

BIG SOCIETY MEMBERS SUB GROUP

5 DECEMBER 2013

PRESENT: Councillors David Burbage (Chairman), Mrs Christine Bateson and George Bathurst.

Officers: Wendy Allum, Wendy Binmore, Andrew Green, Harjit Hunjan and Maria Lucas

PART I

01/13 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

None were received.

02/13 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None

03/13 TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Chairman introduced the Terms of Reference which had been set out by the Big Society Panel. He confirmed that the Sub Group only contained three Members of the Borough Council because that was the nature of a Sub Group of the Big Society Panel. Parish Councillor Davies (Chairman of DALC) stated he wanted to take the Terms of Reference away to digest more thoroughly to be able to produce something more amenable as he had only had the papers for a few days. The Chairman disagreed and stated the Terms of Reference were only one page long and he had had five days to read them. Mr Davies said he was aiming for the same goal of obtaining public involvement but without the Borough wielding a big stick. He added he did not agree with number five of the Terms of Reference which stated:

- It will look at electoral law powers the Borough may choose to exercise should parish councils persist in holding vacancies that are not co-opted and/or repeated under-nomination experienced at past all-out elections.

Mr Davies stated he wanted to discuss it and come up with something that all could agree on. The Chairman stated that the point of having the item in the terms of reference was for it to be discussed. Disagreeing with an item is not the same as saying that it should not be discussed. Councillor Bateson interjected the meeting had been formed as part of the Big Society Panel. Therefore, it was up to the three Members of the Sub group to produce the Terms of Reference but, she welcomed input from the audience. She added that the Terms of Reference could not be taken away for discussion. The Chairman commented although Mr Davies stated he did not like them, he had not made any useful comments. He confirmed that they were not trying to extend the Borough's powers. The Chairman stated

that he wanted to encourage democracy and therefore, wished to have discussions on the issue.

04/13 INCREASING DEMOCRACY BY ENCOURAGING PARISH COUNCIL ELECTIONS – IMPLEMENTATION ARRANGEMENTS

The report primarily looked at the following issues:

1. It recommended that members should:
 - i) Consider the Action Plan for Increasing Local Democracy attached as Appendix A and agree arrangements for its implementation
 - ii) Agree the extent to which the Council should support parishes with the cost of local elections
2. The recommendation was being made to support the Council's commitment to the Big Society and to encourage democracy.
3. If adopted, the key financial implications for the Council depended on the extent to which the Council agreed to support the cost of parish elections.
4. The options ranged through: supporting parishes with the full administrative costs of a contested election (£2,000-£4,000 per election depending on whether it was shared with another election or not), agreeing not to recharge parishes for particular elements of the cost (e.g. polling cards or the cost of premises) or meeting the publicity cost of publicising vacancies and elections.

The Chairman said he had looked on the NALC website to find a good example of a Parish council. He stated that a good Parish Council promoted democracy and citizenship. The points listed on the NALC web site were very similar to the Borough's activities, such as:

- Distributing materials
- Publicising elections
- Press releases
- Working with schools

The Chairman stated they were some of the things the Borough had been doing and requested comments from the audience as to whether they were activities that the Borough could help the Parish Councils with. The Chairman received the following comments:

- Wraysbury had carried out those activities during the last election.
- It was not possible to do anymore than publicize a vacancy
- Word of mouth to advertise a vacancy was a very powerful tool
- All of the mentioned activities were good but they felt strongly that it was a matter for the Parish Council to choose what strategy was implemented.

In response to the comments, the Chairman stated that he was not opposed to Parishes promoting democracy but there was an incentive to do the bare minimum and it did not give the electorate much choice if no election was held. He added that Parish Councils had the ability to campaign and then local residents had a choice. The Borough acted that way so he did not see why Parishes could not either.

PCllr Dawson stated it was not possible to force people to come forward and stand as a candidate. Her Parish did do Facebook posts and newsletters which asked people to find out more about standing as a candidate but people were still not coming forward. She did not see what could be gained by forcing people to have an election. Councillor Bathurst commented that he felt the Parish Councillors worked very hard and he appreciated the work that they did.

