

PARISH CONFERENCE

15 OCTOBER 2013

RBWM Councillors: Mrs Christine Bateson (Chairman)

RBWM Officers: Rob Cowan, Maria Lucas, Harjit Hunjan, Eric Livingstone, Mike McGaughrin, Chris Wheeler, Karen Williams

Parish and Town Councils:

Bisham: Councillors Robson, Brown and Cooper

Bray: Councillor Graham

Cookham: Councillors Brar and Brockwell

Cox Green: Councillors Doman and Jones

Datchet: Councillor Lyons-Davis and Graham Leaver (clerk)

Horton: Councillor Bovingdon

Hurley: Councillor Baker (also Secretary of DALC) and Councillor Burfitt

Sunningdale: Christine Gadd

Waltham St Lawrence: Councillor Birkett

White Waltham: Councillors McDonald, Robinson and Doug Stuart (clerk)

Wraysbury: Councillors Davis and Hughes and Betty Marlow (clerk)

Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Association of Local Councils: Christine Lalley

PART I

WELCOME

The Chairman of the Conference, Councillor Mrs Bateson, welcomed everyone to the meeting.

The Conference noted the legal briefing note which explained the Borough Councillors' ability to speak at Parish Council Development Control meetings. The Conference was pleased with the completeness of the information given.

The Conference received a briefing note from Karen Williams, Democratic Services Manager, regarding RBWM contact information. The clerk agreed to circulate the briefing note via email to all Parish clerks.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Fiona Hewer (Cookham).

MINUTES

The minutes of the last meeting held on 17 July 2013 were approved.

DEVOLUTION OF SERVICES

The Conference received a verbal presentation on Devolution of Services from Harjit Hunjan, the Community and Business Partnerships Manager.

The Conference noted the Devolution of Services Progress Grid. Confirmation was given that the grid would be re-designed for simplification.

Officers hoped for three things moving forward. First, officers hoped that Parish Councils would review their experiences of devolved services and any errors in the grid would be highlighted.

Second, officers hoped feedback would highlight services Parish Councils did not want devolved, and reasons why services were not attractive.

Third, officers hoped Parish Councils would identify services which they would like to see devolved in the future. The grid was described as an evolving document and not a static document.

Mr Hunjan also introduced Chris Wheeler, Group Manager Technical Team for Highways, and Eric Livingstone, Streetcare Manager, and explained they would be available at the end of the Conference to take questions on their respective areas of expertise.

Mr Hunjan summarised the grid, stating fifteen Parish Councils had devolved services for clearing overgrown vegetation, five Parish Councils had devolved services for recruiting volunteers to libraries and four Parish Councils had devolved services for s. 106. The potential for also devolving planning and policy, and grit bins was also being considered.

Feedback on the devolution of services was given by Councillor Graham, Bray. The Councillor informed the Conference that the funding had been received for s.106, however implementation had been problematic and it was suggested that the Borough could give more input into the s.106 construction.

Doug Stuart clerk of White Waltham, endorsed the concerns of Councillor Graham and requested greater involvement in the process.

At the request of the Chairman, Parish Councillors experiencing problems were given the opportunity to discuss issues with Harjit Hunjan at the end of the Conference.

Councillor Davis, Wraysbury, highlighted concern that checking street lighting was impractical as most Members were too old to walk around the streets checking the lighting especially with the evenings staying lighter for longer.

The Chairman suggested the 'Adopt a Street' scheme as a potential alternative.

Chris Wheeler suggested Members contact Alan Marshall, Head of Street Lighting, to discuss this issue further. Mr Marshall's contact information would be made available at the end of the Conference.

The Conference requested that a 'Did You Know' item be included in the next edition of Around the Royal Borough to provide information on the matter.

BOROUGH PROPOSALS FOR SUPPORTING PARISH COUNCIL ELECTIONS

The Chairman introduced the issue of the Borough's proposals for supporting Parish Council elections. Conference was reminded that RBWM supported Parishes with elections and had worked with DALC on the issue for two years. The Chairman identified the relationship between the Borough and the Parish Councils as one of cooperation; all ideas and discussion on the new proposals would be fed back to the Big Society Panel Sub-Committee.

The Conference received a verbal presentation on RBWM's proposals for supporting Parish Council elections from Harjit Hunjan.

Mr Hunjan summarised the report submitted to the Big Society Panel on 17 September 2013. The focus of the report was to increase local democracy. Moving forward, the council wanted to build on what had already been achieved with the workshops and DALC Action Plan, in the hope of engaging people, especially young people.

The Conference noted that Parish Councils constituted the building blocks of local democracy. By way of background, Conference noted that there were only four contested elections for twenty-seven parish electoral areas and a majority of one-hundred and sixty four seats were filled through uncontested elections. Also, there had been twenty-one casual vacancies since May 2011, but only two elections had been called in that period.

Mr Hunjan stated that there were a number of proposed actions, which were open for discussion. These included a register of potentially interested candidates, increased publicity and promotion around elections, financial support for elections, and taking measures to trigger elections where appropriate by securing ten signatures in the event of a casual vacancy.

The Conference noted that requiring elections brought significant costs. It was suggested that if the Borough wished an increase in the number of parish elections, it would require greater financial investment from the Borough to see this through.

The Chairman noted this suggestion and confirmed this would be considered at the Big Society Panel Sub-Committee.

