

Wiltshire Police and Crime Panel

18 January 2024

Item 5 – Public Participation

From Mr Chris Caswill

(Q24-01)

To the Chair: The deadline for public questions to you and the Panel which are guaranteed a written answer on the face of the 18 January agenda is 5 pm on the 11th. When I checked the Council web site at 1725 the day before, ie on the 10th, there were no papers yet posted for this meeting. This means there was only a window between (at best) 1726 on the 10th and 1700 on the 11th for the public to find and read the agenda and submit questions which will get a written public response. Do you think this is an adequate exercise in local democracy and accountability? If not will you apologise for it and seek to improve this process as part of the debate on communications with the public at Item 8 on your agenda?

Response: Thank you for your question. I can confirm that the agenda for this meeting was published on Wednesday 10 January. Unfortunately, on this occasion the papers were published slightly later than usual. We apologise for any inconvenience caused and will try to ensure that the papers are made available more promptly going forward.

As part of its recent review of its constitutional documents, the Panel has extended the deadlines for the public to submit questions to bring them in line with Wiltshire Council's other committees. The timescales set for questions to be guaranteed a written response are in place to reflect the resource implications of drafting comprehensive written responses to sometimes large numbers of questions that address complex and varying issues. The Panel would be happy to discuss the issue further under Item 8.

(Q24-02)

To the Chair: Also on the Communications issue and Item 8 on your 18 January agenda, it should once again be noted that effective communication with the public has always been a national policy ambition for the scrutiny process since it was first established in the early 2000s. In that context, will you please explain for the benefit of the public how the decision taken by you and the Panel to remove from your guiding Protocol the requirement to have a public facing Panel web site was a positive contribution to improved public communication? And point to where on the Wiltshire Council web pages the public can find the system that was supposed to replace it? There is no such service on any of the many drop down headings of the main page, nor on the Overview and Scrutiny page - though the latter does have a small section on 'Publicising Overview and Scrutiny', that shamefully has nothing to offer other than the chance to read annual reports. Isn't the truth that neither you as Chair nor the Panel as a whole, nor those responsible for scrutiny have any positive interest in communicating with the public, let alone engaging in any actual interactions?

Response: We as a Panel place a high priority on improving our communication with the public and have taken a number of steps to make our work accessible, including broadcasting our meetings online when possible and including an item on our agendas to discuss how we can improve our communications. We are glad that you have seen that the Panel has recently updated its constitution documents. After careful consideration by the Panel, both Local Authorities and Wiltshire Council's Constitution Focus Group, it was felt that the creation of a dedicated website would not be the best use of resources, as it would largely duplicate the information already included on Wiltshire Council's website. We will review your other comments. We have recently made a number of improvements to Wiltshire Council's website, including an updated section on how members of the public can get involved.

Your assertion that neither the Chairman nor the Panel as a whole has any positive interest in communicating with the public is utterly refuted. If you have any material questions on the subjects covered in the agenda, then you would be welcome to ask them as a supplementary. Again, we would remind you that the Panel is not in any way meant to be a replacement of the Wiltshire Police Authority (WPA), on which you sat. Most of the work that the WPA undertook is now carried out by the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC). The role of the Panel is to scrutinise the work of the PCC in delivering the Police and Crime Plan. The Panel has no role to play in the day-to-day operation of Wiltshire Police, and neither should it.