Other comments from Parish Councillors included:

- Parish Councils were a legal authority in their own right
- Democracy was all about co-operation and consultation
- They requested that the Borough recognised Parish Councils as legal entities in their own right.
- The Legal functions of a Parish Council aided co-operation and they wanted the Borough to recognise that.
- With support and co-operation came consultation.
- The Parish Councillors should have been invited to sit round the table with the Borough Councillors and should not have been invited as an audience. That had been requested at the Parish Conference. The Terms of Reference should have stated that.
- Some Parish Councils do put some money aside for elections.

In response to the comments from Parish Councillors, the chairman stated that he:

- Wanted more services devolved as he was a believer of localism.
- Was aware that Parish councils did do work on elections but, he suggested it was possible to do more than what was being done already.
- There had not been any positive co-operation from the Parish Councils due to costs.
- There was a short timetable for the 2015 elections.

Councillor Bateson stated she had been a Parish Councillor for 10 years prior to becoming a Borough Councillor. She commented that she was trying to help the Parish Councils and that the Borough was happy to do their advertising of vacancies for them. The Borough just wanted to get more people involved but people did not always know anything about Parish Councils and Councillors. The Big Society Sub Group wanted to help. At the Parish Conference, Parish Councillors stated they could not afford elections because they cost too much to hold.

In response to Councillor Bateson, there were further comments made regarding the promotion of elections and what actions could be taken by the Borough on behalf of the Parishes:

- Members from the Borough had gone out to canvas for a candidate but, an election had still not been called due to not enough candidates coming forward.
- Councillor Beer had been to Cabinet regarding the elections issue but he did not speak as he had not spoken to his Parish colleagues beforehand. His point had been to organise a meeting to discuss the problems.

Councillor Bateson stated that she had held meetings with Parish Councillor Andrew Davies for two years but things had not been resolved; workshops had also been held. The Community & Business Partnerships Manager mentioned that he had been looking at getting different people involved and an action plan had been agreed and given to DALC.

Mr Davies stated that the plan did not include increasing democracy. He added he was in favour of increasing democracy but, there needed to be consultation on it. The Chairman said that various people wanted to join Parish Councils with citizens deciding who joined. That is what looked good. Co-option should not be used unless absolutely necessary.

Action: Chairman of DALC, the Community and Business Partnership Manager and the lead Member for Community Partnerships to review the Increasing DALC Recruitment to Parishes Action Plan.

Mr Davies commented that co-option was not necessarily a bad or undemocratic process.

The Chairman agreed but added that it was better to have elections. He confirmed that walking around and talking to people when campaigning was free of charge but admitted that printing of leaflets did carry a charge which had to be personally met by the candidate themselves.

Mr Davies said that when people were co-opted, the process was carried out through advertisement and candidates were interviewed. To do that with elections detracted from their status. The Chairman disputed that claim.

Councillor Mrs Bateson said she was looking for more engagement from Parish residents, but to do that, elections were required; she was not criticising co-option.

Parish Councillors confirmed that the NALC Quality Council initiative had been suspended.

Following that, Councillor Beer said he was on the Quality Council Panel to see how other Parish Councils filled their vacant seats. The maximum that Panel achieved was three where two of those were Town Councils and they had struggled to get sufficient numbers. As a Member of the District Association, he had worked with Councillor Bateson where she added a half a page of Parish information to a newsletter and had it distributed. That would be a suitable platform to advertise Parish Council Vacancies and information on how to become a Parish Councillor.

Cllr Mrs Bateson commented that she had instructed the Council's Communication & Marketing team to write to Parish Councillors so she could include their items in the newsletter, Around the Royal Borough residents' magazine but, they never received any responses; so soon after, it was dropped. She added that there was an edition of Around

the Royal Borough newsletter published in January 2014 and she was happy to receive contributions for the newsletter from Parish Councillors to include. The Community & Business Partnerships Manager stated that objective two of the report on increasing democracy suggested putting a piece in the 'Around the Royal Borough' Residents Magazine.

Action: Parishes to contact Councillor Bateson to include news from Parish Councils in the Around The Royal Borough residents magazine.

Mr Davies commented it was important that interested parties were put in touch with Parish Clerks so that that Parish Councillors took on more of the role in filling vacancies than the Borough Councillors; the Parish Clerk was able to inform interested candidates about what the role of candidate would entail.

The Chairman did not accept Mr Davies position because if Clerks did not keep a register of potential candidates, the Borough would need to take action. Parish Councillor Keith Robinson responded that it was for Parish Councillors to decide what action to take, not the Borough.

