decisions were made against this background of ignorance and assumption. It was widely agreed that there had been too little information to make a really informed judgement and no pro's and con's had been offered for consideration and no indication of comparative costs given (it was, for example, assumed that a mayor would have to be paid).

Against this, it was also accepted that, among even this 'interested' micro-minority, some had only skimmed the TalkBACK newspaper before voting. Had it not been for the focus group, it was asserted that little further consideration would have been given to the matter and, certainly, nowhere near as much analytical thought given to the Options.

However, respondents were largely sympathetic with the Council and none of the respondents could think of any realistic better alternative way of presenting the options in a way that made every aspect clear (holding focus group discussions to include every resident was, mercifully, dismissed as impractical!) However, a substantial minority of respondents echoed the view proposed in three of the five groups that they felt unqualified to make an informed judgement on the issue. It was also apparent that (even among the 'positively interested') a certain amount of cynicism exists, and there is a widely held belief that local government should be "above party politics".

- **Option A** is seen as having the benefit of achieving the objective of streamlining the decision making process. It was also felt that, unlike one of the other Options, the whole system comprised elected people. The fact that scrutineers could outnumber the decision makers was also felt, by some, to offer a good 'check and balance' mechanism.

The main disadvantages of this Option were seen as the potential for 'incestuous' relationships – the leader 'choosing the cabinet' (especially if it's a small cabinet) and this could lead to a lessening of open government. At worst, it was assumed that three people could run the show for four years. In other words, some felt that the leader could have far too much personal influence on outcomes and this was also expressed as exhibiting "all the problems we see in national government" – a Whitehall model imposed on local situations. The effectiveness of the scrutiny role was challenged by many respondents and, an associated point, a concern that the non-cabinet members – and, possibly, their constituents – might feel 'second class'. In contrast with the current committee system, some felt that members of the Cabinet might not have the necessary skills and experience to be able to take all the requisite decisions.

- **Option B** is thought to have the benefit of having an elected individual at the top of the structure (rather than someone the Councillors choose). The system was felt to be more akin to the Managing Director and Board model used in many businesses and, as such, is recognised as a relatively streamlined process.

The main downsides of this approach are seen as the potential for discord if the mayor does not see eye to eye with the Cabinet. Conversely, it was felt that there is a possibility of a mayor choosing a Cabinet that comprised of just two like-minded Councillors and rail-roading decisions through. In short, there appeared to be too much opportunity for abuse of power.

On a practical level, the geographical nature of the District might make the election of a universally acceptable individual difficult – Lutterworthians might prefer someone from Lutterworth, Harborians a Harborian, and so on. As mentioned above, the District is not seen as a cohesive identity for which one individual could serve. Some also wondered if the person standing for mayor could hedge his/her bets by also standing as a Councillor (assuming the election for both positions was on the same day). If so, what would happen to the Council seat if he/she were elected mayor. Queries and debates of this type typified respondents' concerns that they didn't know enough about the Options to provide a definitive opinion.

- **Option C** In addition to sharing the benefits of elected mayor described above, a minority felt this option also had the benefit of being 'less political'.

However, the concept of the manager being 'politically independent' was widely questioned; indeed, the more cynical suggested that the appointment could soon become political (since the manager is appointed by the Council of the day and subsequent Councils could replace him/her for someone whose politics they prefer). As an associated point, the suggestion that a cosy arrangement between mayor and manager could ensue was often proposed. If the mayor and manager made all the 'day to day' decisions, there was a question as to what the elected Councillors would actually do.

- **Option D** has, for some, the perceived benefits of being closest to the *status quo*. However, for others, this was also its biggest negative – tinkering and not doing much good; "what would such a revision change?" The main operational benefit was thought to be that it is 'obviously more democratic' since all councillors are evidently 'making decisions'.

The greatest concern centred on the fact that, since the number of Councillors would apparently remain the same and the number of committees could be reduced ("up to five' could mean one or two"), this would mean that all the committees would have more people on them and, if the not inconsiderable experience of committee work experienced by our respondents were anything to go by, they felt, this would significantly slow down decision making, not streamline it. Many, through personal experience, thought they recognised committees as potentially long-winded talking shops and that to attempt a change of some sort of alternative could be a risk worth taking.

- **Preferences** Respondents were asked for their preferences and whether or not the group discussion had changed their minds. Having taken part in the focus group, many felt that

they had enjoyed the discussion and found the experience 'interesting'. However, if anything, the additional debate had left some even more bewildered about their preference. There were, it appeared to them, so many conflicting arguments and counter arguments for each option that, to many, none seemed to be the ideal solution (although no one could propose such a model).

The Options which included the elected mayor, although the benefits were recognised, were the first to be eliminated because the disadvantages of the potential for too much power and lack of homogeneous District focus. This, of course, left Options A and D on the table and the decision (often described as the 'least bad Option') was, to some extent, made on the basis of whether or not one was willing to embrace change or prefer the status quo.

By nature of the invitation and self-selecting acceptance process to acquire respondents, there was no deliberate weighting of groups to reflect the quantified response. A substantial minority could not recall for certain how they had voted in the quantified feedback or, therefore, whether they had changed their mind – perhaps another indication of the degree of depth of decision making taken over the matter? However, when the results of the quantified preference was exposed to respondents, there was very little surprise that the options incorporating a mayor had fared less well and no difficulty in accepting the outcome that Option A had been preferred.

This 'micro-minority' of community-interested respondents did feel that the way the Council structures itself is an important issue in order that the decision making process is undertaken as efficiently and effectively as possible. Nevertheless, it was apparent that few respondents held a particularly strong view in favour of either of the 'non-mayor' options in particular and, in the final analysis, it was felt that either A or D could work well if the Council wanted to make it do so.