

**TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL**  
**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY REVIEW GROUP**

**6<sup>th</sup> October 2015**

**1 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT – TONBRIDGE FORUM AND PARISH PARTNERSHIP PANEL**

**1.1 Background**

1.1.1 The Panel met initially on the 21st July 2015 to give initial consideration to the review of the Parish Partnership Panel and Tonbridge Forum. Following discussion, it was agreed that consultation with the community groups who attend the Tonbridge Forum and with Parish Councils should be undertaken to inform the review and assist the Panel with the formulation of recommendations to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The period for consultation was extended at the request of the Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC). The results of these consultations and some suggested options for change are set out below.

**1.2 Tonbridge Forum**

1.2.1 As reported previously, the Tonbridge Forum membership currently stands at 41 members but recent levels of attendance by those members has been low, ranging between 18 groups to 7 groups attending.

1.2.2 All members of the Forum were sent a questionnaire inviting views on whether:

- the Forum should be retained or abandoned;
- if to be retained, what changes to the format and frequency of the meetings might be appropriate.

1.2.3 Despite many reminders, a total of 23 organisations responded to the questionnaire, just over half of the Forum's membership. When considering the responses, therefore, we need to take account of the fact that 18 groups were not inclined to take part in the survey, perhaps suggesting a degree of ambivalence regarding future Forum meetings. The consultation results regarding the main issue are as follows:

Abandon the Forum – 8

Retain the Forum but reduce its frequency to two meetings a year and consider changes to the format – 10

Retain the four Forum meetings per year but consider changes to the format - 5

1.2.4 It is clear from the above that the majority of those responding wish to retain the Forum in some form. However, a significant number do not support its retention (and this number may well be augmented by those who did not complete the survey).

1.2.5 The questionnaire included some specific options on possible detailed arrangements for future Forum meetings. Not all respondents offered opinions on these questions. The results in favour of the following options were:

Move to 2 meetings per year - 10

Opportunities for community groups to chair Forum meetings: 1

Hold meetings at different times:

Mornings – 2

Afternoons – 2

Retain Evenings - 10

More informality – 6

Forum members to suggest items – 8.

1.2.6 There is a majority in favour of moving to 2 Forum meetings each year. Such an approach might enable those meetings to be more meaningful in content and accords with recent recommendations to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee that the number of formal council meetings should be reduced generally. Evening meetings appear to suit the majority of the community members. If a reduction to two meetings a year is supported, there should perhaps then be provision for additional Forum meetings to be called to deal with any major issue that might arise.

1.2.7 It is clear that a number of existing community members may no longer wish to take part in the Forum. A review of the membership of the Forum should therefore be undertaken to enable those members no longer wishing to take part to formally withdraw.

1.2.8 Currently, the Tonbridge Forum operates as a formal 'Panel' of the Borough Council and 13 Members are awarded seats. The review group might wish to consider whether this is the right approach going forward. The number of Council

Members attending the Forum can, at times, lead to them dominating discussions and this may deter the community members from taking a more active role. A smaller membership with a majority of community members rather than Council might enable a more informal, discursive approach to be adopted to engender greater input from community groups and give more opportunity for community members to suggest future items and raise issues.

1.2.9 It is therefore suggested that a more informal style of meeting be adopted. The current approach of a 'top' table and formal speakers/presentations could be replaced by a round table format which could allow greater interaction and comment. Public seats could still need to be made available but these could be separate from the suggested round table. A public question and answer session could be retained.

1.2.10 The Panel is therefore invited to consider the following suggested recommendations:

1. That the Tonbridge Forum be retained but be held two times each year in the evenings.
2. A review of the Membership should be undertaken which will enable members to withdraw from the Forum if they wish to do so or confirm their continued membership.
3. Consideration is given to changing Forum meetings to an informal community meeting rather than a formal Council 'Panel' as at present. This needs to involve a reduction in the number of Council Members attending.
4. The format of future meetings should be changed with a view to implementing a more informal, round table style of meetings and encouraging community members to suggest and raise items.

