

NOTES OF AN INFORMAL MEETING OF THE KETTERING RURAL FORUM

Held at Ashley Village Hall on Tuesday 1 September 2015

The meeting had been called by members of the Rural Forum (RF) David Pope of Kettering Borough Council (KBC) arranging the invites on behalf of the RF members. The meeting was arranged in response to concerns expressed about the objectives of the RF meetings. There was some confusion surrounding the objectives of the meeting and who was to attend – some recalled that Borough Councillors were asked not to attend whilst others expected Danny Moody (who is actually on holiday at the present time) to be there to report back on KBC officers views of the RF. After a few minutes discussion it was agreed that the meeting would be used to formulate suggestions as to how the future meetings should be run. It was also agreed that those Borough Councillors who had arrived could stay and take part in the meeting. David Watson Vice Chairman of the RF was asked to chair the meeting which commenced at 7.07pm – the Chairman agreed to take notes of the proceedings

Present:

David Watson	Geddington, Newton and Little Oakley PC	Chairman
Peter Hooton	Rushton	
Bruce Squires	Stoke Albany	
Nick Richards	Wilbarston	
Ian Bushby	Warkton	
James Woolsey	Warkton	
Brian Peel	Weekley	
David Whalley	Cransley	
Robyn Whalley	Cransley	
Richard Barnwell	Cransley	
Carl Ward	Loddington	
Frances Pope	Thorpe Malsor	
Sally McKeown	Ashley	
Katherine Cadbury	Harrington	
Marie Jessop	Braybrooke	
Angela Beardsmore	Braybrooke	
Rob Hinkman	Dingley	
Hilary Bull	Broughton	
Pat Scouse	Broughton	
Jim Hakewill	Borough Councillor for Slade and Chairman of RF	
Mark Rowley	Borough Councillor for Queen Eleanor and Buccleuch	
Chris Groome	County councillor for Burton Latimer	

The initial discussion concerned the form of the meetings when it was overwhelmingly agreed that the RF should continue as an independent forum representing the villages. Although the agendas of the A6 Towns and Town Forums are often similar this reflects the current mode of operation whereby KBC uses the meetings to communicate issues which it feels need exposing; the members believe that the priority of the meetings should be for the members attending to raise issues impacting on the rural villages which will often be significantly different to the interests of the towns. Members acknowledged that the RF needs to be more proactive.

The question was asked if the Chairman should always be a Borough Councillor as provided by the current constitution. After considerable debate it was agreed that although it is probable that Borough Councillors had greater influence on KBC officials and Cabinet the key issue was that the Chairman should run the meetings from the construct of the agenda to the follow up of matters arising from the meeting. Concern was expressed that minutes are not produced in a timely manner and often included items which appeared to be officer's afterthoughts rather than decisions reached in the meetings. It was accepted that this may just be an impression exacerbated by the time interval between the meeting and minutes being available to those present. It was agreed that the Chairman should hold a pre-meeting briefing with the officers to agree the content of the agenda and that draft minutes should be made available to attendees within a week of the meeting. There was also a strongly supported view that the minutes should include a record of who had responsibility to action issues raised. The RF believes that it is entitled to receive a response to questions asked so that issues such as street lighting and traveller communities are not "kicked into the long grass" (both of these items await response after 18 months or more). It was emphasised that the four councillors representing the rural areas will need to work together to ensure that appropriate action is achieved; parish councillors were reminded of the advantage of using Borough Councillors rather than going direct to officers.

There was concern expressed about attendance (or lack thereof) by the executive officers and Cabinet members with the example of Councillor Ian Jelly failing to attend on a number of occasions which actions were considered to be both discourteous and evasive. Indeed it was agreed that relationships between the RF and KBC appeared to have significantly worsened after the precepting affair. It was agreed that the Leader or Chief Executive should address the RF once a year on the issues that are affecting the Borough and that the Budget should be explained not only in numbers but in service implications – real consultation rather than "ticking the boxes". The members present believe that improved communication could result in support for difficult measures but at the moment the approach seems to be to communicate actions that have already been decided rather than consultation.

The major question that still needs answering is how KBC officers and Cabinet perceive the RF. At present the impression given is that RF meetings are a hurdle to be overcome rather than an opportunity to work with the local representatives of a substantial part of the electorate. Members attending other forums have also expressed the view that it appears to be increasingly difficult over the last few years to influence officers. Following concerns expressed at the last meeting of the RF the members believe that this matter is being reviewed in conjunction with officers by Danny Moody and we await the outcome with interest.

In summary it was agreed that:

- 1 The Rural Forum should remain independent from other Forums
- 2 The Chairman should ensure that the Rural Forum runs its own meetings
- 3 A Deputy Chief Executive should regularly attend the meetings with the Leader/Chief Executive attending once a year
- 4 Minutes showing action responsibilities should be produced in draft form within a week
- 5 The views of the KBC officers/Cabinet are awaited with interest.

The meeting closed at 8.48pm with thanks to Ashley Village Hall and Sally McKeown for their hospitality and providing refreshments.

