

MILTON ABBOT GROUPED PARISH COUNCIL

(Parishes of Milton Abbot, Chillaton, Dunterton and Bradstone)

Frequency of Meetings

Cllr Brewer has submitted the following request that the Council reconsider the need for additional meetings, over and above the regular bi-monthly meetings that the Council used to hold, as follows:

'We stick to standing orders meeting dates and set up delegated powers of decisions for Planning Apps and urgent items between meetings, which can be altered by two councillors call for item to come before a full Council (WDBC has a similar arrangement) but only need the District Council to call it in to be discussed at a full Planning Meeting. This would save time and money.'

The Council has reviewed the frequency and structure of its meetings twice in just over twelve months; March and November 2016. In March 2016, Min Ref 118:15/16:

'The Parish Council agreed that it was in the public interest to replace the current planning advisory panels by a more formal process. It was felt better to meet as the full Parish Council, rather than as a Planning Committee, to determine views on applications that had to be dealt with outside the current bi-monthly cycle. By doing so, other matters could be considered, thus speeding up Council business and shortening meetings generally.'

The arrangements were then reviewed, at the end of a six month trial period, in November 2016, Min Ref 93:16/17, when *'Councillors noted that the length of meetings had been reduced from between 2 and 2½ hours, to 1½ and 2 hours and that increased frequency meant that all planning applications had been discussed at meetings of the Council.'* A resolution to permanently make the change to monthly meetings was made.

Available Options:

i) Revert to bi-monthly meetings and delegate non-contentious planning applications to Advisory Panels:

Previously the Council had delegated powers to 'Advisory Panels' consisting of local Cllr's. The process was that the Cllr's met as requested by the Clerk to look at non-contentious small scale applications. The panel then reported to the Clerk, to take action under urgency procedures and submit those views on behalf of the Council, the Clerk's action being reported to the next meeting of the Council. This system did not work smoothly, as individual Cllr's were sending their views to the Clerk, rather than the view of the advisory panel, and often only after being sent follow up emails.

This system of working comes with risks to the Council, for example; at a recent meeting of the Council, March 2017, Min ref 138:16/17, a Planning Application, 0254/17/FUL was discussed and it was resolved that the local Cllr's would consult outside of the meeting to formulate a response to the application, which would be submitted to the Clerk to respond appropriately.

The local Cllr's did undertake to consult to formulate their response, which was then drafted into a submission to the Planning Department by the Clerk. Prior to submission it was circulated amongst the relevant Cllr's, and the Chairman, to ensure that it adequately set out their concerns. No issues were highlighted and the response was submitted. At the

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following meeting of the Council, it was noted that Cllr's who took part in the consultation, were not happy with the final response.

Also, what constitutes a non-contentious application? Criteria in Standing Orders could help determine what is a contentious application that should be referred to a meeting of the Council, and the Clerk could call a special meeting if needed. However, contentiousness is a subjective issue and the Council runs the risk that residents may subsequently consider that an application should not have been dealt with by an advisory panel. The recent application 0254/17/FUL, highlights the potential of this to some extent.

The Advisory Panels were not required to issue agendas, and did not meet publicly. This meant that members of the public had no knowledge of these panel meetings or how the members of a panel came to make decisions regarding planning applications, and were not able to make representations to the Council. Not only was this undemocratic, but it left Cllrs potentially vulnerable to accusations of improper conduct.

WDBC Planning Officers determine all planning applications unless borough councillors ask for them to be considered by the Planning Committee. Parish Clerks are not professionally qualified planning officers and are therefore unable to make professional judgements on planning applications, their role being simply to submit the outcome of a resolution made by Cllrs. Therefore passing responsibility to a Parish Clerk to determine whether or not an application should be considered by an Advisory Panel or the Full Council is not appropriate, and puts the Council in a position whereby its practices could be called into question.

ii) Revert to bi-monthly meetings and delegate non-contentious planning applications to Planning Committees:

Planning Committees could be set up for each parish within the Council, although this would prove difficult for Bradstone and Dunterton, both of which only have one local Cllr, there being four Cllr's at both Milton Abbot and Chillaton.

All committees are required to operate under the same regulations as full meetings of the Council and as such have to publish agendas, minutes and meet formally. Due to the small number of Cllrs available for each parish, these meetings would be vulnerable to not being quorate and not always able to meet the deadline for submission of representations.

The establishment of different Planning Committees would create the opportunity for different approaches to be adopted to the same issues in different areas, which would not be desirable.

iii) Continue to hold monthly meetings of the Council as resolved in November 2016, Min Ref 93:16/17.

Holding monthly meetings permits, as a general rule, planning applications to be discussed and determined at an ordinary full meeting of the Council

Risk of complaint regarding the lack of public consultation that may not have been otherwise undertaken, in the event that a decision had been made by an Advisory Panel, is eliminated.

A monthly cycle of meetings allows for a speedy response to new issues, the prompt follow up of developments in on-going matters and prompt payment of invoices.

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The length of meetings has reduced from between 2 and 2½ hours, to between 1½ and 2 hours, on occasion being less than this. Longer meeting times may not be considered conducive to the proper determination of items placed towards the end of the agenda.

Whatever process the Council adopts to resolve this issue, Cllr's have an obligation to properly prepare for all meetings of the Council and to ensure that they are fully briefed on items of business, including that of planning applications.

The **Council is requested** to consider the options available and the way it wishes to proceed.