

Monmouth

Phone interview with Rachel Jupp, Kelly Jackson-Graham and Claudia Blair of Indy Monmouth by Peter Andrews, November 2018

Background and Monmouth Town Council

The story of Indy Monmouth (IM) started as did many of the independent movements with the intransigence of the local council. In this case there had been a problem about the siting of a new children's playground and getting it moved from close to a busy road to somewhere safer and less polluted. One of the campaigners Rachel Jupp had built up quite a large Facebook following about the problem. She had also visited council meetings with other members of her team. They came away with the overall feeling that they were being treated as a nuisance and it seemed that by ignoring them the council hoped they would go away. It was commented that during that meeting when the 'playground people' were speaking the councillors had their backs to them and wouldn't even look at them.

This wasn't an isolated incident but kept on happening. Kelly Jackson-Graham, who is now one of the IM councillors, told me that she wanted to speak at a town council meeting but was too frightened to speak because of the disdain with which she felt the public were being held.

Rachel's father had sent her a copy of Flatpack democracy and said why didn't she do the same thing in Monmouth. A group of residents made a visit to Frome Town Council to see how their council meetings were run, and then a trip to Abergavenny to hear Peter Macfadyen the author of Flatpack Democracy speak.

All of this acted as a catalyst and in February 2017 they held a meeting, in a pub, and decided to set up Indy Monmouth. Shortly after they held a public meeting in the town to which about 70 people came (including several councillors and their spouses) and it was decided to try and take over the council with independents. They set themselves a target to go forward to the election of having 16 people stand as candidates. At the end of the evening they had 15 potential candidates, plus a self-proclaimed facilitator into the bargain. Despite being one candidate short the consensus was to forge on as they had a lot to do before the election. Privately, though, Kelly and Rachael expressed our doubts to each other over one or two candidates who they were less sure of or who seemed less strong than others. Also, the lack of the magic '16' caused

Rachel to lose a bit of sleep as the Flatpack manual makes very clear it should be all or nothing.

They did not form a Small Political Party. IM is a loose affiliation of residents which, on reflection, the interviewees felt was a mistake as it didn't allow them to formalise their values and views and didn't give people 'something to sign up to'. In addition it meant that everybody wanted IM to be what they wanted it to be and it diluted the common message. It also meant that they didn't get what they wanted they could cause trouble which in turn prevented IM from always showing a united front.

They used the usual methods of campaigning leaflets, knocking on doors and especially social media. At the May 2017 elections 7 IM representatives were elected to the council. Significantly the turnout was 20% higher than usual for a local election and for the first time in living memory all seats were contested. All this was despite the local newspaper the Monmouthshire Beacon acting more or less as a mouthpiece for the Conservatives

As of today October 2018 IM have only 4 remaining members. Two have resigned (more of which later) and one has joined another political party.

What Happened Next

Immediately after the elections the trouble started. IM decided, as the biggest party on the council, to put forward their members for the position of mayor and deputy mayor. At a packed meeting, five days after the election, IM members were elected to both offices. Again my interviewees felt this may have been a mistake as the shock to the existing order and the remaining non-IM councillors was possibly greater than they could take and they became immediately obstructive, and in general, remain so.

To add to the strangeness, no sooner had the IM councillor that had been elected mayor, put on the tricorne hat and chain of office, than she became an establishment figure. And if not actually working against the IM objectives did not seem to 'get' their ethos at all. So nothing she deemed different or radical was allowed past her or the parish clerk. The reasons for this transformation were never quite clear to the IM members but you can imagine this was quite a shock and a lesson to all to know your candidates. Kelly even commented that at one infamous meeting she even yelled at the IM members and stormed off in tears when the particular vote did go her way. The woman elected as mayor continued her 'no risk, no change' policy until her resignation in May 2018.

As mentioned above the newly employed town clerk decided to throw in her lot with the 'old guard' and the mayor. This has caused innumerable problems getting anything faintly radical even taken up by the council let alone passed. It also underlines the need to have in place sympathetic officials and to work out a strategy to get them employed, or win over the current post holders, if they are being obstructive.

Ways of Working and Standing Orders

IM have not adopted an agreed way of working. They did however think it would have helped from the start as it would have given them a framework in which to work together and make decisions. It would also have weeded out at an early stage those unsuitable for collaborative politics and hence to be part of IM.

The Standing Orders have in Monmouth, as in almost everywhere I have interviewed newly elected independents, become a bone of contention. IM have sought to change the Standing Orders to make them more user-friendly but have been completely ignored by the council and the officer??. As we have seen elsewhere, unless they are radically updated they remain a barrier to public engagement is a comfort blanket to those who do not wish to see change.

What have you done that you are proud of

The IM Facebook page has 321 followers – more active than others and each IM councillor has their own page. The current Council has a rather strange attitude to social media by, for example, not allowing councillors to upload agendas themselves. In addition everything posted must be agreed with the clerk and 'corporate body' ages in advance. So no tweeting during council meetings or opening out debate to the residents. This shows a complete lack of understanding by the council of the role of social media and is acting as yet one more obstacle on the road to open governance.

Organised a hugely successful Lantern Parade bringing over 2000 people into the town – 10 times more than a similar event the previous year. The interviewees told me that they had received a lot of grief from the council and others when trying to setting it up - being told it was going to fail etc and quibbling over minor details.

Held a well attended public event on the playground where people could talk and get listened to.

Set up talks with County Council about a new footbridge over the River Wye

Campaigned for more money for Citizens Advice Bureau which was to be cut to £5K. IM demanded £10K but in the end had to settle for £7500

The underpass needed repainting, it was covered in graffiti. Rather than wait for a council to do it Kelly said she just got a lot of local people, and some tins of paint, and went out and did it.

Hints and Tips

Get to know your candidates - Enough said

Important to have a diversity of political views in your party – or you just become the Liberal Democrats or Labour whatever the current opposition party is.

Timeframe was too short – in an area so resistant to change IM should have been working to convert the townspeople for longer than the six or so weeks they had.

Get a facilitator for big public meetings.

DIY. Don't wait to be allowed.

Get a WOW early in your life cycle

Kelly says she loves campaigning – being part of a group – having fun – making new connections.

If you are in a conservative area you will undoubtedly the experience of backlash, which can become nasty and personal, as you are challenging this status quo.

As a footnote and you will be overjoyed to hear the playground is going to be moved to a more conducive spot and Rachel has now been elected to the council