

Draft Parish Charter - FPC Consultation Response

We are grateful for the time and trouble taken by the Parish Charter review group which has resulted in the Draft Parish Charter (DPC), now out for initial comment. This will be an important document shaping relationships between B&NES Council and Parish Councils so we hope our comments will be seen as a constructive contribution to help achieve a more useful and enduring final document

How will commitments in the Parish Charter be delivered?

While it says in the summary that the document will go on to explain how the aims of the Charter will be achieved, the 'how' is never made specific.

The DPC is rich with aspirational messages – 'working together', 'respecting', 'valuing' and the like - but, in some instances at least, it is unclear who will do what to achieve these goals. As just a couple of examples:

- B&NES "will involve parish councils in the setting of our long-term corporate strategies and other priorities". Who will make this happen? How?
- B&NES will "prioritise – making sure local needs come first wherever we can". What mechanism will achieve this?

In many instances, understandably, the 'commitment' is shared between B&NES Council and Town & Parish Councils and the phrase 'working together' is used. If the mechanism and responsibilities are not made clear there would seem to be considerable potential for each 'side' to assume that the other was shouldering the burden – or to blame the other if commitments are not met.

B&NES is a huge organisation split into 12 main service areas. Where specific commitments are being made in the Charter it would be helpful to know which Department of B&NES is making the commitment. There's a danger that when a potential problem arises we will be faced with the response that – 'that's not my Department – you should have spoken to Highways/ Planning/ Democratic Services,' etc.

Who do parish councils talk to if there are concerns about the operation of the Parish Charter – the Community Engagement Team?

Recognising the limited resources available to PCs.

We are concerned that the DPC makes little allowance for the reality of the resources available to a small parish council like Freshford. (In population terms we are 28th out of 51 so there are many smaller than us.)

- To spell it out - we are seven volunteers, with much else going on in our lives, supported by a part-time Clerk who is paid for roughly a day a week to attend to PC business and other responsibilities e.g. the management of our village green, our street-lighting, our cemetery. We have two vacancies on

- the PC which we struggle to fill. We haven't had a contested election since 2011.
- Councillors accept that we should give up one evening a month, plus of course the time taken to prepare for and follow up on the PC meeting. In addition we each take responsibility for particular areas of the PC's work, on which we spend many hours each month.
 - We also try to ensure that we have a representative at outside meetings such as ALCA, Parish Liaison and Connecting Communities Forums. (Although Freshford PC covers these external meetings we note that many other PCs do not. Has anyone asked why? We suspect it may be because of an unwillingness by councillors to spend yet more time on PC-related matters. The same may also apply to the training activities proposed in the DPC.)
 - Freshford PC is also represented on local bodies such as the Valley Parishes Alliance and its Highways Sub Committee, our Village Hall Management Committee and on the board of our Community Association which, among other things, runs the Community Shop..
 - Probably in common with other PCs, it should be noted that councillors are often also the mainstay of other organisations in the community, further limiting the time they are prepared to spend on PC activities.
 - The DPC talks about "utilising local volunteers". Although the labour may be 'free', it takes hours of someone's time to recruit, equip and manage volunteers.
 - Our financial resources are defined by the precept, which has to be justified in advance in relation to our annual budget. National government is trying to control increases in precept so our room for manoeuvre in future looks limited. What this means is that we cannot undertake significant extra expenditure without budgeting it in advance, selling the idea to residents and negotiating whatever hurdles there may be in increasing the precept - always assuming that we have the management resource needed to handle additional responsibilities.
 - In short, therefore, it should not be assumed that we can cover additional expense or work more hours. It is just not going to happen.
 - The Parish Charter should by all means help us to work smarter but it will get nowhere if it assumes we will spend more or work longer.

Parish Liaison/ Connecting Communities Forums

We note that a Parish Charter Steering Group will be established and one of its functions will be to set the agenda for the Parish Liaison meetings.

