



Finance and Administration Committee – 13 September 2018

Agenda Item FA1388/18

Report of the Review of Council (working & meetings) Working Party

Introduction

At the Council meeting on 30 July 2015, under item CC1506/15, the Council resolved:

- *That Cllrs Greenman, Kaur, Mitchell and Vassiliou become members of the Review of Council (working and meetings) Working Party.*

At the Council meeting on 26 November 2015 under item CC1545/15 the Chairman advised that the group had now held two meetings and been looking at the workings and structure of other Councils.

At the Council meeting on 30 June 2016 under item CC1614/16 the Chairman reported that this group was looking at the workings of the Parish Council in terms of number and scope of meetings and had looked at other Councils elsewhere to see how they were set up. Draft papers were to be put together for the existing committees to review, comment upon and change/modify as necessary probably in September. The Council resolved:

- *That Cllrs Kaur, Hollands, Mitchell and Vassiliou become members of the Review of Council (working and meetings) Working Party.*

At the Council meeting on 27 July 2017 under item CC1753/17 the Clerk commented that this working party was currently in abeyance and that work should re-continue after the summer recess.

At the Council meeting on 28 June 2018 under item CC1876/18 the Clerk commented that this working party had not met over the past year and no recommendations had been brought to his attention regarding how Standing Orders may be best updated, or otherwise. The Clerk added that he will now be updating the Standing Orders as per the recommendation from the internal auditor. The Council resolved:

- *That the composition of the working parties for 2018/19 are as follows:
2. Council Workings Party: Cllrs Gallagher, Kaur & Mitchell.*

The reconstituted Working Party met on 23 August 2018 to discuss progress and findings to date and prepare this report to Council.

Summary of work to date

The Working Party terms of reference were:

“To review of the workings of the PC, especially the meetings and how they are set out. Is it possible to make our meetings more efficient and even combine them or hold them on the same evening? The working party should research other councils

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looking for good practice that may be relevant to our own. This will then lead onto a full review of and update of the standing orders."

The Working Party summarised its objectives as being:

- *To review the way we work*
- *And what we need to achieve*
- *To suggest ways to improve to recommend to Council*

At the first meeting the Working Party carried out a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, & Threats) analysis. This was amended in subsequent meetings (as below).

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities & Threats

<p>Strengths</p> <p>Not party political Good accountability Processes in place Do good things Village engagement (but hard work) Circulation of papers in advance Caring and passionate councillors Good relationship with CGRA Nice size community:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Events - Knowledgeable people - Reasonable Precept <p>Surrounded by green belt (outside the parish boundary)</p>	<p>Weaknesses</p> <p>Too many meetings Meetings taking place when nothing on the agenda Failure to tell everybody Poor etiquette in meetings Negativity not controlled Too many irrelevant negative e-mails Too much stuff from the past Not all councillors express an opinion Resistant to change Lack of pro-active PR</p>
<p>Opportunities</p> <p>Making meetings more purposeful & fruitful Improved PR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What we do - Events <p>Concentrate on moving forward Being passionate Engagement of residents Populating the website with relevant information Use of Twitter Connect with others organisations</p>	<p>Threats</p> <p>Resistant to change Too much PR Not enough time to engage with others Being seen as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Irrelevant - Ineffective - Expensive - Out of touch

Best practice review

Following the first meeting the working party members agreed to investigate a parish or town council of their choice to find out the following information:

Question
What is the name and type of the council?
What is the size of the community?
What is the precept?

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What is the meeting structure and number of meetings?
Meetings – what are they held to discuss?
Number of rules and regulations?
How many councillors?
Is the council politically orientated?
Do they have Quality status?
What events do they arrange?
What is the PR strategy?
What is the main focus of the council website?
Number of Staff?
Number of Wards?

