

BIG SOCIETY PANEL

17 SEPTEMBER 2013

PRESENT: Councillors David Burbage (Chairman), Christine Bateson (Vice-Chairman), Natasha Airey, George Bathurst, George Fussey, Jesse Grey and Philip Love.

Officers: Alan Abrahamson, Russell Bell, Wendy Binmore, Wayne Coles, Seona Douglas, Andrew Elkington, Andrew Green, Harjit Hunjan, Cathryn James, Maria Lucas, Naveed Mohammed, David Perkins, Henri Rapson and Karen Williams.

PART I

11/13 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Dudley and Mrs Cynthia Endacott

12/13 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Cllr Mrs Airey declared an interest in the item 'Increasing Democracy by Encouraging Parish Council Elections' as her husband was a Parish Councillor

Councillor Burbage declared an interest in the item 'Progress on the Big Society Projects Report' as he had been working with organisers from the Aspire programme.

Maria Lucas declared an interest in the item 'Adopt-A-Street Scheme' as her husband was a volunteer in the scheme.

13/13 **MINUTES**

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 16 July 2013 be approved.

14/13 **INCREASING DEMOCRACY BY ENCOURAGING PARISH COUNCIL ELECTIONS**

The Community Partnership Co-ordinator stated the report looked into the legal requirements of increasing the promotion of Parish elections; it also highlighted possible disincentives such as costs associated with holding them. The report identified when and how the Council could trigger local elections in paragraph 17.7 of the report, and how that could be crucial in encouraging more candidates to stand. The report also noted that although there were measures the Borough could take to trigger and/or encourage elections, they would only be effective if there were a sufficient number of candidates willing to stand. There had only been four contested elections in 2011 but the majority of seats had been filled with uncontested elections. The report concluded that it was critical to locate people who were interested and willing to stand as a candidate and inform those people when elections were called.

Cllr Bateson commented that a candidate for Parish elections had to live within three miles of the Parish and there were only 14 days to get the 10 signatures from the

public required for the election to be called. The Community Partnership Co-ordinator said a list of potential candidates could be drawn up; if there were not enough candidates, the vacant seat could only be filled by co-option therefore, having potential candidates was critical when filling a casual vacancy. The Head of Legal Services explained that the only time the Council could step in to trigger an election was if the Parish Council was not quorate and had failed to fill its vacancies by co-option within 35 days. Cllr Bathurst suggested that if the elections were properly constituted perhaps the Parishes could get more funding and more powers than if they had co-opted. The Head of Legal Services referred to the National Association of Local Councils Quality Standard, which required at least 2/3rds of parish councillors to have stood for election and said that could be looked into. Cllr Bateson stated that the local paper should be used to advertise any Parish Council vacancy and that it needed to highlight the 14 days aspect of the election process. She said that if a list of candidates existed, the Parish could help get vacancies filled as the candidates could be hand picked quicker. Costs could also be kept to a minimum by not charging the Parishes for holding the elections. The Chairman commented that Maidenhead and Windsor town centre residents might question why they should contribute to the elections of Parish Councillors when they lived in non-parished areas.

Cllr Airey suggested that vacancies for Parish Councillors could be advertised in schools and colleges for candidates. The Head of Legal Services confirmed that the minimum age for a candidate was 18 years old. The Chairman suggested that if there was a seat which had been vacant for 12 years, the boundaries could be changed and possibly reduced; he added that greater publicity of vacancies and the processes of getting involved would increase the numbers of candidates coming forward and more elections might be contested.

Cllr Bateson stated that if Parish Councillors were elected for parts of a ward only and a vacancy came up, because that affected the whole ward, it would create more interested candidates to stand and also get residents more interested in elections in general. The Head of Legal Services confirmed that any candidate would have to live or work within the parish if they wanted to stand. She added that the clerks often notified the Borough of upcoming Parish elections, as they had requested but that there was no obligation in the regulations for Parishes to give notification of vacancies.

The Chairman suggested a leaflet should be circulated to residents when a vacancy for Parish Councillor arose; that would notify residents of the vacancy; the 14 day time limit and could also explain the commitment required from Parish Councillors. The Communications and Marketing Officer offered that the Parish Council could let local media know of vacancies.

The Chairman commented that the Borough's website appeared out of date but that it did mention current Parish Council Vacancies. Cllr Bateson said that the issue of notifying the Borough of Parish Council Elections would be raised at the Parish Conference in October 2013. The Chairman recommended that a new sub-committee be set up to work with the Head of Legal Services and the Head of Policy & Performance so that an action plan could be produced. It was agreed that Councillors Burbage, Bateson and Bathurst should be members of this.

Councillor Fussey stated he thought it was a good idea to waive the costs of holding Parish Council elections, or at least a percentage of the costs involved. Cllr Bathurst agreed and added that all costs should be waived but not permanently. The Chairman

said this would be discussed at the sub-committee and any recommendations relating to financial implications would need to be considered by Cabinet. It was agreed that the wording of the recommendations be amended.

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That:

- i) **A sub-committee comprising Councillors Burbage, Bathurst and Mrs Bateson be set up to deliver the action plan for encouraging democracy on town and parish councils, in conjunction with the Head of Legal and Head of Policy and Performance.**
- ii) **The Sub Committee to consider the issues of funding parish council elections and encouraging new candidates to put themselves forward for election.**