The Chairman stated he was keen for people to stand for election and wanted to be able to tell citizens that he was able to add their name to a list of prospective candidates. If there was no election for a long time, the Borough may want to put forward its own candidates. Mr Robinson stated that if the Borough offered help with the register of candidates instead of the Parish Clerk holding it, and the Parish Councillors rejected the help, the Borough would force it on them.

The Chairman clarified that the register could be circulated instead of held in the one place with the one person. The sharing of information would help all interested.

Councillor Beer commented that the Big Society Panel had offended Parish Councils. The Big Society Panel said it wanted to increase democracy which implied there was none. Parish Councils acted freely and did what they felt was best.

The Chairman emphasised that the Panel wanted to provide more democracy by devolving more services. Only four elections were held in May 2011.

Parish Councillors responded with the following comments:

- It did not indicate lack of democracy; it was not possible to force people to stand for election in Parish Councils.
- The Parish Councils had been trying to get people involved but once people found out what the role entailed they were no longer interested.
- Parish Councillors used to tell the Borough when they wanted to stand but now it was widely promoted within those Parish Councils.
- Parish Councillors did not want the Borough involved or advertising vacancies, the Parishes did it themselves.
- Parish Councillors were always trying to improve the way the Parishes worked. PCllrs were doing the job the borough wanted them to do.

- If more than one person came forward to stand for election, they would call an election.
- It has to be the Parish Clerk which holds the register of candidates.
- Parish Councillors are dedicated and hard working. When people realise how hard the role can be, anyone interested no longer wants to do it. The Borough making the process more politicised is putting more people off.
- Even through co-option, people ended up resigning from the role within a few months.

Action: Parish Clerks to hold and maintain a register of prospective candidates and inform the Borough that the register exists.

Councillor Bateson offered to begin adding half a page of Parish Council news to the Around the Royal Borough residents' magazine again. She added that people often felt the need to give something back to society, the Parish Councils and the Borough needed to encourage that.

Mrs Dawson confirmed that in order to get a good quality outcome, a good quality process was required. Councillor Bathurst stated that the Borough was looking to increase democracy in Parish Councils and that meant having more elections.

Central government often dictated to local government regarding policies and he did not see why it could not be the same for the Borough with Parish Councils.

The Chairman commented there were things that the Borough had to do statutorily and that situations were judged when they arose. He added he was trying to move forward with the devolution of some services to allow for more autonomy for Parish Councils.

Mr Robinson responded the Big Society Panel had been given KPI's to meet so it was not about increasing democracy. The Chairman stated that he was trying to push powers down to the Parish Councils and not keep them at the Borough level.

Councillor Beer responded to push them down was to force them onto Parish Councils.

Mrs Dawson stated that instead of the Borough coming up with a recipe and trying to sell it to the Parish Councils, the Borough should be consulting with the Parish Councils.

The Community & Business Partnerships Manager confirmed that the Borough does talk and listen to the Parish Councillors and that the devolution of services menu is discussed at all Parish Conference meetings. Parish Council have been invited to identify services that they wished to be devolved which the Council would develop into an offer as a devolved service. The Chairman suggested it would be helpful to ask the Parishes if there was anyone they wanted to put forward for election.

Action: Parish Councils to contact the Community and Business Partnerships Manager for discussion on how existing services could be made more attractive for them to take on themselves or, to identify new services that could potentially be developed.

Mr Davies confirmed that would help but, the Parish Clerk was the best person to approach. Councillor Bateson commented that was something that the Borough could help with if the Clerks were busy.

She offered Members to knock on doors to find candidates. The Parish Councillors said the Clerk could do that.

The Chairman stated he was not saying it was easy but it was possible. He added that the Big Society idea was to increase volunteers and those volunteers could help.

The Community & Business Partnerships Manager confirmed 99% of volunteers continued to volunteer and there were 880 Adopt a Street volunteers and 2800 people volunteering and supporting council services such as libraries, Guildhall museum, School Governors etc.

Other comments from the Parish Councillors included:

- Parish Councillors were ambassadors for their Parishes and they worked very closely with Parish Clerks
- They were always networking to find new candidates.
- Some kept lists of potential candidates in their diaries.
- Parish Councillors wanted elections but on the whole they usually had one candidate who stood.
- The Clerks were authorised Officers which had legal powers and were independent, they were the obvious point of contact for potential candidates.

