

# Reflections on a Life in Local Government

Lesley Cumberland

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the creation of Dover District Council, when the three boroughs of Dover, Deal and Sandwich were all incorporated into the new district, along with Dover Rural District Council and most of Eastry RDC. Long retired, I was unaware of this milestone, but, once alerted, much of my career in Local Government flashed before my eyes! Patchy memories were at once distilled in chats with a good friend whom I met on my first day as an articled clerk in the Town Clerk's office at New Bridge House, Dover, in summer 1965. After fifty years we should all be well aware of how the local government system is set up in this country. The dramatic 1974 change and further proposed changes in the late 1990s (which never materialised) have been well reported in this magazine and the press. Even so, for someone who experienced it first hand, retirement has dimmed much, and I offer you some random memories that remain.

What prompted an only child from a working-class family in the East Midlands to get a degree in law from King's College, London was a mystery to my family. However, seeking further training in local government towards becoming a solicitor was clearer. It paid a living wage during training, unlike much of the private sector at the time. As I waited for my final exam results, an advertisement on the front page of *The Times*, commencing 'South Coast Town Clerk seeks articled clerk ...!', prompted me to seek employment out of London, and the rest is history.

With its castle, port and close association with the Cinque Ports, Dover seemed a prestigious place to be. I was made very welcome by the councillors and staff,

especially the typists at New Bridge who seized the chance to adopt the new fashion for miniskirts, forbidden until I turned up in one (just over the knee). I had to learn about the committee system: there were twenty-four councillors in all, six of whom had been elected Aldermen and wore red fur-trimmed robes on ceremonial occasions. James A Johnson, the Town Clerk of fearsome reputation, presided over them at Council and Committee Meetings and kept us all in order. I should add that he was always kind to me and, I learnt, carried out many acts of a charitable nature in the town, which remained private.

After two years learning the ropes, I spent six months at a law college in Liverpool, where I did my final exams. I returned to Dover to find the Town Clerk on the brink of retirement, his Deputy (Ian Gill) about to replace him and a new articled clerk (also a woman) already appointed and in situ. My options were limited. Either look elsewhere for a position or become Deputy Town Clerk, if they would have me. I became probably the youngest Deputy Town Clerk in the country. Within a few years the much-heralded Local Government Act 1972 came into force, and it was all change.

The five local authorities thrown together by the Act had already appointed a number of officers (including me) to prepare the disparate councils for the event, whilst continuing to run the existing ones as before. Each council had its own method of doing things and the integration to one system had to be agreed and ready in time. The Local Land Charges Register, for instance, which solicitors search whenever a private property is about to change hands, were kept in five different paper



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systems in 1972, but in good time had all been incorporated into the single Kalamazoo system favoured by the largest constituent authority. Overwhelmed by paperwork and archives, it was time to get to grips with IT.

KCC made a brave offer to produce an integrated, online, computerised version of all thirteen district registers of electors in Kent. Eventually, they succeeded, but at a far higher cost than anticipated – the shape of things to come! The new Dover District Council took office in April 1974 with fifty-six members (since reduced to thirty-six), again with offices scattered throughout the district. This meant more travelling, more committees and much more political intrigue from the beginning. Life in the office was rarely dull for any department.

I remember we coped with ever-reducing resources as central government clamped down, over time, on all expenditure. Early on, we lost control of business rates, and matching grants for expenditure from government rapidly diminished and disappeared. Then came privatisation, compulsory in the Thatcher years, so that many services are now provided by the private sector, with the public sector footing the bill. Change is periodically needed in any organisation and can and should be welcomed, so long as somewhere someone is keeping a reckoning. When further amendments to council powers were mooted, it was then my personal belief that we would be better off with a much larger Unitary Authority, with

virtually all powers (education, social services etc), much like Medway Council and many larger towns and cities have now adopted. However, it would have had to be based, say, in Canterbury, as it would have acted as a regional authority in place of KCC, and the report of the investigating Government Commission quashed the idea on the basis that consultations had found little appetite for such a change.

In recent years of retirement, I have wondered whether public interest in local government has been diminished to near oblivion by increasingly larger authorities, with numerous unpaid councillors trying to serve their electorate in the face of seemingly hostile governments. To have purpose and clout, it is still my belief that we do need larger authorities, but with fewer councillors, paid an attractive fee, (not a salary), for serving. If one MP can serve fifty thousand voters or more, why should not say, three to five members elected by each joining authority, provide, in whatever way they choose, semi-regional government? Part of the problem is lack of interest and less available information, caused in part by the reduced presence and interest of the press, battling as they are with new on-line means of communication. At least the local parish councils would remain, but I am not sure if they are any better known or talked about by their constituents.

Could a more strategic authority revive the public's interest? Or should we stand back and let things stay as they are? Has local government passed its heyday, with almost no one knowing their local councillor, never mind their county council representative, or was that always the case? This needs fresher brains than mine. I shall return to my armchair and leave further discussion, if needed, to those better placed and interested.