

**BROMSGROVE DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**PARISH COUNCILS' FORUM**

**TUESDAY, 11TH APRIL 2006 AT 6.30 P.M.**

PRESENT: Councillor Mrs. J.M.L.A. Griffiths (Chairman)

<b><u>Parish</u></b>	<b><u>Representative(s)</u></b>
Belbroughton	Mr. C. R. Scurrall
Bournheath	Mrs. C. Harris (Clerk)
Clent	Mrs. P. Harris (Clerk)
Cofton Hackett	Mr. B. Bridgewater
Cofton Hackett	Mrs. P. Foxall (Clerk)
Dodford with Grafton	Mr. R. Oakes (Chairman)
Cofton Hackett	Mr. B. Bridgewater
Dodford with Grafton	Mr. R. Oakes (Chairman)
Hunnington	Mr. J. Peeney (Chairman)
Hunnington	Mrs. L. Teese (Clerk)
Lickey and Blackwell	Mrs. J. Casey (Clerk)
Lickey and Blackwell	Mr. R. Brown (Chairman)
Romsley	Mr. I. A. Hodgetts (Chairman)
Romsley	Mr. K. Isaac- Henry
Stoke	Mrs. T. Roll (Chairman)
Stoke	Mrs. M.J. Birmingham

1. **APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received from:-

<b><u>Parish</u></b>	<b><u>Representative(s)</u></b>
Beoley	Mrs. J. D. Luck (Chairman)
Belbroughton	Mr. R. Copley (Chairman)
Lickey End	Mr. C. Bateman (Clerk)
Romsley	Mrs. P. Taylor (Clerk)
Stoke	Mr. P. Callaway (Clerk)
Bromsgrove District Council	Councillor R. Hollingworth

2. **MR. D. WATERS**

The Chairman referred to the recent death of Mr. D. Waters who had been a member of Alvechurch Parish Council and had previously been a Member of the District Council. Mr Waters had also been a representative on CALC. The Forum members stood in tribute to his memory.

3. **MINUTES OF LAST MEETING**

The Minutes of the Meeting of the Parish Councils' Forum held on 13th December 2005 were submitted. It was felt the Minutes should be amended to reflect that at the previous Meeting on 27th September 2005 it had been agreed that Planning would bring forward a paper in relation to consultations with Parish Councils. Subject to this it was AGREED that the Minutes be approved as a correct record.

4. **CONSULTATIONS WITH PARISH COUNCILS ON AMENDMENTS TO PLANNING APPLICATIONS**

Following discussion of this item at a number of previous Meetings of the Forum, Mr. D. Hammond, Head of Planning and Environment was present to try to address the issues raised. Mr Hammond stressed that he was not in a position to agree to put a procedure in

place to consult Parish Council's formally when amendments were received from applicants. He explained that the Authority was under great pressure from Central Government to meet planning targets set. The Council's performance in this regard could also have an effect on the amount of Planning Grant which would be received from Central Government which in turn would have a knock on effect on the service which could be provided. Previously the average number of cases which individual Planning Case Officers would be dealing with was 150 and at present the figure stood at 230 per Officer. He was therefore unable to build into the application process a requirement to consult the Parish Council when an amendment to the original application was received. He felt that it had to be left to individual Case Officers to make a judgement as to how fundamental an amendment was. In any case, many amendments made arose from comments received during the consultation process. If an amendment was very significant, a new application would be required. In addition, in many instances amendments were received towards the end of the period allowed for decisions to be made and followed a period of negotiation between the Applicant and the Authority.

Whilst there was an understanding amongst the forum of the position, it was still felt that Planning Case Officers should at the least be encouraged to inform Parish Councils of amendments where at all possible. It was suggested that Case Officers may be able to request the Applicant to inform the Parish Council. It was felt that all parties wished to work together to improve the process wherever possible and it may be that when all the vacant posts within the Planning Department were filled the issue could be looked at again.

#### 5. **RESPONSES TO COMMUNICATIONS**

Phil Street, the Corporate Director (Services) was present at his first Meeting of the Forum. He explained that at present the Council was looking closely at its Customer Service performance. A Customer First Strategy was being developed and all staff were undergoing Customer Training and were being constantly reminded of their responsibilities to improve on the Customer Service offered. In addition there would be improved monitoring of the quality and timeliness of responses. The level of complaints received indicated that at present the position was unsatisfactory. Members of the Forum provided instances of where procedures had not been followed and responses not received on a timely basis. In line with comments made by Mr. Street it was accepted that answers could not always be immediately forthcoming but it was felt that when the query had been passed to someone else or it would take some time to give a full reply the Customer should be kept informed of the situation and given an indication as to when a reply would be received at present this was not always happening.

Mr Street acknowledged that this should be the case and assured the Forum that the issue was being addressed with a view to improving the Council's performance in this area. He was fully aware of the need for the Parishes and the District Council to work together to achieve improvements.

#### 6. **CONCURRENT FUNCTIONS**

Kevin Dicks, the Corporate Director (Resources) referred to the difficult budgetary situation which the District Council was facing. The concurrent function budget had been reduced in 2006/07 and further cuts were forecast for 2007/08 although the Council was looking to make savings elsewhere. At present a data collection exercise was being undertaken to obtain all the relevant information regarding maintenance of land, grass cuttings etc. The Authority was hoping to move towards formal Service Level Agreements to cover these types of services.

Whilst the Parishes understood the financial pressures the District Council was under, it was felt that as much notice as possible was needed by the Parishes on the level of Concurrent Functions payment so that Parishes could make their own financial plans as efficiently as possible. On this occasion a great deal of additional work had been required at short notice when the precept had to be increased at a late stage. Mr Dicks undertook to try to ensure that Parishes were kept fully informed. Mr Dicks also requested that if there were instances where Parishes felt they were carrying out District functions then the Council should be informed as it may be that the district could take advantage of economies of scale and take over the function.

#### 7. **PARISH COUNCIL CHARTER**

It was acknowledged that the the discussion on a Parish Charter had been going on for approximately two years.It was clear that the Leader of the Council was concerned about

parts of the content of the Charter. It was also recognised however, that the Authorities at different levels needed to work together in order to provide good quality services within the District. It was acknowledged that some neighbouring Authorities had signed up to the Charter but it was still felt that it did not reflect the need for a partnership between District and Parishes. The District was keen to pursue this but it was felt there were fundamental matters to be resolved before an appropriate level of partnership could be reached, such as time for responses to letters etc. as discussed earlier in the Meeting. The Chairman stressed the firm intention of the District Council to improve.

There was discussion as to how the Charter would assist with the delivery of good quality services. It was reported that following the previous meeting, Chris Surrell had been involved in meetings with Councillor Hollingworth to consider how this issue can be taken forward. It had been suggested that a small Working Group of Parish Councillors meet to look at how the Charter may be amended. It was acknowledged that Bromsgrove District had not participated in developing the Charter and had therefore lost the opportunity to influence the document at that stage. It was felt that this meeting had been more positive towards moving matters forward.

8. **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

It was noted that the next Meeting of the Forum would take place on Tuesday, 27th June 2006 at 6.30pm.

The Meeting closed at 7.25 p.m.

Chairman