### **1.3 Parish Partnership Panel**

1.3.1 As with the Forum members, all Parish Councils were sent the same questionnaire inviting their views on the current format of PPP meetings. There were 22 Parish Councils who responded to the questionnaire and 5 that did not take part in the survey. The consultation results regarding the main issue are as follows:

Abandon the PPP – 2

Retain the PPP but reduce its frequency to two meetings a year and consider changes to the format – 9

Retain the four PPP meetings per year but consider changes to the format - 11

1.3.2 It is clear that the majority are in favour of retaining the PPP although almost half of respondents wished to reduce its frequency to two main meetings a year. With

regard to specific options regarding the arrangements for the meetings, there was support for the following:

Opportunity for PC's to chair meetings - 7

Hold meetings at different times:

Mornings – 4

Afternoons – 5

Retain Evenings - 6

Support for increasing the number of items, but making them shorter and less formal – 11

Support for PC's to suggest agenda items - 15

- 1.3.3 It is clear that Parish Councils would value the opportunity to suggest more agenda items for future PPP meetings. At the present time, Parish Councils are invited to raise agenda items prior to each meeting but rarely does this happen. We therefore need to review the process by which Parishes are invited to suggest items, for example, giving Parishes a longer lead in time to enable them to consider this. The aim should be to achieve future agendas which are led by the Parish Councils themselves with the number of Borough Council items being kept to a minimum.
- 1.3.4 All of the respondents have opted for some level of change. The Parish Councils that responded were divided on whether the PPP meetings should be reduced to two main meetings a year or kept to four meetings as at present. A change to two main meetings would align with recent recommendations to reduce the frequency of meetings generally and be consistent with the recommendations regarding the Tonbridge Forum. This could also allow for a more interactive approach allowing more time for Parish Council's to suggest topics that they would like to see discussed and thus result in better attendance and more pro-active meetings. If a need arises, additional meetings of the PPP could be called if a specific issue arises
- 1.3.5 Alternatively, the four meetings per year could be retained but perhaps only on the basis that, unless there are sufficient items suggested by the Parish Councils for a particular meeting, it would be cancelled rather than its agenda only having Borough Council items. A possible compromise solution given the split of preferences between 2 and 4 meetings would be to suggest 3 meetings of the PP each year.
- 1.3.6 The preferred timings of the meetings were varied, with only a slight favour towards retaining evening meetings. Holding meetings in the afternoons might encourage more to attend and would save on costs of caretaking etc.

1.3.7 A number of Parish Councils expressed support for the opportunity to chair PPP meetings. This could be one way that Parish Councils could be encouraged to take more ownership of the PPP meetings and could therefore perhaps be accommodated on a rotational basis or, alternatively with joint chairs appointed on an annual basis who would then share such duties. To create a more informal approach, future PPP meetings could perhaps be held in the Committee Room, rather than the Council Chamber.

1.3.8 The Panel is therefore invited to consider the following

1. To retain the PPP meetings but to consider whether its frequency should be reduced to two or three per year or, if the four meetings are retained, that they only held if there are sufficient items suggested by the Parish Councils.
2. Whether future PPP meetings should take place in the afternoons instead of evenings as at present.
3. That the process by which Parish Councils are invited to suggest topics and agenda items be reviewed to encourage greater participation.
4. That the opportunity be given for Parish Councils to chair the meetings be investigated further.

#### **1.4 Financial and Value for Money Considerations**

1.4.1 Reducing the frequency of the meetings would see a reduction in staffing costs and room hire costs (Tonbridge Forum) and refreshment costs for both meetings.

#### **1.5 Recommendations**

1.5.1 That the Panel be invited to consider the suggested recommendations in 1.2.10 regarding Tonbridge Forum and the recommendations in 1.3.8 regarding Parish Partnership Panel to be presented to the next meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

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