A Speakers’ Corner project
in rural Herefordshire

Peter Bradley, Speakers Corner Trust
Speakers’ Corner Trust is a registered charity which promotes free expression, public debate and active citizenship as a means of revitalising civil society in the UK and supporting its development in emerging democracies. Speakers’s Corner Trust approach is based on the belief that association between citizens and the free, face-to-face exchange of ideas, information and opinions – with each other as well as with the decision-takers among them – is a key to rebuilding trust and participation in Britain’s civil society and developing vibrant civil institutions and robust rights in emerging democracies.

www.speakerscornertrust.org
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1. Summary

The aim of this paper is to identify the challenges to be overcome by the Speakers’ Corner Trust in implementing a suitable unit in rural areas across the county and, later, the country.

Speakers’ Corner Trust (SCT) is a new registered charity which promotes free expression, public debate and active citizenship as a means of revitalising civil society in the UK and supporting its development in emerging democracies.

SCT pursues its aims by forming local Speakers’ Corner Committees made up of representatives of the public, private and voluntary sectors which ‘own’ and steer projects designed to stimulate and support public discussion and debate.

SCT’s emphasis on face-to-face engagement distinguishes it from a range of initiatives promoting participation online. SCT believes that it is important to encourage communities to come together to exchange information, ideas and opinions and, when necessary, to make their case directly to policy makers, decision-takers and service providers. That experience can be empowering, enriching and a powerful way in which to develop the mutual respect, sense of common cause and cooperation which underpin successful communities.

2. Background

Over time, SCT aims to establish a network of Speakers’ Corner projects throughout the UK and overseas. It was first launched in Nottingham in February 2008 and the new Speakers’ Corner in the city centre was inaugurated by the Justice Secretary Jack Straw on 26 February 2009. SCT’s second project, in Lichfield, was launched in May 2009 and several more initiatives in Bristol and the London Borough of Waltham Forest are due to be undertaken.

At the heart of each initiative lies a programme of events designed by the local Committee to reach every community in its area. They could include debates led by local interest groups, public consultations mounted by local organisations, politicians or statutory bodies or discussions stimulated by experts, enthusiasts or others on subjects from the global to the local to the cultural.

The central principle in all these events is that they should be accessible to all, strictly non-partisan and non-adversarial, welcome diversity and seek to inform opinion and, where possible, identify common ground.

In major towns and cities the committee’s work may include establishing new Speakers’ Corners in public spaces as symbols of citizens’ rights, focuses for civic identity and platforms for public engagement. However this may not be the best approach for a rural location. This study considers the effectiveness of implementing such an initiative in a rural setting.
3. Scope of the case study

A key focus in commissioning this paper was to evaluate the steps needed to adapt the current model, used in towns and cities, to address the needs and interests of rural communities. In particular, it focuses on disadvantaged rural communities whose voices are seldom heard and focuses on providing new opportunities for them to come together to discuss the issues of greatest importance to them. The model is meant to be used as a basis for consensus-building and cooperation and as well as a means of influencing decision-takers.

Through recommendation by the West Midlands Rural Action Network (WMRCAN), SCT held a consultation with the Herefordshire Association of Local Councils to identify a potential location for the project. It was here that a boarder group of six parishes in north Herefordshire was identified as the ideal location for the Speakers’ Corner project.

The parishes - which include Buckton and Coxall, Brampton Bryan, Adforton, Walford, Letton & Newton and Lingen & Willey - all share the same County Council Ward of Mortimer. They cover an area of approximately six miles east-west and seven miles north-south, with a population of some 500 people living in the three small villages of Adforton, Brampton Bryan and Lingen and the countryside between them.

The size and rural nature of the area, the sparsity of the population, the distance between settlements and the lack of any major town combine to make the location particularly attractive as well as challenging for a pilot, rural initiative.

In this location the SCT will be able to gauge the effectiveness of a mobile Speaker’s Corner which visits individual villages, on a cyclical basis or as requested, to engage people in debate and active citizenship. It’s hoped the unit will provide a platform for spontaneous expression and exchange as well as for organised events, including consultations commissioned, for example, by local authorities and other public bodies.

