

Parish Liaison

Parish Matters

This newsletter used to be sent monthly but following reports from clerks that it was not being read, and officers/Members awareness that it was not being read by the lack of knowledge in the Parish/Towns, its distribution was discontinued. When Councillors or clerks were questioned as to why it was not read comments included areas such as too much information being sent, the clerk not forwarding information and information overload. In the interim period information has been forwarded to Parish/Town Clerks on an as-required basis but this is subject to things being missed and provides no audit trail of what information has been issued.

If Parish Matters was resurrected as a monthly newsletter and I would suggest that it be sent by electronic means only as per the distribution below.

Distribution

Previously Parish Matters has been sent to clerks. I would propose that it be sent to all clerks, all Chairman and any Town or Parish Councillors that we hold email addresses for. There is no cost to email distribution and the more Councillors it is sent to the more opportunity there is for it to be read. Parish Matters must also be sent to MDDC Members in order that they know what information is being distributed.

WIS

WIS is issued weekly to all Mid Devon Members. This newsletter does not contain confidential information (which would be issued by other means) and Members could be encouraged to share appropriate content at Parish Council meetings.

Website

The Town and Parish Council pages on the website are updated by officers in the Communications team who upload information as provided to them by the Parish Liaison Officer. Information currently provided on the website includes contact details for all local councils. Registers of Interest forms are held on these pages and should be up to date at all times. There can be a link from this page to the Town/Parishes own web pages.

Member Briefings

There are a number of Member Briefings that take place in the evening at Phoenix House (and could be viewed remotely at Crediton) that may be of interest to local Town and Parish Councillors. These briefings can be poorly attended by our own Members. Could these briefings (when the topic is appropriate) be opened up to local councillors on a first come first served basis? – but obviously only when the content is of a general nature.

Member Training

When Member Training has been organised in the past there have been occasions when not all of the available places have been taken up. Could we, when appropriate, offer these places on a first come first served basis to Town and Parish Councillors?

Taking into consideration the drive every four years to encourage more people to stand for District elections closer liaison may encourage Town and Parish Councillors to consider that.

Information Up and down

Parish and Town Councils should be given the opportunity to pass information up the chain and equally Devon County Councillors should be given the opportunity to pass information from County that is relevant to both District and Town/Parish councils. This could be accomplished by a column in WIS and/or Parish Matters.

Updates re Membership

In the past there have been difficulties in getting Towns/Parishes to update this authority when they have changes to their Membership. A monthly (for example) automatic email could be sent to clerks and chairman to remind them of their responsibility to do this.

Town and Parish Clerks Annual Training

Anecdotally those that have less need to attend do and those in greater need don't! This training could be opened up to Chairman and Vice Chairman so that they are aware of what is going on and of what their clerk should/shouldn't be doing.

Planning Training

This is offered every year but Members have reported that their Parish/Town Councillors find it difficult to get to the venue at the time the training is held. I would propose consultation to find out when best suits them.

Parish Liaison in Other Areas

I have undertaken an internet search to try to establish the level of parish liaison that is undertaken by other authorities. I came across only one council that still employs an officer to undertake this role, which was Hereford. The officer there is employed as a Parish Liaison and Rural Services Officer. It should be noted that this is a County Council.

Having surveyed our neighbouring authorities I have found that locally services provided to Town and Parish Councils have reduced in recent years. Taunton Deane had a Parish Liaison Officer until 2 years ago (which they thought was a unique post

in the South West) but this post was lost in the first round of budget cuts. Taunton Deane now deal with requests when they are able, within the Democratic Services team, but often signpost onto the Somerset Association of Local Councils who they consider are better equipped to help. They provide code of conduct training following elections, but attendance is patchy. They did comment that the removal of the post did not appear to have increased the number of complaints received about Town and parish Councils.

Both West Devon and South Hams manage parish liaison within Democratic Services.

South Hams used to organise meetings in various locations throughout the district on a twice yearly basis but they found that they were poorly attended so in the last few years they have held one meeting annual that all Towns and Parishes were invited to. They also run a planning training event once a year.

West Devon have meetings twice a year in three locations and they have active participation from their Towns and Parishes.

At both South Hams and West Devon Members are encouraged to keep in touch with Parishes within their Wards and monthly 'key messages' are circulated for Members to share with their local Parish Councils.

East Devon have no dedicated officer but their Democratic Services team deal with updating a register of clerks and any queries received, such as the code conduct. Joint Parish and Town Council meetings with the District Council are held at least annually to discuss relevant issues.