In the event only two town councils were reviewed in detail: Blandford Town Council (Dorset) and Harpenden Town Council (Hertfordshire). These are compared with Croxley Green Parish Council in the table below:

Question	Harpenden	Blandford	Croxley Green
What is the name and type of the council?	Town Council	Town Council	Parish Council
What is the size of the community?	Approx 29,900 in 11,635 homes	Approx. 11,000 in 5,000 homes	Approx. 12,000 5,500 homes
What is the precept?	£912,870 (FY 15/16)	£523,981 (FY 15/16)	£273,174 (FY 15/16)
What is the meeting structure and number of meetings?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Full Council ii. Environment iii. Human resources iv. Policy & Finance v. Planning vi. Strategic planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Full Council ii. Finance & Staff iii. Recreation & Amenities iv. Town & General purpose v. Planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Full Council ii. Finance & Admin iii. HR & Compliance iv. Environment & Amenity v. Planning & Development
Number of rules and regulations?	Have standing orders	Rules and regulations have been placed into various documents; H&S Handbook, Policy statement, Environmental Policy, Standing orders and Financial regulations.	Standing Orders
How many councillors?	16	16	16
Is the council politically orientated?	Yes – 14 Conservative & 2 Independent	No	No
Do they have Quality status?	Did have, now have foundation status. Clerk feels it is not worth it.	Yes and are part of the newly introduced local council award scheme	No

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Question	Harpenden	Blandford	Croxley Green
What events do they arrange?	Many (see website)	They have a number of event venues. They hold monthly markets and other community events.	See budget
What is the PR strategy?	They are active on Facebook and Twitter, but mainly as information of events etc., not about Council decisions	The website is the primary means to advertise events and news, the events page looks up to 2 years ahead. They also have a strategic plan which looks up to 4 years ahead.	Website
What is the main focus of the council website?	Manage a lot of land and facilities now.	The Blandford town council website is similar to the old CGPC website but with a few added functionality; events, calendar etc.	
Number of Staff?	12 full time and 6 part time	11 full time and 3 part time	4 full time
Number of Wards?	4	4	2

The type and frequency of meetings are compared in the table below:

Meetings	Harpenden	Blandford	Croxley Green
Full Council	5 x year	1 x month	10 x year (+ AGM)
		Full council has a 10 min session at the start to allow the community to ask any questions or express a view.	
Oversight	Governance 6 x year	Finance & staff 4 x year	F&A 11 x year
Planning	2 groups 1 x month	1 x month	P&D 2 x month
Environment	6 x year	1 x month	E&A 11 x year

Conclusions from best practice review

- Harpenden is significantly larger (in terms of population and number of households) than either Blandford or Croxley Green.
- Both Blandford and Harpenden have higher total precepts and employ more staff than Croxley Green.
- Both Blandford and Harpenden have a more strategic approach to planning their business than Croxley Green
- Harpenden has apparently fewer meetings than Croxley Green, and Blandford has fewer to manage finance and staff, despite having more resources (staff and money) to manage.

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Recommendations

The working party recommends that:

- 1) Those chairing meetings should consider how they could structure the agenda and manage discussion to address some of the perceived weaknesses and make meetings more purposeful and fruitful.
- 2) All Councillors should consider how they might contribute more positively and effectively to discussion and decision making in Council meetings.
- 3) Each of the Council's three standing committees (E&A, F&A and P&D) should consider how they might arrange their business and run their meetings to be:
 - a. More efficient
 - b. More effective and
 - c. (possibly) less frequent.
- 4) The Council should continue to pursue a more strategic approach to developing initiatives and deciding priorities.
- 5) The Council should continue to develop a more positive approach to public relations and keeping the electorate informed.
- 6) Responsibility for resources and decisions on projects should be delegated to the standing committees and (where appropriate) sub-delegated to working parties (remembering that the Responsible Financial Officer has oversight of all payments).
- 7) There should be more transparent monitoring of the progress of projects, perhaps through a "Croxley Project Review" document held centrally which would show all Councillors (and the public) what is being done.
- 8) Standing Orders should be modified in the light of the conclusions and recommendations of the working party and the standing committees.

Cllr Chris Mitchell
23 August 2018