

Meeting	Full Council
Date	21 st September 2023
Report Title	Changes to Meeting Schedule
Agenda Reference	14
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Officer Recommendations

1. To note the report.
2. To trial the revised meeting cycle for six months (November to April)
3. To agree to incorporating Planning & Highways matters into the Full Council agenda from November 2023.
4. To develop a Planning & Highways Scheme of Delegation for handling future planning matters to be brought back to a future meeting for adoption.

Background

Haydon Wick Parish Council has a Full Council meeting and four standing committee meetings every month. Annually there are at least 55 formal meetings per year, each one requiring an official summons and agenda pack. In addition, the Council has a portfolio of Working Party meetings progressing projects (for example and not an exhaustive list: GMF, Play Area Development, Budget Setting, Climate Awareness, Emergency Planning, Events and Wildflowers, Tree & Bulbs).

Our most active Councillors are probably attending Council-related meetings twice if not more per week. Below shows how many meetings we have had so far this year, and we are just about to embark on Budget Setting, so this number is likely to increase from October to end of December.

1. June - 12 meetings
2. July – 10 meetings
3. August – 7 meetings
4. September – 9 meetings

It is recognised that not all those meetings are formal and as such do not require an agenda summons pack. However, they still require pre-meeting preparation, attendance at the meeting, often preparing post-meeting notes for the lead Councillor to present to Council and actions - mostly for the Officers but can be for Councillors too.

Our meeting cycle is continuous, and its current frequency represents a significant resource implication for the Clerks and other team members who attend and contribute towards them. Not to mention the impact on the Councillors' time too. The regularity of the meetings means we are continually preparing for the next meeting, having just attended the previous one, and never seem to have enough time to work on the actions before the next meeting requires a further update. Also, some actions require more than four weeks to prepare an update due to third party turnaround times.

It should also be noted that the Clerks' attendance at many of the meetings has increased since May due to mentoring/inducting the new Councillors, the need to be in attendance due to an escalation of POST matters, and more recently the departure of the Community Development Officer requiring additional attendance at meetings. Whilst this is likely to be reduced in the future



there remains the necessity to contribute to reports even if they are not directly involved in attending a given meeting.

The proposal is to move the meetings to a bi-monthly frequency, with some exceptions as detailed in the Appendix. This will allow everyone more time to follow up on the actions, have sufficient time to make the necessary investigations and prepare the reports for the forthcoming meeting. It will also lessen the impact on the Councillors already busy working lives.

Planning & Highways Committee

The proposal is to incorporate Planning & Highways (P&H) Committee meetings into Full Council meetings and to trial this for the six-month period. This trial will assess the effectiveness of the Planning submission process and whether we could make some further changes to be more efficient given the complexity of planning applications we have to deal with. We are a land-locked parish with no major development, and we could consider a Scheme of Delegation giving the Chief Officer, and three P&H committee members, the authority to review and submit comments on behalf of the Council. This will free up time in the Full Council meetings by only discussing the contentious applications, such as the recent Telecoms Mast and Multiple Occupancy applications.

Holding the meetings bi-monthly will mean that we must ask the Planning Authority for an extension for comments. If they are unable to provide this, it is suggested that we circulate the applications for comments to the Committee and retrospectively report the submitted at the next Full Council meeting. If there is a controversial application, we can call an Extraordinary Council meeting to discuss that one application to meet the planning authority's deadline.

Statutory Consultee Obligations

As a statutory consultee for planning the Parish Council must advertise the applications via our agendas. This gives members of the public an opportunity to air their concerns at a public meeting. The above proposal does not remove this right. However, ultimately, we are not the final decision maker and can only go so far when trying to influence the final decision of the Swindon Borough Council's (SBC) Planning Officer. It is a plan-led system, and the law requires that decisions must be made in accordance with the plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. The Officers make their decisions based on policies such as the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), the Swindon Borough Local Plan 2026 (2015) and Neighbourhood Plans.

SBC's planning department deals with over 2,000 planning and related applications each year. Over 90% of these applications will not go before the Planning Committee but will be determined under delegated powers. The Parish Council can call in an application but must give material considerations when doing so.

Since the beginning of this municipal year, we have only had two controversial applications. The breakdown below shows the number of applications we have had and how few we have had objections to.

1. June – 6 applications – 5 No Objections.
2. July – 3 applications – 1 No Objections.
3. August – 4 applications – 3 No Objections

We often raise concerns to do with the design of an application, but these are usually overturned by the Swindon Borough Planning Officer. The time and effort Officers and Councillors spend reviewing an application, discussing it at a meeting, administration to complete the minutes, submit comments to Planning Control and then report it again at a future meeting, when it's been invariably Granted is a futile exercise and leaves the Committee feeling somewhat despondent.

If Council is minded to developing a Scheme of Delegation we can address as many scenarios as possible for Council to have confidence in the comments being submitted.