Mike McGaughrin, Managing Director, stated that the report from the Big Society Panel was a consultative document. Mr McGaughrin confirmed that if there was enough demand for a certain initiative, and this initiative increased local democracy then RBWM would be very keen to help such an initiative progress.

The Conference raised concerns that identifying suitable candidates was open to abuse as it was unclear what made a candidate 'suitable'. The Conference was also concerned that artificially generated elections for 'the sake of it' was unsatisfactory.

Maria Lucas, Returning Officer and Head of Legal, confirmed that the Borough would only trigger an election if the Parish Council in question was non-quorate. However the issue of who should bear the costs of that election needed to be discussed further.

The Parish Councillors suggested further financial assistance would make Parish Councils more welcoming of an increase in Parish elections.

The Chairman asked that Parish Councils discuss what elements of the election created the greatest financial burden and relay this to Harjit Hunjan so as to allow the Borough to consider in what way it could assist.

The Conference was concerned that changes to the election process made it hard to know what was happening. Candidates for Parish elections now had to submit their candidacy direct to the Borough, rather than the Parish clerk, and so Parishes did not know who, or how many people had stood as candidates. The Conference therefore requested that the Returning Officer be more forthcoming with information and feed back to the Parishes when candidates were put forward.

Mrs Lucas confirmed that she would inform the Parishes when she had received two nominations and therefore an election would be called.

The Conference also raised concern regarding the forms Parish Councillor candidates filled out. If a silly mistake was made then the candidate was rejected. It was confirmed that this was the case for Borough Councillors and that the situation was avoidable if candidates kept a copy and submitted forms early enough to allow mistakes to be rectified.

Mr Stuart, clerk to White Waltham, highlighted two further issues regarding elections for Parish Councillors, first that local residents often did not know enough about the role of a Parish Councillor.

Mr Hunjan confirmed the report identified this issue.

The Chairman suggested further workshops in Ascot and Sunningdale, Maidenhead and Windsor to increase local awareness.

Mr Stuart stated his second concern was the middle age group of thirty to forty year olds were not well represented on Parish Councils.

The Conference offered one suggestion of co-opting Members from this age group. It was also suggested that greater local awareness might improve this situation.

Betty Marlow, clerk of Wraysbury Parish Council, highlighted that local residents had incorrect information regarding the rule where a candidate needed ten signatures.

There appeared to be a misconception that this caused the whole Parish Council to be re-elected, however this only required one position to be re-elected.

Andrew Davis, Head of DALC, gave a verbal presentation which updated the Conference on the action plan for recruiting Parish Councillors. The main concern highlighted by Mr Davis was communication which was necessary to heighten awareness of the position of Parish Councillors. The Conference agreed that a job description would be required with any advertisement of vacant positions.

Mr Davis also commented on the low number of twenty to thirty year olds on the Parish Councils. It was confirmed that almost all Members of the Parish Councils were retired. Due to other commitments such as work, it was harder for the middle age group to commit to being a Parish Councillor.

Mr Davis stated that, as a result, Parishes had to be proactive and talk to local residents about what Parish Councils did and see what people wanted. Also, the community outside the parish should be engaged because as they got involved there was more chance of them wanting to be Councillors.

Mr Davis suggested visits to secondary schools to speak to older children and encourage their involvement would help. It was also hoped that indirectly the message would then filter through to parents and PTA members.

It was concluded however that the most important element of the Parish Council's work in this regard was communication.

Mrs Lucas reminded the Conference that the annual register of electors canvass had started with over 5,500 responses received from households by email, received from residents who previously indicated they would like to update their details this way. This saved around £5,500 in printing and postage costs. All properties not canvassed by email were sent a Register of Electors Audit 2013 form on Wednesday 23 October and residents were urged to respond as soon as possible to make sure they were registered to vote in 2014. Anyone who had not received their form by Thursday 31 October was advised to contact the electoral registration canvass helpline on 01628 683868. Parish Councils were requested to assist in getting this message out. Canvassing took place to register the electorate and it was requested that Parish Councils got the message out. If people posted the form before January 2014, this saved the Borough money by not having to canvas door to door. It was agreed by the Conference that awareness of the situation could be improved by informing people through 'Around the Royal Borough'.

Parish Councillors raised further concerns regarding what was perceived as a lack of involvement on the sub-committee of the Big Society Panel, though it was explained that the Parishes would be consulted at every stage of the process. The Conference suggested Parish Councillors should be on the sub-committee, or a working group be set up where Parish Councillors were involved.

The Chairman agreed to discuss increased involvement of Parish Council representatives with the Big Society Panel.

PRESENTATION AT THE NEXT CONFERENCE

The Conference recalled that, at the Conference meeting in June 2007, it was

agreed that there should be an opportunity for Parish and Town Councils to share their experiences and successes in relation to projects and schemes that they may be involved with.

All Parish Councils were encouraged to submit suggestions to the clerk for future presentations to the Conference.

Bray Parish Council suggested that it might be possible they present on s. 106 and the Street Art Fund at the next Conference scheduled for February 2014, though this would have to be confirmed at a later date.

DATE OF NEXT CONFERENCE

It was noted that the next Parish Conference would take place on 20 February 2014.

MEETING

The meeting, which began at 7.00pm, ended at 8.15pm.