

Portishead

Interview with Paul Gardner of Portishead Independents by Peter Andrews, November 2018

Background

Portishead is a town of about 28,000 residents and about 20,000 voters. The town has grown rapidly over the last 20 years and its character has changed from a 'working industrial village' of 5000 souls to its current size where it mainly acts as a dormitory town to Bristol and surrounds. Despite being this the town has a vibrant community life which has thrived, as Paul says in spite of the council rather than because of it.

The current council has been described as utterly hapless. As an idea of the state of things the local newspaper once ran a headline "Democracy is Dead in Portishead" As I write it consists of 9 Conservatives members 3 Libdems and 2 independents (ex Tories). Like many councils of this type it is dominated by retired people most of whom could be fairly categorised as 'golf club' types. And, again as in other places, it would appear their attitude is that once elected they can do what they want for the next four years. Currently their main preoccupation is not to increase the precept. Paul points out that most of them are not bad people but that they just don't seem to understand participatory democracy.

Portishead Independents were formed in April 2018. They came together as group of people fed up with the Tory led council and their policies or rather the lack of them. As people with differing national political views joined the organisation it needed to evolve to become what it said on the tin apolitical and truly independent of party politics. Membership has steadily increased with the loss of a few of the original members.

Portishead had 4 wards with 14 seats. At the time of writing they have 11 candidates confirmed to stand in the May 2019 elections. Their situation is slightly complex in as much as the town sends 6 councillors to the Unitary Authority – North Somerset Council . PI is standing candidates at North Somerset as well as Town level.

They have no "manifesto" but have publicised their 6 key pledges and the underpinning detail on their website and on Facebook.

Facebook and Communications

PI currently have a website which Paul says is used mainly for reference purposes. So for example they will put up details of their

candidates, their six key pledges etc. Their main means of communication with their public and members is via Facebook. They have quickly added more than 800 followers. Paul proudly said that their last post reached 5,000 people with 2500 clicking through for more information. PI Posts regularly reach several thousand people per week and we have a bigger FaceBook following than any of the National Parties in North Somerset. (Portishead Poulation 28k: North Somerset 180k)

Paul has noticed an interesting hierarchy of responses to Facebook posts. The best are posts about people, followed by voter education material, Town Issues, followed by details of PI's pledges and positive news stories. He said that originally people responded to "negative posts" more than "positive" but that that was now changing fast.

They have a policy of not responding to attacks from other parties or the trolls although they have had to ban a few people from posting on Facebook. Their house rules are to make their communications as positive as possible but that this is sometimes impossible given the level of incompetence they have to deal with. Paul believes that by not responding to attacks or responding politely they make their detractors just look stupid. Just asking people to meet for a coffee normally makes detractors go quiet!

PI have an open monthly meeting to which they encourage members of the public to attend. It is held over a pub and has an agenda of PI issues. It also has space where they encourage members of the public to come along and voice their issues. A Facebook post follows the meeting. They see this as the beginning of a process whereby PI can start to get a handle on issues that affect their town.

As concerned citizens they have recently used the Local Government Act to call a special residents meeting and will draft 4 or 5 motions on improving public participation and democracy. Which they fully expect the council will ignore. The purpose of this is twofold 1. it showcases positive, reasonable things we would do if elected and 2. forces council to respond - if they do nothing - they believe PI will gain more support.

Flatpack Democracy

Paul said that many PI members had read Flatpack Democracy to a greater or lesser extent. He himself found it a strong, engaging read and he particularly liked some of the ideas and pointers as to how to go about taking control of your local council. One idea that particularly resonated with him was the fact that you must stay in

regular touch with your supporters. He also liked the fact that it showed that local people could get together and take over their Town Council.

What he disagreed with however was the timeframe. Members of PI have the philosophy that you need as long as possible to engage with your electorate. The longer timeframe has given them the opportunity to build trust with their electorate and in addition shake out any people who are not fully on board with the concept of independent politics. As Paul says that the longer you have the more people will get to know about you and the longer you have to build up your supporter base.

Way of Working and Standing Orders

Candidates sign a simple statement whereby they agreed to follow the Ways of Working. These were taken from Flatpack Democracy, adapted for their own use and posted on the PI website along with the local pledges.

Paul also said that he would like their first act on taking power to burn the Standing Orders.

Hints and tips for others taking the independent route

1. Go public as early as possible – it is a marathon not a sprint
2. Have a plan – treat take power as a project with a goal
3. Be as open and welcoming as possible – try and leverage the expertise of the whole community.
4. You need to be resilient and keep going – people have got interested and faded away and others taken their place. This is another reason to start as early as possible.
5. Always be positive in your dealings

When I asked Paul what would be the first thing he would like to see when PI took control of Portishead Council he said that he would like to see, at the first council meeting, all the members dress up in fancy dress and make a dramatic entrance, to show they were utterly different from what had gone before.

FOOTNOTE – Portishead Independents went on to take control of their council