A number of local themes have been identified as useful discussion themes for the Speakers’ Corner project. These include:

- Addressing rural isolation;
- Sustaining rural communities;
- Securing affordable housing;
- Listening to the ‘lost voices’ of the elderly, the isolated and those on low incomes;
- Meeting the challenge of climate change;
- Developing the local economy;
- Delivering health and social services and improving public transport.

The project will also be used to engage a local theatre such as the Courtyard in Hereford in organising free coaching sessions in the skills required for confident and effective speaking in public.
4. Findings to date

At this stage there appears to be significant interest in utilizing a rural, mobile model of the Speakers’ Corner project in the region. Herefordshire County Council, specifically, has expressed interest in the project and has proposed a number of preliminary initiatives through which to secure local support for it. They have also agreed to form the nucleus of a small project working group which will also include representatives of other key local organisations, including the county council and other public services, local schools and the voluntary sector to be recruited at an early stage in the project’s development.

This study is still [at the scoping/in a provisional] stage, however plans are already in hand to generate interest in the project in the local community though it will be made clear that the development of the project is subject to funding.

Beyond the council, the SCT has been in consultation with a number of local and national organisations to gauge their interest and support in the project. Although more consultation is required to identify practical means through which funding for the initiatives can be secured, it’s hoped the project will be rolled out across the West Midlands and elsewhere. The response to the plans from the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC), as one example, was promising. They believe the SCT project is:

“...a very interesting project which ties in well with our promotion of community engagement; we welcome initiatives which help to engage rural people in policy and planning processes, especially those not normally engaged in such processes.”

Beyond support and funding, other practical considerations include the actual creation and implementation of a mobile Speaker’s Corner. In this study, the SCT joined in collaboration with Central St Martins College of Art and Design (CSM), part of the University of the Arts London, who developed designs for a generic modular Speakers’ Corner. The project included platforms and seating areas which can be assembled, stored and transported. Through this consultation a design has been chosen and there are now preliminary discussions with a Shropshire-based woodworker on the creation of a hand-crafted but affordable wooden model for use in the parishes.

Furthermore, it will also be necessary to consider how the project will be administrated over the long-term. It’s believed that the appointment of a part-time administrator will be key in the project’s lasting success. The role of the administrator should be to:

- Provide support to the Speakers’ Corner Committee;
- Assist in the development and promotion of the project;
- Co-ordinate the project’s launch;
- Encourage and manage the use of the Speakers’ Corner by local organisations;
- Manage the planning and delivery of debates and events;
- Plan and execute fund-raising initiatives as required;
- Manage the planning and delivery of speaker training programmes;
- Develop and maintain a dedicated website.

The administrator would probably work from home but liaise closely with the Borders Group Parish Clerk and the Chair and officers of the Speakers’ Corner Committee and its partners.

In conclusion, the initial stages of this study support the need and desire to host a Speakers’ Corner project in a rural location.
5. Appendix

Research to support

The Border Parish Group provides the ideal point of entry for the Speakers’ Corner project.

It was awarded Quality Parish Council status in 2007 by the Department for Communities & Local Government (DCLG). The scheme describes a Quality Town or Parish Council as one which:

• “Is representative of, and actively engages, all parts of its community, providing vision, identity and a sense of belonging;

• Is effectively and properly managed;

• Articulates the needs and wishes of its community;

• Upholds high standards of conduct;

• Is committed to work in partnership with principal local authorities and other public service agencies;

• In proportion to its size and skills, delivers local services on behalf of principal local authorities when this represents the best deal for the local community;

• Works closely with voluntary groups in its community;

• Provides leadership to the community through its work on parish plans; and

• Working with its partners, acts as an information point for local services.”

DCLG states in its guidance that:

“Clearly, Quality Parish Councils will be in a better position than other parish councils to help realise the ambitions and goals contained within their parish and town plans. They will be in a better position to represent the views of local people and to ensure that principal local authorities and other service providers listen to and respond to the needs of local people. They may also be in a better position to take action and decisions more directly including the delivery of some local services.”

The Border Group was responsible in 2003 for one of the first Parish Plans in the country. Pride of Place was developed with the support of Community First (part of the West Midlands Rural Community Action Network) and funding from the Vital Villages programme, administered by the Countryside Agency (now the Commission for Rural Communities). It provides a blueprint for the community’s future, addressing a range of its needs, including housing, transport, health care, education, recreation and economic development.