

The Annual Open Meeting 2017

It's not clear from PC sources whether this is the "Open Meeting" or the "Annual Meeting" or the "Annual Open Meeting", but you probably know what I mean.

This year's is coming up on Thursday 27th April.

The 2016 Open Meeting

I can't find the minutes of the last meeting (PC refuses to send me their documents) but I did see them when they were published after last's year's meeting and they seem to have disappeared from D&H PC website: they did not seem to be a faithful account about what happened that evening for three reasons.

1. There were several speakers from various local groups who put a lot of effort into their presentations. There were only a few present who were not on the council or not presenting. Not even a summary of what the speakers said was recorded in the minutes. So their efforts were wasted as a communications exercise with residents. Mind you, more residents could have attended.
2. I personally had to insist on presenting the community website and Dyrham Garden Club (the biggest society in the parish) as the opportunity was not given me in the agenda. But my efforts were also not recorded or even the fact that I spoke.
3. At the end of the meeting, I asked the PC why they not have a complaints procedure. The PC refused to answer that one and the chairperson promptly closed the meeting. That was also not in the minutes.

Incidentally, a week later, following a complaint from a councillor, I was visited by the police – more about that another time.

The 2017 Open Meeting

The agenda shows the community website (several hundred page hits by residents already this year) and Dyrham Garden Club (see above) have not been included on the list of speakers. I would hate to single out any other organisation as being less meritorious, but the facts are, these two organisations are locally significant. Which leads one to ask, why were they excluded?

What's the Use of Open Meetings?

To Present Local Organisations

According to Governance Toolkit for Parish & Town Councils 2009, the purpose is for local groups to advertise themselves. But what's the point if very few residents turn up and nothing is published in the minutes about their presentations? (BTW, any such organisation is most welcome to publish a summary of their presentation in D&H.com, the community website).

An Opportunity to Question the PC

If you look at House of Commons Briefing Paper Number 04827, 15 May 2015, "Parish & Town Councils: Recent Issues", under the section about Complaints, it states

Constituents may wish to complain about the decisions, the procedures, or the conduct of members or staff of their parish council. There are few remedies

available in this regard outside of the four-yearly elections to the parish council. The route to complain depends upon the subject of complaint: there is no single organisation which oversees parish councils. The Government has taken the view that parish councils are accountable to their electorate principally through the ballot box. The most recent Parliamentary Question on the issue of complaints was answered as follows:

*Parish councils can put in place their own mechanisms for handling complaints, having regard to a model code of practice produced by the National Association of Local Councils. In addition **every elector has the right to raise any matter affecting parish business at the annual parish meeting**, and a group of electors has the power to call for a poll on any issue which affects the parish.*

Also, where electors consider there has been a possible waste or inefficiency or think that their council has spent money unlawfully, they can refer a complaint to their local district auditor.

Our PC does not have, and seems not to want to have, a complaints procedure. I tried to persuade them last meeting but was rebuffed and abused. So the only recourse seems to be to have to raise issues, better settled privately, at the Open Meeting. There should be a place on the agenda for residents to question the council. Without going against Parliament's directions, this year, our PC should not refuse to respond to questions.

It's very nice to hear the presentations but without an opportunity to ask questions of the PC, the Open Meeting is more like a shareholders meeting where the investors are only allowed to talk about their summer holidays!