

40 YEARS OF DUNSTABLE



Paul Hodson PSLCC, Town Clerk and
Chief Executive at Dunstable Town Council

in Bedfordshire, reflects on 40 years of growth, resilience, and service.

At Dunstable Town Council's first meeting, held on 1 April 1985, the council's budget was set at £225,439 with 16,000 homes paying Council Tax. In the first year, the council took on the management of Grove House and Priory Gardens, the cemetery, five recreation grounds, allotments, public toilets, and the War Memorial. A super-council of its day! 40 years later, Dunstable Town Council employs 80 staff delivering a wide range of public services from several buildings, with a total budget of £4 million. For councils looking to take on more devolved services in the near future, Dunstable's story may offer some hope.

Relationships matter

The council's first permanent town clerk, Richard Walden, had previously worked for South Bedfordshire District Council, and had worked closely with their then chief executive. That relationship and overall support from the district council was key to the town council's initial success. The district passed over the management and then freehold of Grove House and Priory Gardens, the cemetery, five recreation grounds, allotments, public toilets, and the War Memorial. The immediate set of services gave the council an opportunity to develop and deliver services from the outset.

Keep evolving

Many of the council's services have been through several delivery models over the years. The medieval Priory House includes tea rooms which raise an income to contribute to the costs of maintaining the building. Initially, the tea rooms were run as a concession by a commercial organisation. While this provided a good service, ultimately the original provider could not make the venue profitable. The town council then took on direct delivery of the service. This has enabled the team running the centre to be flexibly involved in events, youth work, and other council services. The council also directly delivers a community café, youth services, and older people's services, among others.

Seize opportunities

When Central Bedfordshire moved its registrar service from the town council's offices to a single provision at its headquarters outside of the town, the town council took the opportunity to offer Priory House as a wedding venue. After modest investment, the house has become a popular venue, not least because of the opportunity to be married on the town council's croquet lawn within Priory Gardens, a scheduled monument, on fine days.

Special Feature

The purpose and principles
of the public sector

*'Those who cannot learn from
history are doomed to repeat it.'*

George Santayana

Preserve listed buildings – cautiously!

The town council purchased the Priory House as a heritage centre in 2004, using a £1.1 million grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund. Despite carrying out extensive works a few years later, the building is currently undergoing more substantial works to address unforeseen internal issues, at a cost nearing £5 million, largely funded by grants. Discussions continue today as to whether councillors would have bought the building had they known the full extent of the issues hidden within the walls and floors of the house at the time. However, no organisation other than the town council would have fought for the building's future, or would be able to ensure its long term use by the community.



Members of the town council, 1986

Celebrate your identity and history

While the town council was a brand new creation in 1985, it inherited a mace presented to the town by Queen Victoria and a 120 year mayoral history. The council has continued to protect and promote the town's unique history and traditions. The council office corridor is adorned with photos of all our past mayor's and town clerks, which often gives visitors reason to pause, read and reflect.

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Countless groups of school children, brownies, cubs, and local groups have been shown around the council's offices over the years, supporting the shared sense of local history and civic pride shared by many of our residents.

Add value

The four town rangers rotate round the town's five wards on a 'see it, fix it' basis. Their work is additional to the street cleaning service provided by our unitary council. Graffiti is cleaned, overgrowth cut back, and a host of issues resolved. All jobs that nobody else would do. The rangers are able to add value and to make the town look much better than the unitary council's budget would enable.

Communication

Things have changed since the first typewritten minutes were produced 40 years ago. The council invests in communication; we now have 14,000 followers on our main Facebook page, along with thriving accounts for individual services, including using Instagram, TikTok, and more recently LinkedIn. Along with a mobile digital display and a rolling digital display in the town centre, the council's electronic communications are constantly evolving. But the most significant channel remains our printed newsletter, 'Talk of the Town', which is delivered to every household and high street businesses four times a year. Whilst this isn't cheap, it is fiercely protected as the only way of ensuring all residents receive regular updates about the council's services, our contact details, and invitations to provide feedback on council services.

Partnerships can change

The town council played a key role, working with Central Bedfordshire Council, in establishing the Creasey Park Community Football Centre in 2011. The town council managed the centre under a licence to CBC and was able to develop it

into a thriving community venue, with costs covered by income raised. CBC decided in 2022 that they could 'sweat the asset' more by going out to tender for a provider. The town council lost out to another provider who offered more money but with less focus on community benefit. Partnerships are only as strong as the current councillor and officer relationships and are always subject to changes in policy and the wider context. Whilst Dunstable Town Council will always look to develop partnership projects, the council's long term aim is to secure freehold ownership of buildings and land to ensure their long term security and protection for our residents.

Don't give up!

In 1988, 'Anglia Water Authority was advised about the town council's concern about continuous flooding in the town centre at times of heavy rainfall. A meeting was arranged...to take the matter further.' A scheme to install storage tanks under the high streets, connected to newly installed rain gardens, was finally completed...in 2022.

From its creation, the town council sought to take on the running of Dunstable Markets. The town council requested devolution market management in 2004. This was declined in favour of a commercial operator. However, this arrangement stalled, and in 2012 the town council took over the management of Dunstable Market, along with the powers devolved from the town's market charter. The town council was able to change the market arrangements over time, and this year is our busiest to date, with the fortnightly Middle Row Markets averaging 30 stalls, along with a range of specialist markets and events through the year.

The council will continue what is now our proven ability: to preserve and develop assets and services that our residents are proud of, whilst seizing new opportunities and telling residents about all that we do.



As part of a package of support to help clerks navigate the challenges of unitarisation and devolution, SLCC has developed a range of resources to help town and parish clerks understand the implications of the English Devolution White Paper. These include specific guidance to support you in navigating the changing landscape of local government.

The proposed devolution plans will bring new responsibilities and challenges. To support you through this transition, we've also launched a programme of webinars addressing key issues and practical considerations.

Find out more at: www.slcc.co.uk/devolution