

Good morning Tim,

I trust you had a great Christmas. Happy New Year.

Reference the P&R meeting next week. I am unable to attend, but would appreciate if my comments regarding the constitution item, appendix 1 item c, below for convenience, could be taken into consideration by the committee before it votes?

Can you ask Dem Services to send a copy to members of the committee please, in advance of the meeting?

Appendix 1 Item C
(Name change and other items to be added to the functions of the Committee)

1. The name of Area Committees should be changed to “Councillors and Residents Forum”. This will make the purpose of the meetings clearer.

2. For certain items, members of the public and parish/town councils have the ability to vote/express/indicate a preference. It will be agreed by the Chair in advance which item/s this applies to and be made clear on the agenda. The potential outcomes of the vote will be explained to the public before a vote is Taken.

3. Only ward councillors to vote to refer items to Service Committee Chairs. In this context, ward councillor means a Swale Borough Councillor who is a member of the relevant Councillor and Resident Forum.

4. Chairs to meet after each round of meetings to review and forward plan. In particular this meeting will consider future items that are suitable for the public vote/indication.

The proposed changes, as set out in Appendix, are justified because they will "correct an error, could provide greater clarity, and make decisions more robust and/or improve efficiency. The changes above do none of that and, therefore, there is no clear reason for them.

First, they do not correct an error.

Second they confuse rather than clarify. I think the change of name and the inclusion of residents in any formal vote will increase expectations beyond what can be delivered.

The change of name is window dressing at best. If there is a contentious subject on the agenda, as there has been on Sheppey in the past, we can easily fill a hall to standing room only. And every member of the public knows the purpose of their being there is to sway councillors opinions and votes.

Simply changing the names won't achieve greater turnout. Ensuring the agenda is packed with issues of real concern rather than simply reporting council business, and giving the committees more power and autonomy, would increase attendance. However, the proposed amendment changes neither, and, therefore, won't make any difference to turnout.

The public has been allowed to speak on any item at every Area Committee I have ever attended. On occasions, chairmen have allowed a "show of hands" to indicate the broader view of the meeting on an item. This should be encouraged. In my experience, the public's views have demonstrably influenced how members have subsequently voted, which is clear and democratic.

Therefore, I do not think we need to change the constitution to give the public or parish councils the right to vote formally on issues being discussed. They may subsequently believe there was collective agreement that something would happen as a result. Giving everyone present a formal vote will likely increase the risk of misunderstanding and disillusionment, which will lead to lower turnouts in future. It also creates a visible divide between councillors and the public by saying there are important issues on which only Members are allowed to vote, and other less important ones. Added to that, it's a small group of Members who will decide, behind closed doors, what those items are. The optics are not good and risk bringing the council into disrepute.

As we know, votes at these committees are advisory, except for referrals to Service Committees and Full Council. The informal nature of a "show of hands" re-inforces this principle.

Thirdly, there is no evidence as to how the changes will "make decisions more robust and/or improve efficiency".

In summary:

1. The proposed changes do not provide the means to achieve the three stated objectives.
2. Instead, they run the risk of creating confusion and disappointment, while the existing arrangements are clear and transparent.

3. The change of name is window dressing. Attendance at meetings is dictated by the agenda and public feeling for or against an item, and the knowledge that if they speak they will be heard.
4. Changing the rules won't in itself increase attendance.
5. Deciding behind closed door what are Member-only items and what are public ones risks public confidence.

I ask the committee to dismiss the proposed changes and not recommend them to Full Council.

Thank you for your time.

Regards

Mike

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