

Birchington Parish Council

Review of Standing Committees

1. Background

At the workshop session held on 1 July 2025 councillors agreed that the existing committee structure and meetings frequency should be reviewed in six months. Published minutes of committee meetings held since May 2025 have been analysed and the findings considered against comments logged in the 2025 BPC Audit Report and findings from the October/November 2025 LCC Staffing Review.

Both the Audit Report and Staffing Review reports noted that committee meetings consume too much resource and are not operating effectively.

2. Analysis

Committee minutes from meetings held during the period May-November 2025 show 22 meetings occupying just over 28 hours. In total there were 304 items discussed and 65 agreements which range from consensus on a point to a decision to take action, although generally it is difficult to determine what were clear, defined decisions. Consideration of planning applications occupies a significant proportion of Planning Committee time.

On average meetings were attended by between 5-6 councillors.

There is evidence of some overlap across committees of items discussed and of some agreed actions not being followed through.

Live streaming of Full Council meetings has not yet been evaluated.

With the exception of the Staffing Committee meetings (2 meetings / 2 hours 40 mins) all meetings were held in the evening. Resulting in staff time in lieu of about 25½ hours.

The following points emerge:

- Time spent in meetings is not very productive of councillor time
- Discussion is often rambling and not focussed
- Meeting agendas are not well structured, minutes are too detailed, and outcomes are unclear
- Evening meetings result accumulation of staff time off in lieu
- Other than Full Council and some Planning Committee meetings public attendance is rare
- Live streaming creates addition work before and after meetings

3. Agendas, Minutes and Conduct of Meetings

To bring focus and more purpose to meetings, the agenda should differentiate between items to note and those for decision. It is in the role of chairman to ensure that discussion is purposeful and that outcomes are clearly expressed. Any agreed

actions should be assigned to a lead and properly recorded; previously agreed actions should be reviewed at each meeting.

The primary purpose of minutes should be to record decisions and agreed actions; minutes should not be partial or full verbatim records of who said what.

Recommendation 1

Organisation and conduct of committee meetings should be structured to encourage purposeful debate, clear decision making and accountability for agreed actions.

Recommendation 2

Council should require councillors and staff to undertake suitable training to ensure benefits of meetings are maximised.

4. Timing of Meetings

There are perceived benefits to committee meetings being held in the evenings, namely that it provides better opportunities for public attendance. On the contrary, evening meetings can be disruptive for staff and are often not attended by public.

Day time meetings may be more agreeable in some respects but could be difficult for public attendance and council members who are employed.

Recommendation 3

Full Council should debate whether it is more beneficial for some or all committee meetings to be held during normal working hours.

5. Live Streaming of Meetings

Several Full Council meetings have been live streamed and posted onto YouTube for later viewing. There is insufficient data to determine whether this is beneficial or necessary, although some anecdotal reports suggest that there is demand and expectation for these services.

Transportation, set up and break down of kit is time consuming as it management of the output and recordings.

Live streaming is not universal across town and parish councils, whilst there is no national dataset it is estimated that about 10% of parish and town councils provide this service.

Recommendation 4

Full Council should determine a process and date by when the current livestreaming arrangements will be reviewed and debated.

6. Committee Structure

The current committee structure with Full Council and five standing committees is ineffective and inefficient. Productivity may be improved through Recommendations 1 & 2 above, however the Audit and Staffing Review reports note that the existing committee structure requires review.

Benchmarking of town and parish councils of a similar size identifies that, excluding full council, two or three committees occur frequently – often two standing committees plus a smaller HR committee or panel. These tend to combine finance, general purposes and governance into one committee, with the other being a “place-based” committee combining planning, highways and environment into one.

Based on these findings and the recommendations contained in the two reports cited above, it is proposed that to streamline decision-making, reduce duplication, and strengthen governance BPC moves from five standing committees to two principal standing committees plus small sub committees for confidential HR matters (under FGP) and a planning applications (under PPE).

Responsibilities, within delegated limits, would map as follows:

Responsibility area	Full Council	Finance, Governance & Policy	Place, Planning & Environment
Strategic direction, major policy adoption	✓	R	C
Precept decision	✓	R	C
Budget monitoring / reserves / audit readiness	O	✓	C
Procurement/contract rules	O	✓	—
Planning consultation	O	—	✓ (Sub Cttee)
Highways/transport	O	—	✓
Open spaces/parks/allotments/public realm	O	—	✓
Grants policy / grant awards	O	✓	C
HR (recruitment/appraisal/discipline)	O	✓ (HR Panel)	—
Risk management / business continuity	O	✓	C
Meeting governance / ToR / delegation scheme	✓	R	C

✓ = Lead; C = Contributes to lead; O = Oversight; R = Recommends to Full Council

The follow cycle of meetings is proposed although additional meetings may be called if necessary:

	Full Council	Finance, Policy & Governance	Place, Planning & Environment	HR Panel	Planning Applications
April	Parish Assembly	✓	✓	Annual Appraisals	✓
May	Annual Meeting				✓
June		✓	✓		✓
July	✓				✓
August		✓	✓		✓
September	✓				✓
October		✓	✓	Budget Review	✓
November	✓				✓
December		✓	✓		✓
January	✓				✓
February		✓	✓		✓
March	✓				✓

This structure and meetings cycle would result in 33 meetings per annum compared with the current expected 44 meetings in 2025/26.

In addition to reduced numbers of meetings this approach would bring more clarity of purpose and elimination of overlap of business.

Recommendation 5

That the new committee structure and cycle of meetings be adopted for implementation at the next Annual Meeting or such time when committee membership is considered.

Recommendation 6

Terms of Reference be drawn up for each committee and other Council policy documents be revised accordingly.

Nick Blankley
Chairman