- Is this appropriate? Will the Steering Group know enough of what is in the pipeline as far as B&NES is concerned so as to put upcoming matters on to the agenda?
- No mention is made of who runs the Connecting Communities Forums - the Parish Charter Steering Group again?
- The role of the Parish Charter Steering Group is beginning to sound rather demanding. Given the existing pressures on parish councillors mentioned, will there be sufficient interest in membership?

Time for responding to consultations

The DPC states “Parish councils will respond to consultations in a timely manner and as appropriate will call special meetings”.

- Given the time constraints outlined, consultations should be expected to allow enough time for PCs to consider matters at their normal timetabled PC meetings. This should apply to all consultations, including planning applications.
- Special meetings should not be required except on extremely rare occasions - and even then should have to be justified to PCs as being necessarily urgent (and not just to cover for delays elsewhere in the process or to fit in with other bodies' timetables).

Time for responding to communications

The DPC requires PCs to “respond to communications within reasonable timescales”.

- Let’s be realistic about service levels. In this digital age there is the misguided expectation that a PC offers a 24/7 service. The reality is that if the Clerk or the appropriate councillor is away - on holiday or otherwise - there may be no reaction for a couple of weeks or more. Other members of the parish council may well not even be aware that an issue is awaiting a response. We cannot be expected to do more.
- B&NES proposes “We will make all communications to parish councils through the clerk”. Fair enough, but when (not if) the Clerk is away...?
- And may we make a point about B&NES’ communication to Clerks. Every officer within B&NES seems to have their own contact list rather than using one centralised list. Freshford PC’s recently appointed Clerk has responded many times giving the new contact email address but the old address continues to be used.

How to reflect local views

The DPC states that PCs’ response to consultations “will seek to reflect the view of local people”.

- How? By consultation? By referendum? and if so, how? and who pays?
- The only cheap, quick channel of communication open to Freshford PC is our community email database but we know that a proportion of residents either cannot, or do not wish to, engage with the community in this way and have not signed up to receive these communications. If we rely on email we exclude these people from any consultation.
- If we are given several months for consultation we could use Freshford PC’s quarterly Bulletin, which is delivered to every household.
- Otherwise we are left with delivering leaflets door-to-door and evaluating the response - both costly and time-consuming (will B&NES contribute to the cost?).
- Does the “need to reflect the view of local people” apply to the PC’s response to planning applications? The point of the Parish Charter should be to provide clarity on such matters.

- Will residents get fed up with a survey coming through their doors almost every week? Of course they will.

Responding to enquiries

The DPC states “We will work together to try and answer residents’ queries at the first point of contact, signposting as necessary, regardless of whether the query is to a parish or to B&NES Council”.

- A resident contacts the PC with a query about B&NES’ services and PCs are supposed to provide the answer? We do not think that is likely to be achievable in any meaningful way beyond pointing the resident to the ‘Report It’ page on the B&NES website.

Cooperation with neighbouring District Councils

Could not the Charter draw out from B&NES a commitment to link more effectively with other local Councils so that e.g. notice of road works/ road diversions are handled efficiently and effectively and with proper consideration for the villages affected. Freshford, being at B&NES’ border with Wiltshire, is perhaps more exposed than other parish councils to ‘cross-border’ inefficiencies. For example, recently a Wiltshire road scheme sought to temporarily divert traffic through the villages of Limpley Stoke, our Neighbourhood Plan partner, and Freshford. There was little or no local consultation before the event.

Repetition

The structure of the DPC results in excessive length and a considerable degree of repetition. For example, the requirement on B&NES to allow PCs adequate time to respond is stated at least twice and the related point that PCs will respond in a timely way is also stated at least twice. This all results in a longer document than is strictly necessary. We would suggest that a more succinct wording would help clarify the content and would improve the practicality of the new Parish Charter.

Freshford Parish Council 30th June 2017.