The Chairman responded he was happy for clerks to be ambassadors when the system worked.

The Chairman discussed advertising for potentially interested candidates on local websites, such as RBWM, WMVA, DO It and other appropriate websites. Parish Councillors noted that not everyone had a computer but everyone read the noticeboards and that they advertised many different activities using the noticeboards.

Councillor Bathurst added that there was no harm in adding to what the Parish Councils already did. Councillor Bateson said if the Parish Councillors wanted to advertise something in the local paper, the Borough could also help with that.

Parish Councillors expressed some concern that if the Borough got involved, they would not be seen as independent, and they would be seen as affiliated with a political party. The Chairman assured them that anything that went out from the Borough to help Parish Councils would not bear any identifying logos.

Councillor Bathurst confirmed that he had spoken to residents in Wraysbury Parish and one or two had said the Parish Council was perceived as being a 'closed shop'.

The Chairman explained that the Borough wanted to develop a publicity and communications plan that attracted potential parish councillors, particularly young people. He confirmed that younger people were busy looking for work but 16-19 year olds who

wanted to apply for university were likely candidates as it was something that looked good on an application form in terms of what they had done for their local community. The Borough had interns and volunteers doing work experience and the Parishes could work in the same way. The Chairman confirmed it was an exercise that was worth trying.

The Chairman explained that the Borough was looking to develop and deliver a publicity and communications plan for the next full scale Parish election. The key components included were

- Web Page
- Front page on 'Around the Royal Borough' feature
- Press releases
- Posters/leaflets

The Community & Business Partnerships Manager confirmed the preferred outcome of the exercise was to reach 20% turnout for the Parish election in 2015. (**not sure this is correct – will need to check the 20%**)

The Chairman discussed the option of securing the necessary 10 signatures to trigger an election whenever notice of a casual vacancy was posted. He explained that the objective was to make sure the vacancy was publicised effectively to advise and encourage potential candidates to secure the 10 signatures required.

The Chairman stated that the Borough had felt it was a good idea and had already trialled the objectives in Wraysbury recently. He added that it was a useful pilot as people had not known about the vacancy. The noticeboards in Parishes would not have been read if the residents had been working.

Parish Councillors were not happy that their residents in Wraysbury had been approached, they were quite sure that if Members of the Panel went back into Wraysbury again, their residents still would not know about any vacancies.

PCllr Davies claimed his press release regarding a vacancy had encouraged five people to come forward for election in his parish. The Chairman asked for it to be noted that the Parish Councillors did not want the Borough to canvas parishes when vacancies were announced. Mrs Dawson stated even when 10 signatures had been collected to trigger an election; it did not mean an election was going to take place because they still might not have had a candidate to put forward.

The Chairman discussed the Increasing Democracy by Encouraging Parish Council Elections report. The report highlighted the following points:

1. The report outlined the legal requirements relating to parish elections, looked at barriers to parishes holding elections as opposed to co-opting new members and recommended actions for promoting town and parish elections and encouraging local democracy. It looked specifically at how more young people could be encouraged to participate on town and parish councils.
2. It recommended that members endorsed the 'action plan for increasing local democracy' at Appendix A which included proposals to: increase publicity and

promotion around parish elections, support parishes with the cost of elections, encourage more candidates (particularly young people) to come forward for election and take the necessary measures to trigger local elections wherever appropriate.

3. The recommendations were being made to support the Council's commitment to the Big Society.
4. If adopted, the key financial implications for the Council would be dependent on the extent to which the Council is prepared to support the cost of parish elections.
5. The options ranged through: supporting parishes with the full administrative cost of a contested election (£2,000-£4,000 per election depending on whether it was shared with another election or not), agreeing not to recharge parishes for particular elements of the cost (e.g. polling cards or the cost of premises) or meeting the publicity cost of publicising vacancies and elections.

Councillor Bateson said the costs of Parish elections had come up at the Parish Conference and that parish councillors had said they could not afford the costs. She had spoken to the Leader who had offered to look through what the Borough could offer the Parishes in terms of help to pay the costs. The Leader had offered to pay 50% of the costs of the first parish elections then after that, a grant could be offered.

