

# **Barford, Sherbourne & Wasperton Joint Parish Council**

## **Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Council held on Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2010 in Wasperton Village Hall**

**Present:** Cllr. J. V. Murphy (Chairman),  
Cllrs. Mrs. W.P. Barlow, Mrs. A. Gordon,  
Mrs. M. A. Hayward, Dr. M. J. Metcalfe, D. Morrow,  
R. G. Mulgrue and N. F. J. Thurley.

**In attendance:** Cllr. L. Caborn (Warwickshire County Council).

**Apologies for absence:** Cllrs. R. Clay, W. Worrall and J. T. Wright.

### **140 Declarations of Personal and Prejudicial Interests**

There were none.

### **141 Review of Localities Working**

The Chairman explained that the special meeting had been called to consider the Council's response to the County Council's review of localities working, including the functioning of the Community Fora.

Cllr. Caborn in introducing the item emphasised that the Fora across the County operated differently from each other and thus their effectiveness differed, including different levels of financial delegation and varying degrees of commitment from the senior officers allocated to each Forum. In all cases, however, the Police regarded the Fora as their official means of communicating with the public. He pointed out that the Fora's significance could be enhanced by the new government's "Big Society" initiative and thus it was important that they should be made to work effectively. He also pointed out that Youth Fora were being set up in the County to mirror the Community Fora.

Councillors then discussed the experiences of localities working and of the functioning of the Warwick Rural West Forum. Amongst the points raised in discussion were the following:

- (i) the cost of the Fora must be justified by their effectiveness – this Council's experience called their effectiveness into question;
- (ii) in urban areas, where there are Town Councils, why could not these act as the Fora, rather than have separate bodies? Even in rural areas, where the Fora did not coincide with individual Parish boundaries, why could not the Parish Councils or, for specific topical issues, groups of residents deal directly with the officers of the Principal Councils, rather than have the Fora act as intermediaries?

- (iii) Fora should be used for discussion and decision, not as a means of top-down communication from the Principal Councils;
- (iv) District, as opposed to County, Councillors did not appear to be supporting the Fora;
- (v) several District and County officers, particularly at middle and senior level, did not seem to be responsive to localities working – a culture change was necessary in the organisations, with localities working seen as central, not peripheral, to their jobs. Officers needed to listen and respond to local concerns;
- (vi) the current system of considering applications for grants from the Warwick Rural West Forum was unacceptable as a means of fairly and responsibly disbursing public funds;
- (vii) the work of the County’s Area Committees could be subsumed by the Fora, thus giving a cost saving.

Despite these criticisms, the Council recognised that, given current legislation and the Government’s “Big Society” proposals, Community Fora were unlikely to be abolished. Therefore, they had to be made to function more effectively in the service of local communities.

The following proposals in response to the review paper were generally agreed:

- (i) a sustained effort by chief officers and their senior staff was necessary to bring about a culture change amongst the staff of the District and County Councils to make localities working a reality, whereby issues raised by communities were responded to promptly;
- (ii) there should be greater effort to ensure continuity of officer support, since frequent changes reduced the effectiveness of locality working;
- (iii) Community Fora needed to be given a formal role in participatory budgeting and policy formulation, since many local issues could only be resolved if they did not fall foul of overall policy considerations and if there were budgetary provision;
- (iv) Fora should have devolved powers over spending within budgets, to which they could add funding from outside grants, for which they would be able to apply, and voluntary help from members of the local community;
- (v) agenda for Fora meetings should concentrate on common issues across Parish boundaries, leaving Parish and Town Councils to deal directly with the Principal Councils on issues confined to a particular Parish/Town;
- (vi) there was support for the proposal in the paper for agenda to concentrate on only up to two substantive items in addition to community safety;
- (vii) pre-meetings should be routinely arranged to manage agenda;
- (viii) there was concern that Parish Councils should not be seen as part of “the third sector” (p.18 of the paper);
- (ix) Area Committees should be abolished and their responsibilities taken over by Community Fora, thus devolving decisions closer to local communities and giving a cost saving;

- (x) there should be a defined procedure for electing Chairmen of Community Fora;
- (xi) the voting membership of Fora must be defined and be confined to Councillors, since these have been democratically elected by their constituents. This should not preclude representatives of organisations being invited to attend, nor should it prevent members of the public being routinely encouraged to attend and to speak;
- (xii) there was confusion about decisions being reached by consensus, since there was no agreed definition of this term.

It was agreed that the Chairman be authorised to draw up the formal response on the basis of the points noted above and submit them to the County Council. It was understood that the responses would be discussed at the December meeting of the Warwick Rural West Forum.

The meeting closed at 9.18 p.m.