

Cllr Francine Haeberling
Leader
B&NES Council

13 October 2010

Dear Francine,

FUTURE OF THE BATH CITY LIAISON FORUM

David Taylor asked us at the end of August to provide views on the future of the Forum, with a view to strengthening its arrangements. Working from the BCLF minutes, I have consulted all the people who attended more than one meeting, including non-FoBRA attendees, and got a good response, and we have also had a discussion about this in the FoBRA committee on 30 September.

There is a fundamental question whether the BCLF should continue at all. It is a fairly obvious candidate for a spending cut. On the other hand there is much interest in the new localism. Views are not unanimous, but the majority feel that the Forum ought to continue if the arrangements can be strengthened. I have received a wide spread of views, some of them deeply critical, but I will try to summarise them constructively under headings relating to the practical arrangements.

General

Most respondents have expressed concern about the poor attendance, despite the presence of leading figures from the Council and from FoBRA. To turn this around, we think the meetings have to be seen to be attractive, interesting, relevant, and likely to make a difference. Otherwise resident representatives just won't turn out in the evenings for them.

Some respondents have commented that the Parish Liaison Committee model (on which you based the BCLF) is not appropriate because the city is not parished, and residents' groups in Bath are not resourced like parish councils. There is no general support for parishing Bath, and in the short term at least I think we need to concentrate on improving the Forum arrangements.

Purpose of the Forum

While the stated purpose, to 'act as a focus for community engagement...provide a link to the LSP...', suggests that there will be a two-way dialogue at the meetings, there is a perception that in practice the Council uses the Forum to tell residents what it has already decided, rather than to ask them what they think and to listen to their concerns.

Venue

Most people think that the Council chamber is quite unsuitable for the Forum. Whilst it's architecturally and historically interesting, it has an unsympathetic layout, poor acoustics and is patently inappropriate for a genuine dialogue. There is also a feeling that this is not 'neutral' territory. The other meeting rooms in the Guildhall are even more depressing, so if you want more people to come we think you need to hold the meetings somewhere more pleasant.

PROMOTING RESIDENTS' INTERESTS IN BATH

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Frequency

There is quite a strong desire to have more meetings – three or four a year. This might help the Forum to develop momentum, but only of course if there were enough important subjects to make the meetings worthwhile.

Agenda

The general principle of deciding this in discussion between the Council and residents is accepted, though non-FoBRA attendees would naturally like this discussion to go wider than FoBRA. I think the solution must lie in greatly improving communications (see below).

Chairperson

The Chair of the Council ought to command general respect, but has not always done so at the BCLF. We suggest that the chairmanship should alternate between the Chair of the Council and the Chair of FoBRA. This might help to relieve pressure if the frequency of meetings is increased.

Attendance

Respondents have commented pointedly on the difference between attendance at the BCLF (10-20 residents) and the BetterBath Forum (100-200 attendees). This is attributed to BBF taking place on neutral territory in bright, friendly surroundings, with an independent chairman, one item on the agenda per meeting and good advance publicity. There are several practical lessons here.

The Council seems to have very poor and outdated information about residents' groups in the city. Contact details for FoBRA members are listed on our website, but no one seems be charged with maintaining an up to date list of other groups. This obviously needs attention.

You might also consider whether the net should be widened to bring in more people. Could Neighbourhood Watch groups be invited? Should individuals be allowed to attend, as well as representative groups? Is it appropriate to exclude local pressure groups?

There is a general view that Council leaders must be seen to be taking an interest. This doesn't mean that officers should not continue to make detailed presentations and reports, but that you yourself, the Chief Executive and the relevant Cabinet member(s) should attend and be prepared to join in the discussion.

Attendance by Bath councillors has been patchy. Some respondents feel they are out of touch with residents, and that it would help to reduce this distance if they were encouraged to attend.

David's email mentions the possibility of inviting the Police and Health Authority. We think the attendance should reflect the issues under discussion, which might require these organisations to attend on occasions, eg if alcohol harm reduction was on the agenda. Other bodies, eg Somer, might be brought in for other topics. But generally, we think it would be best to strengthen the involvement of Council leaders, rather than to dilute their presence with other organisations.

Nature of the discussion

There is a strong feeling that the discussion lacks spontaneity and genuine debate. It would be helpful if the Council confirmed that it does in fact want an open-ended two-way discussion at the Forum.

If we succeed in attracting more residents groups, Councillors, and sometimes other official bodies, the discussion will inevitably become more general. This strengthens the case for having a tighter arrangement to look at specific issues, on the lines of the street cleaning Task & Finish Group, where residents and Council officials worked successfully together to draw up a fresh blueprint for the operation. Regular meetings between the FoBRA and Council leadership can also be useful. There is very great annoyance over the Council's failure to deliver on its agreement to set up a second TFG, on transport options.

The Council's willingness to set up specific initiatives like this will be seen as a test of your commitment to making the BCLF work.

Publicity

The Forum has been announced in one or two emails, and I'm not sure whether anything was done for recipients who aren't on the internet. Most respondents think this is inadequate.

It would be helpful to get forward dates agreed, say, a year in advance, with key issues pencilled in at the appropriate season (eg budget preparation). The resident side could also call for discussion on particular issues, and these could also be built into a forward calendar, though there should still be space for either side to table urgent ad hoc items. These arrangements could be publicised well ahead, in the Chronicle, Council Connect, and perhaps at dedicated notice boards at Council offices open to the public.

There certainly needs to be a webpage for the Forum, with information about its objects, successes, expected agendas, and how to attend, though we have to remember that a proportion of potential attendees are not internet-equipped, and would need a parallel newsletter.

Successes and failures

The street cleaning TFG is seen as the main success. The presentation on the Council's budget was also very helpful.

Failures include the poor attendance, lack of genuine debate, the Council's failure to set up a second TFG, and poor publicity.

Conclusion

Despite the shaky start, the majority would prefer to see the BCLF continue, with arrangements amended on the lines suggested above. I expect that you and your colleagues have also been thinking about changes. Would it not be a good idea for us to get together to talk through these points before making any definite decisions?

I should be happy to bring together three or four FoBRA and non-FoBRA people to discuss this with you.

Best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Henry Brown, Chairman