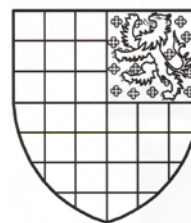


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**LEWES
TOWN
COUNCIL**

MINUTES

of the meeting of the **Working Party** formed to consider Communications & public engagement held on **Thursday 19th May 2016**, in the **Yarrow Room, Town Hall, Lewes** at **7:00pm**.

PRESENT Cllrs A Ashby; S Catlin; H Jones; I Makepeace; S Murray; R O’Keeffe; A Rowell and E Watts.

In attendance: S Brigden (*Town Clerk [TC]*).

ComWP2016/01 ELECTION of CHAIRMAN:

Cllr O’Keeffe was elected as Chairman of the Working Party for the 2016/17 municipal year.

ComWP2016/02 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE: Apologies had been received from Cllr Elliott, who had an unavoidable work commitment.

ComWP2016/03 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST: There were none.

ComWP2016/04 QUESTIONS: There were none

ComWP2016/05 REMIT of the WORKING PARTY:

The remit of the working party, as defined by Council was reviewed:

Council meeting 17th December 2015 Minute ref FC2015/82

Council considered a proposal (NOM 017/2015 – copy in minute book) for a working party to be set up to review the council’s public engagement. Its remit, it was suggested, should be to look at all forms of communication between the Council and the public, electronic communication and other forms of written and spoken communications.

The working group should seek advice from experts in the field of public communications where possible and should research examples of good practice from other local government bodies.

ComWP2016/06 BUSINESS OF THE MEETING:

Cllr Catlin again reminded all Members to ensure they were familiar with, and complied with, the Council’s communications policy.

1 A discussion paper had been submitted, which made reference to issues discussed at the Annual Town Meeting and the frequency of these. TC was asked to explain the legal framework surrounding these meetings, and any imperatives arising which might impact upon the Council. It was noted that there were only two decisions that might demand response, and these were technical issues. It was conventional to acknowledge the discussions at an annual meeting by referring any salient points to Council later in the year. There followed some discussion as to the responsibilities of members to engage routinely with their electorate. A Town (parish) meeting could be called at other times, but was subject to the same legal controls as the statutory annual meeting. This was distinct from a general public meeting, which could be convened by anyone with access to an appropriate room, at any time. It was suggested that Council should be asked to agree facilities and invitations for a mid-year (Autumn) public meeting for general discussion on matters of public interest.

2 A question arose as to the rights of members of the public at meetings of the Council. There appeared to be some prevailing misunderstanding regarding the number of questions allowed, and the distinction between rights to question or present a point or to raise a supplementary question in consequence of an answer

during the allotted period, and ‘participation’ in the actual meeting which followed. TC explained the statutory background to this and noted that the detail was enshrined in the Council’s published Standing Orders, and every agenda carried a highlighted panel explaining the basic principles. It was thought that more emphasis could still be placed upon this and TC agreed that a specific explanatory notice could be placed in a Town Hall noticeboard, and included on the website. Press advertising of individual meetings would be expensive and have limited effect, and would require the Council to revert to a structure using standing committees, with scheduled meeting dates. This was considered to be unhelpful in the operation of a modern Council and the reasoning behind the Council’s change to ad-hoc task-and-finish Working parties (in 2005) was rehearsed. Members undertook to promote meeting dates and salient issues using their personal facilities such as Facebook and Twitter accounts, and this gave rise to a brief discussion regarding personal surgeries. TC would revise some of the information on the Council’s website, and Cllr O’Keeffe undertook to research information already prepared by ESCC on the distinction between tiers of local government.

3 The sub-group that had been tasked with research into examples of other websites made a report. There was a general discussion on desirable aspects and wide agreement, and the conversation touched-upon many elements of detail. TC cautioned members that they must observe the distinction between their role in setting policy and strategic direction, and officers’ responsibilities to conduct the actual work. Also; Council agreed an annual plan of major projects, and it would be necessary to seek agreement that a redesigned website should be accorded priority as an addition to the current plan. To support that request it would be sensible to define an estimated cost which, it was suggested, could be up to £10,000 in total.

4 TC updated Members on the present status of the approved project to provide publicly-accessible Wi-fi in the Town Hall. A comprehensive technical assessment had been carried out by the Council’s current IT services provider and a robust scheme designed and costed that fell within the budget provision agreed by Council and could be installed within a few days. This would provide uncomplicated log-in and allow significant numbers to access internet services concurrently – as anticipated when large public meetings were in progress or several rooms in use at the same time. In attempting to satisfy requirements to obtain competitive quotations, it had become apparent that most commercial providers were poorly-equipped to deal with the complexities of the Town Hall; which was not only constrained by Grade 2 heritage listing but several aspects of its scale and construction presented technical problems outside their practical capability. One major national provider had ignored invitations to carry out a technical survey, and technicians representing another had inspected the building at length and determined that the system envisaged was beyond their remit. TC planned to propose to Council that the existing quotation be accepted and the requirement for competing quotes be waived under the circumstances. Members concurred with this view.

5 Members were reminded that they had undertaken to provide copy for the Council newsletter. The next edition would be published in August and contain the annual report, and be printed and distributed to every household.

6 It was suggested that a student, or two, at Sussex Downs College might be invited to advise the Working Party in communication matters. There were some considerations regarding the age and status of such an adviser, but contributions from a young person’s perspective would be welcomed.

ComWP2016/07 CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS TO COUNCIL:

The Working Party concluded that:

- Improved promotion of the public’s rights to attend meetings and raise questions was desirable. Additional notices and informative panels would be

introduced, and Members would individually attempt to improve public understanding through work within their Wards.

- Council should be asked to agree an Autumn public meeting, for discussion of topics of general interest to the community.
- Council should be asked to agree that a redesigned website should be accorded priority as an addition to the current annual plan, and to allocate a maximum budget of £10,000 for the project.

ComWP2016/08 There being no further business, the Chairman declared the meeting closed, and thanked everyone for their attendance.

The meeting closed at 8:25pm

Signed date