

BISHOP'S ITCHINGTON PARISH COUNCIL

**Minutes of the meeting held on 24 October 2011
St Michael's Church Hall at 7.30pm**

Parish Councillors Present:

Cllr Kettle, Chairman
Cllr Tagg-Wilkinson (part of meeting)

Cllr Maddison
Cllr Heatley

Cllr Wheeler

In Attendance:

Cllr Stevens (County)
Cllr Mann (District)
Cllr Hamburger (District)

Alison Biddle, Clerk to the Council
Nick Gower-Johnson, Localities & Communities, WCC

Representatives from Other Councils:

Cllr Lockley (Harbury PC)
Cllr Ellard (SDC, Southam)
I Klegerman (Wormleighton Parish Meeting)

Cllr Wise (Southam TC and SDC)
Cllr Spencer (SDC, Long Itchington)

Members of the public: 3

1. Apologies

Apologies were received as follows:

Cllr Christian-Carter; Cllr Whittaker; Cllr Macaulay (sick)

2. Declarations of Interest

None declared.

3. Public Forum

Everyone present was aware that there was only one item on the agenda. No one wished to raise any other matters.

4. The Role of the Community Forum

Introduction

The chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting. He explained the background to BIPC's concerns about the role of the community forum which had arisen at a planning workshop for the new SDC Core Strategy which he and Cllr Tagg-Wilkinson had attended. At this workshop it had become clear that the community forum is to be used to inform the Core Strategy which raised a number of concerns. This resulted in a meeting between members of BIPC and 2 officers from Mr Gower-Johnson's team at WCC. The concerns discussed at that meeting are not solely the concerns of BIPC but are shared by other local councils too, as can be borne out by the number of representatives of other councils attending this evening.

Mr Gower-Johnson explained that there are 30 community forums across the county and each is unique. They are in various states of effectiveness but support for them is growing. He has come tonight to listen to people's concerns and will do whatever he can to address those concerns. There is also currently a WCC members' working group which is examining the future role of community forums and ways in which members interact with their communities.

Issues Discussed

- **Definition of “the community”**

This is defined as shown on the map of local areas which was agreed by WCC, SDC and the police. The population in these areas varies from approximately 10,000 to 30,000. The Southam area is therefore relatively small with a population of around 12,000 to 15,000.

- **Terms of reference and mandate**

It was acknowledged by Mr Gower-Johnson that the community forum is not a democratically elected body but he believes there are some shared interests with those bodies. The question was asked how could it therefore represent the community? If the average attendance is 15 people, that only equates to 0.1% of the local population and yet the information gathered from the forum is to be used to inform the Core Strategy.

The statistics show that attendance is low and therefore the forum is not working for people in this area. Criticism was made of the publicity for the forum. While some parishes receive plenty of publicity material, others are not even aware of the forum's existence. Mr Gower-Johnson acknowledged this point and vouched to improve the publicity and give the community forum a stronger profile.

It was suggested that some people who do not understand how the principle authorities and parish councils work, might find it easier to go to the community forum for help with problems and surely that is a positive thing? However, an alternative view was that this is the very thing that parish councils are concerned about i.e. that the community forum is in fact side-stepping the parish councils. It is parish councils who are closest to their local communities and therefore residents are better off approaching their parish council for help on local matters. Even worse, parish councils have been excluded from the planning meetings for the community forum. Mr Gower-Johnson emphasised that there is no intention to supersede the role of parish councils. The aim of the community forum is to help communications between the 3 tiers of local government and the police so that they can all serve the community better.

It was noted that the terms of reference are supposed to be reviewed every 12 months but this has not happened. One reason for this is WCC's current examination of the future role of the community forum which has delayed a review. Could the review be put on the community forum agenda on an annual basis?

Parish councils would also like to be involved in planning the agenda; it should not be set by the chairman of the community forum.

- **Decision Making Process**

The community forum gives people the opportunity for debate; the notes taken at every meeting are sent to the local authorities and the forum's views are fed into the system. The community forum doesn't make a decision but rather the chairman of the meeting reflects the consensus of the meeting and feeds back. However, as no minutes are kept, it is not possible to check what happened at the meeting or to whom or what the chairman is reporting. Perhaps some training for chairmen would be an area to look at? There is also a need for transparency. Mr Gower-Johnson agreed to provide a more formal record of the meeting if that is what parish councils would like.

Cllr Tagg-Wilkinson arrived at this point.

Mention was made of the last community forum meeting at which a windfarm developer was invited to speak but the spokesperson for a local residents' group against the development of windfarms in this area, was not. No explanation for this was given. This was not open or transparent.

- **Conflicts of Interest**

There is currently no mechanism for identifying people with a vested commercial interest. Mr Gower-Johnson understood this concern and pointed out that it is within the role of the chairman to identify such people by asking. The chairman is elected by the community forum.

Conclusion

During the course of the meeting, Mr Gower-Johnson had compiled a list of actions to be undertaken, as follows:

- Convening a meeting of all parish councils in the area to discuss issues such as the planning of the next and future community forum meetings
- Ensuring that more formal agendas are used and minutes are kept and circulated
- Improving the arrangements for promotion/publicity of the forum meetings, including the availability of free transport
- Improving the chairing of meetings
- Consulting parish councils on any review of the terms of reference

Mr Gower-Johnson recognised the need for a balance between formality and encouraging people to express their views in a free and open way.

Cllr Kettle thanked everyone for attending. He hoped that Mr Gower-Johnson understood that the concerns raised were not just those of BIPC but were shared by other local councils.

The meeting closed at 9.00pm.

Signed.....Chairman

Date.....