The Parish Councillors agreed that they had no objections to being given money to help with costs of running and holding elections. Councillor Bateson confirmed they would only receive the money if parish elections were held. Parish Councillors suggested that some of the larger parishes would need to put some of the funds aside in reserve for future elections. The Chairman confirmed he was aware that people came and went and that there was a proposal to offer half the costs towards the first election; the Borough was legally allowed to do that. The Elections Administrator confirmed the costs for holding and preparing for an election came from:

- Ballot papers
- Postal voting
- Publicity

Although they were the main costs Parishes were worried about, there were other costs associated with elections which needed to be considered such as:

Portion of:

- Cost for hire/use of the polling station
- Returning officer fees
- Fees for polling station staff
- Fees for verification and count staff
- Fees for staff involved with the issue and opening of postal votes
- Cost of providing stationary and notices for the polling station
- Cost for the printing of postal voting packs if combined
- Postage for poll cards and postal voting packs
- Administration/clerical costs.

Councillor Bateson said the Borough could help out with single elections but that it was cheaper to hold more than one election at the same time due to parishes sharing costs.

Some of the suggestions for publicising elections were as follows:

- Roadside signs

- Press releases
- Adverts
- Leaflet drops

The Chairman re-stated the offer to do press releases but Wraysbury Parish did not want the Borough to do that. Mr Davies confirmed that Wraysbury had done their own press release; it was their vacancy and they wanted to control it. It was felt by the Parish Councillors they had no right to speak on behalf of absent Members and so a decision on how the Borough could help was unlikely to be reached. The Chairman expressed his enthusiasm for helping Parishes with elections; he suggested the Parishes designed a leaflet advertising a vacancy and the Borough would look into organising a leaflet drop to distribute it; this was welcomed by Parish Councils.

The Chairman explained the objective of ensuring an election is triggered if parishes failed to fill all vacancies within 35 days of a full election. The Elections Administrator confirmed that the Borough could put up another notice if there was failure to co-opt after 35 days of vacancy. If the Borough did not put the notice up, there was nothing to say the Borough could not issue a notice further down the line. She said she would double check on that and let the Chairman know. She went on to confirm that there had been three vacancies in Cox Green since 2011. The Elections Administrator said she would double check with the clerk. The Chairman said it was a good opportunity to trigger an election if the vacancy had existed since 2011.

The Chairman stated there were issues with the following statement in the report:

as set out in S.36 of the Representation of the People Act 1983, any expenses reasonably incurred by the returning officer shall be paid by the principle council; and if the council so required, this expenditure shall be repaid to them by the town/parish council.

The Chairman added he might look to review the situation but he was happy to hear commentary on it regarding the 2007 election. The Chairman confirmed if there was a long running vacancy, it was possible that not that many parish councillors were required. It could also be added to that when a seat had been uncontested for long periods of time, such as ten years or more. That could be a good metric used and requested Officers to do some work on that issue.

05/13 MEDIA PROTOCOLS FOR ADVERTISING PARISH COUNCILLOR VACANCIES

The Chairman requested comments on the report for media protocols. The Parish Councillors put forward the following views:

- A Parish Council should be free to draw up their own media plans
- They did not think it was the right time to discuss media protocols, it should be discussed within DALC and then they would come back to the Council with proposals.

The Chairman confirmed he did not want to duplicate any effort. Councillor Bathurst stated that the Borough wanted to compliment what the Parishes did and to add to it. The

Borough did not want to keep things secret from the Parishes but, if there were two different organisations promoting something, it was likely to have a greater impact. Councillor Bateson stated that some other Parish Councils might find the proposals beneficial.

The Chairman confirmed that he wanted the Parish Councillors to discuss the proposals with their other Members and associations and to come back with constructive feedback.

He added that he wanted to talk to and gain feedback from all Parish Councils not just the Members of DALC. The Parish Councillors stated that people were wary of politicians and what happened in Wraysbury might have damaged relations with residents further.

The Chairman responded he did not think the residents saw Members talking to them as negative and welcomed the chance to have their say. He added he was happy to have discussions regarding any concerns at a national level, with DALC and non-DALC Members.

The Chairman requested a meeting to be organised in February 2014 to update on progress.

Action: Progress update meeting to be organised for February 2014 with Parish Councillors to be invited to attend.

6/13

MEETING

The meeting, which began at 6.00pm, concluded at 8.00pm

CHAIRMAN:

DATE: