Proposal for Buckfastleigh 'Community Council' - discussion document - 14/7/2015

Community and voluntary organisations - the so-called 'third sector' - are increasingly under stress as public funding is progressively cut and income from investments and public donations are also reduced.

Yet at the same time, publicly funded services and the public sector is also being systematically dismantled, so the need to provide all sorts of additional local services (from libraries, to youth work, to food banks) from within the local community is becoming ever greater.

The pressure on communities to provide beneficial and in many cases, essential services, is increasing year on year and we as a community need to find ways of enhancing our effectiveness, engaging more public involvement and boosting our voice.

The Town Council want to be proactive for positive change in the community and have proposed that we look at the idea of setting up a 'Community Council' in order to strengthen our response to this changing climate as well as provide a number of other benefits.

Purpose:

Sharing - To encourage and act as a forum for information, experience and resource sharing between disparate groups already existing in the community.

- Information-sharing - We often duplicate work in information gathering or lose out because we are not well-enough informed. For example, information about available funding opportunities could be shared amongst the wider community as well as any gained expertise in how to claim them successfully...
- Resource sharing - Many resources are duplicated across groups and have only occasional use, and many more might be achievable if shared - this might mean a jointly purchased community projector and screen become possible (a community 'library of 'things' http://sharefrome.org/) or shared access to an experienced professional fund raiser
- Experience & support - it could be that some of the problems faced by a particular group are similar or the same as those faced by another, but it is common to feel we are alone in adversity. A forum for experience-sharing can be a valuable resource... *'if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken'*

Creative ideas generation & influence - The Town Council is by it's nature a cumbersome and formal institution (though in the newly formed Council we are attempting to strip away as much of this as is legally possible). It is inevitably difficult for new, creative ideas and quick responses to arise from it's formal meeting structure. Decisions cannot be made unless on a pre-distributed meeting agenda so have to be proposed far in advance and there is no place on the agenda for creative, inventive thinking with community involvement. The Community Council could be a place where the more exciting ideas generation can take place, which can then be acted on from within the group without delay or fed back to the Town Council quickly, ready for it's approval.

Open Democracy - Ideally everyone in the town should have a voice in every decision made that effects the town. Up till now, the channels for such engagement have not been as good as they might be and the majority of people from an early age have a sense of powerlessness and disengagement from thinking and decision-making on the wider issues that effect them. It would be good to develop a forum where issues, information and decisions affecting the community are aired amongst a wider, more representative section of the townsfolk and informed decisions or at least recommendations can be made - the Town Council's role may move from being the prime decision makers to primarily that of facilitators...

Encouraging Engagement - There is a fundamental human need for connection and engagement in

meaningful activity, yet many of us in the modern age feel disconnected and disengaged. At the same time, more people are always needed to engage in the projects that are already running and to bring into being those that are still pipe-dreams. It would be great if by encouraging involvement in this forum, new people could be exposed to the spirit of community engagement and become enthused about the work that is going on in the community. The ideal is for everyone in the community to be an active participant in building the community they want for themselves and their children.

Feedback - To provide a direct channel for feedback from the community and those active within it to the Town Council and influence it's decisions. In the past, Town Council delegates have been appointed onto other groups to provide this channel and this will continue where councillors are able to do so, but it is not possible for a representative to be a part of every group and this offers a more efficient method of feedback, not just with the council, but with other individuals and groups as well. It could offer a great way to keep the community informed about where you and/or your organisation is at...
...and? This could be your forum - What would you like to see, add or get from it?

Composition:

The group would loosely consist of a number of people already active in the local community and representatives of active organisations and groups within the parish (such as BCF, BTT, BDS, FOBS, FOBL, Football club, Faith groups, Town Council), but without restriction - it's brief being (amongst other things) to encourage and act as pathway towards greater and more active participation and engagement in community for all. Participation would therefore be on a voluntary, self-nominated basis.

Method:

Why would you want to come to another meeting, I hear?
Traditional formal meeting structures can be dull, leaving us feeling disengaged and can lead to the loudest voices being heard the most with some of the most creative ideas never being explored or even heard. In order to maximise involvement from everyone, encourage attendance and engagement, and generate an environment conducive to creative thinking, I propose that we adopt some of the meeting practices outlined in the pamphlet 'Designing Productive Meetings & Events' from Agenda 21 that you can read here: http://www.gaiauniversity.org/sites/default/files/DPME2ndED.pdf
In particular the idea of an 'Open Agenda' that gets negotiated at the meeting with everyone's involvement, so everyone gets to contribute to the content of the meeting and the insistence on giving everyone a chance to contribute. Maybe you might find something useful to take back to your own group - Meetings need never be the same again!

Your Thoughts:

Please let me know your thoughts, ideas and suggestions on:
- Whether you and/or other people you know would be interested in participating in such a group
- What else you would like to see as a function of the group
- How often you think it might meet
- What time(s) would be best for meeting
- What you would like to see included in such meetings
- Who would you suggest to invite?

I would really appreciate your feedback, thoughts and ideas. Contact me on andystokes@buckfastleigh.gov.uk

Many Thanks, Cllr. Andy Stokes