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27.11.18

Catherine Meek  
Head of Democratic Services  
Slough Borough Council

By Email

Dear Ms Meek

**Community Governance Review of 19 November 2018 /Council Meeting of 27 November 2018**

Britwell Parish Council notes the Report on the Community Governance Review ("Review Report") for consideration by Slough Borough Council on 27 November 2018. Britwell Parish Council in making this Response reserves all legal rights, including the right to seek judicial review and include within such legal process additional matter. In the short time available to it from declaration on 19 November of the recommendation by the Community Governance Review Group that Britwell Parish Council be abolished and the requirement to submit a response on this to Slough Borough Council by 27 November, this Response shall not be deemed to include all points that Britwell Parish Council hereafter may wish to use.

Using the Review Report's paragraph numbering, Britwell Parish Council makes the following comments:-

5.2 Britwell Parish Council ("BPC") requested that its Response to the arguments raised by Slough Borough Council ("SBC") in the leaflet which SBC planned to issue to voters in the parish area should also be included within the material being sent to voters. This request was refused by SBC. The effect was to give a one-sided position to electors which made the process unfair. BPC subsequently had to arrange for its own distribution of its leaflet response but its effect would have been limited as delivered later and separate from the main SBC communication.

5.14 / bullet point 2 – The Report states "*The poll results indicated support for the retention of the parish, but taken alongside the general comments received, the outcome was balanced with more or less equal support for abolition and retention.*" The natural understanding of electors taking part in the referendum was that a decision would be taken on the basis of the majority decision of the voters. As noted in para 5.13, the result was 51.9% against abolition and 48% for it. It is well known that only a small minority of people are moved to write specific comments and to give such people's involvement a greater weight is unfair on those expressing their view through the popular vote. It is also worth observing that the 51.9%/48% almost mirrors the popular vote in the 2016 Brexit Referendum and both major parties nationally confirmed they respected the popular vote.

5.14 / bullet point 2 – The Report states “Turnout for the Poll at 30.14 % was low and there had only been 16 other submissions on the Council’s recommendations indicating an overall general lack of interest in the future of the parish”. Why should the level of turnout be an important factor in rejecting the outcome of a popular vote in this particular referendum. In the 2018 Council elections for SBC ( see <http://www.slough.gov.uk/council/voting-and-elections/borough-elections-2018---results.aspx> ), the SBC’s own website noted that the overall turnout for the 14 seats was 31.5% , with the specific turnout for Britwell & Northborough just 30.28% - almost exactly the same as the turnout for this referendum.

5.14 / bullet point 3 – The Report states “ The electorate of the parish had, since 2014, consisted only of those people living in close proximity to the parish council buildings and community grounds and these people were therefore more likely to use the facilities than had been the case when the council was larger. Despite this, the poll results did not demonstrate overwhelming support for the parish council – there was still significant continuing support from the electorate for its abolition.” The issue of proximity is misleading and irrelevant. There is little in distance between those who still live in the Parish and those since 2014 outside the Parish in accessing the Council premises. It is however a one-sided and partial observation to state simply that “there was still significant continuing support from the electorate for its abolition.” As noted in para 5.8, the popular vote in 2013, the popular vote was 57% in favour of abolition which had fallen in the recent referendum to 48%.

In its submission to SBC, BPC was open in noting the impact which a fraud by then parish staff had on BPC. Due to the gravity of the event, it focussed much Council attention on it up to the time of the convictions. BPC’s more strategic focus since July 2017 could have taken place earlier but for this attention on dealing with the consequences of the crime. However the movement of direction was clear and is reflected in the 25% swing away from abolition in just that short period.

5.14 / bullet point 5 – The Report states “A reduction in hiring charges for the hall appeared to be the only benefit that parish residents received for their precept making it questionable value for money for the majority of residents.” Compared to the prices charged by Slough BC for hire of the Britwell Hub, the reduced hire charges for residents is a benefit. However from submissions already made, this is a one sided misrepresentation and attention can be drawn to:-

- there is an admin price to be paid for local democracy. BPC reviewed and commented on the Slough Local Plan in 2017; comments on planning matters; Neighbourhood police have an office in the Community Centre grounds and attend Parish Council meetings to hear and respond to local concerns which councillors raise. BPC Councillors live in the community – they hear and act on issues affecting local people– eg anti social behaviour (Monksfield Way & Twist Way), drug dealing (Monksfield Way & Upper Lees), dog fouling (Goodwin Road), or cars illegally parked (Long Readings Lane);

- BPC has been seeking to broaden its reach by increasing co-operation with others includes participating with bodies such as “Active Slough” and Berkshire Active, allowing the Community Centre and grounds to be used for:-

- Wildcat Girls Football for 5-7 year olds and for 8-11 year olds;
- Teen Boxing;
- Rugby for children and young people;
- Pilates;
- Local Football teams.

- SBC has said it will only commit to using the Community Centre for the youth. Currently the Community Centre is used by young people and a variety of groups including Over 50's Arts & Crafts, Britwell Come Dancing and Britwell Drama Group. If these groups have to move to the Britwell Hub their charges are likely to be substantially increased - if they can be accommodated at all.

- BPC worked closely with the Neighbourhood Action Group (NAG) and Borough Council Events to run the Summer Celebration in June 2018. Following a consultation with 66 completed questionnaires returned, 100% who responded stated their support for the Summer Celebration (June 2018) as a good use of Parish Council resources.

- A Job Club run (at no charge) one morning a week from January - Easter 2018 to help local jobless ; although this has been discontinued by the organiser (a local church) due to the poor take-up rate ,it illustrates another way in which BPC strives to give benefit to residents.

- the presence of the BPC secures benefit to local people not just through the precept but voluntary effort. The Community Centre and surrounding grounds and sports fields have been managed by volunteer parish councillors – some have done so for over 30 years - completely free of charge, including being called out in the middle of the night. This service would disappear with abolition.

5.14 / bullet point 7 – The Report states “ *In 2013 the parish council advised the review group that it planned to reduce the precept, but this has not happened*”. The point is irrelevant and partial. Since 2014, a different parish council has been elected.

5.14 / bullet point 8 – The Report states “ *No evidence was provided that the parish council was likely to make and sustain any significant improvements in the way it works or succeed in bringing the community together.*” Whilst it is open to the Review Group to have an opinion on the effectiveness of any BPC action, it is wrong and therefore partial in stating that no evidence of this was provided. Particular attention is drawn to:-

- the decision to move from BPC running the Chicken Ranch bar itself to one where the Bar is run by a tenant on a commercial basis, has enabled BPC to focus more on other areas;

- as noted above, BPC has been seeking to broaden its reach by increasing co-operation with others such as “Active Slough” and Berkshire Active and in events such as the Summer Celebration

5.14 / bullet point 9 – BPC recognises the need to update the website.

5.14 / bullet point 11– BPC repeats the responses it has made above .

5.14 / bullet point 12 - The Report states “ *The fraud by parish staff resulted in a loss of public money*” . This is correct but in giving no context , it is essentially intended to be negative. The context is that a fraud was committed which both the internal and the external auditor failed to spot in two audits and which was only brought to light by a BPC councillor. The loss is subject of a current insurance claim.

5.14 / bullet points 15 & 16 – References made to Britwell Hub do not make clear that their charges are substantially higher than those charged by BPC currently nor is it clear that existing regular users of the BPC Community Centre would be able to find space or be able to transfer to the Britwell Hub.

Yours sincerely

Jonathan Holder  
Locum Clerk