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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

## Berkshire Association of Local Councils



Address: BALC, Wyvols Court, Basingstoke Road, Swallowfield, Reading, Berkshire RG7 1WY  
Tel: 01189 880226

Ms Catherine Meek,  
Slough Borough Council

November 27<sup>th</sup>2018,

Dear Ms Meek,

I was dismayed to read that it is proposed to abolish Wexham Court Parish Council, firstly, against the wishes of the local electorate, secondly, before the target dates for improvements in the action plan, (the majority of which are for May 2019) and thirdly, in the light of the fact that improvements have already been made and are continuing to be made.

Through BALC a review of HR has taken place. Job descriptions have been drawn up and contracts for employees prepared for approval at a forthcoming Parish Council meeting. Three councillors have recently undertaken Councillor and Code of conduct training organised by BALC. The Parish Clerk has recently attended "What you need to know training" arranged by Hampshire ALC and is currently undertaking CiLCA training run by BALC. Wexham Court Parish Council is working to complete the action plan drawn up earlier this month. I will be recommending to the next executive meeting on December 5th that BALC offers mentoring to the council to assist in its endeavours.

The National Association of Local Councils (NALC) is concerned that decisions like these can be taken against local opinion and without any recourse to independent appeal. The government has agreed to look into the CGR process and this provides further evidence in support of a major overhaul.

Yours sincerely,

Ms Ruth Cottingham,  
Chair BALC.



**WEXHAM COURT  
PARISH COUNCIL**  
*Norway Drive, Slough SL2 5QW*  
*Website: wexhamcourt.org.uk*

**Item 1.3 Pre-Signing of Cheques** – I joined Wexham Court Parish Council (WCPC) on 15/08/2005 the pre-signing of cheques with one signatory was already in place when I joined and is part of the Standing Orders that remain in place. I raised some concerns but it was explained to me that it was sometimes difficult for the Clerk to obtain two signatures. The procedure covering this demands that one signature may be a councillor but the other signature must be the Chairman or in his absence the Head of Finance. In the first instance preference is for the Chairman and Head of Finance to sign cheques. ALL cheques are raised with supporting documentation and has been checked by the RFO that it is either a budgeted expense or a capital/approved expense that has been recorded in the minutes.

I have never raised a payment that is not in line with our procedures. If I am instructed by the Clerk to raise a payment that I do not deem has been properly authorized I raise the matter to full council, as was the case with the capital expenditure for the replacement heating and the HR Consultant.

Pre-Signed cheques actually stopped in January 2017, the Clerk has made an error in reporting this in the minutes, the cheque book is kept with me at all times and I was unable to attend meetings throughout 2017 and onwards.

**Delegated Powers** – neither the Clerk or RFO are allowed to make purchases outside of the budgeted expenditure without following proper procedure for approval through full council. Budgeted expenditure covers the daily running costs, mostly attributed to the Parish Hall and Allotments, for example, Gas, Electric, Waste removal, Cleaning products, Stationery etc.

**Precept** - The precept was discussed at a Finance and General Purpose Meeting see copy of email below

*On 22 Nov 2017, at 14:09, Tina Kellett*

*The Clerk has asked me to send out the summons to the Finance & General Purpose Meeting for Tuesday 28<sup>th</sup> November 2017 at 7pm.*

*If you are unable to attend please let the Clerk know in advance.*

*This is a very important meeting for the F&GP Committee (but all members are invited) as the Budget for 2018 -2019 will be reviewed, the capital reserves expenditure will be decided and the Precept Set for 2018-2019. The minutes from this meeting will then be presented to Full Council in the December meeting for approval and Slough Borough Council will be notified of the Precept.*

*Members of Public are excluded from this meeting.*

*Tina Kellett  
Responsible Finance Officer  
Wexham Court Parish Council*

*<WCPC Finance Letter to Councillors Nov 2017.docx>*

*<budget 2018 2019.pdf>*

*<staff hall and allotment rates 2017.pdf>*

This meeting was moved to the 05/12/17 wherein the precept and budget were approved. These minutes were then presented at the Full Council Meeting on 12/12/2017 and approved. However, the Clerk failed to detail that it covered the budget and approval of the precept and I have not been provided with the minutes for the December F&GP meeting.

**Approval of payments** - Council is provided with a list of cheques drawn, the procedure in place when I joined in 2005 is to produce a set of accounts monthly of a Cash Book nature on a spreadsheet that directly reconciles to the monthly bank statement, this forms part of the Standing Orders. It is not always possible to produce the cheques at the meeting as it must include salary payments that have yet to be calculated or hall hires that have taken place during the month. However, if council wish to put this change in place F&GP Committee needs to discuss how this may be effectively implemented and put before full council for approval with clear instructions to the RFO on how this is to be managed.

**Procurement** – Insurance, we are committed to using Aviva and receive a loyalty discount for doing so. Providing the quotation for renewal is within budget it may be taken up without requiring approval by council. However, as a courtesy council are always pre-advised of the renewal and the amount. We have attempted to obtain competitive quotes which is a long process and failed at the last attempt to be cheaper than the current insurers Aviva. I believe that Council are allowed to use their long time suppliers of services for continuity of supply providing they remain competitive. If council wish to explore other suppliers it must instruct the Clerk with ample time to do so and not at time of renewal which places the council at risk of not being insured.

**Capital Expenditure** - Council were in limbo for some time with the funds in the bank, as under the agreement of the first £150k received from Slough Borough Council for the Rescinding of Leased Land there was a clause that if Planning Permission was not given to SBC the money would have to be refunded. Therefore the money could not be spent or earmarked. I understand this restriction has now expired. However, I as the RFO has always warned council that it was not spending enough in the community for three years or more despite having sufficient funds to do so and requesting a supporting precept to enable the expenditure. The last budget produced in December 2017 clearly showed in red that council must discuss and earmark reserves for Capital Expenditure.

**Final comment:** I have not been instructed or authorized to respond to you but I cannot allow misconceptions to be reported that reflect on my professionalism and ability to carry out my role as RFO. Any Councilor or Member of Public or any other official body may scrutinize the accounts and question any item and require me to show supporting documentation and authorization to prove its authenticity and appropriateness.

Tina Kellett  
RFO  
Wexham Court Parish Council  
25/11/2018