

HOUSING MANAGEMENT PANEL: WEST HOVE & PORTSLADE AREA

Meeting on 22nd October 2019

From Graham Dawes
(Philip Court Residents' Association)

An agenda item at the West Area Residents' Associations meeting on the 17th of September concerned the question: What will help us to build strong Residents' Associations? This is to be one of the items on the agenda for the Area Panel meeting on the 22nd.

This is a matter of great moment to me as secretary of the Philip Court Residents' Association. Our association has been moribund for years, hovering on the verge of extinction. When I, reluctantly, became secretary it was only so as to save the association from dissolution. There was no-one else willing to take the role. Similar crises have hit us since.

I made a suggestion to the Area Panel on the 17th which I would like to elaborate here so that both its exposition and its import is clear. As a means of strengthening resident involvement in their associations, it aims to counter two failings on the part of the council so this is where I must begin.

Until very recently there was a role with the title 'Resident Involvement Officer'. If that title were to be taken to mean what it appears to mean then it would have to be accounted a failure. There has been no evidence of an increase in resident involvement. If there were it would surely have given rise to an increased involvement of residents in residents' associations for these, and other groups in which residents work with council officers, are surely the index of any robust engagement of residents with Brighton & Hove City Council. If not that, what is there?

The second failing, is the widely recognised and parlous state of council communication. A huge number of complaints against the council come down, in one form or another, to matters of poor communication. Within the academic literature on organisations it is held that such problems are a charge against senior management, though the devolved responsibility lies with management at all levels.

When an organisation has poor communication the burden of this falls on all those affected by that organisation. This also bears on the question under consideration in that I have often been told, by experienced RA reps, that to get anything done you have to continually write, email and phone the council again and again and again. This is dispiriting. When I was attending the Philip Court RA meetings, before becoming involved, I would hear of such attempts being made, again and again and again - and that was reason enough to want nothing to do with it.

My hypothesis is that people would be more willing to involve themselves in residents' associations if it were more obvious that this was a means to getting things done.

To this end, my suggestion is that the role of the, now, Community Engagement Officers be one of resident advocates. CEOs are within the council. If a resident is emailing or phoning a given officer and not getting an adequate and timely response, a CEO can go and sit on their desk until they do respond. We cannot do that.

Of late, we were told by RIOs that they were understaffed and could not attend all RA meetings, other than AGMs. I was told they would attend if they were 'needed'. I felt this was to ask of me augury. Every agenda carries the item, 'Any Other Business', and there is no knowing what will come up there and, let's face it, there is really no knowing what will come up with regard to any agenda item.

Now that the CEO contingent is larger it would be good to have one at each residents' association meeting. They could take matters from the meeting back to the council and follow them up. For each RA, a designated CEO could be the portal through whom RA reps and residents could put their questions and complaints and the

CEO could check to ensure an adequate and timely response was received. (These days there are ways to automate such alerts.) This would take the burden from RA officers.

A pertinent point, here, is that this might also improve the effectiveness of council communication. Currently, the pain of poor communication is pushed out of the organisation and onto residents. With the CEOs acting as our advocates, it could be turned back into the organisation finally creating the incentive to improve, which clearly has not yet had sufficient force.

It is only fair to state that, in being real advocates for residents, CEOs would have to be ready, temporarily, to be unpopular within the organisation until such time as their prods and prompts within the organisation had caused a correction to its current culture of communication.

With this new role for CEOs, residents would have a much stronger feeling that the council was working for them, rather than against them. They would feel they had someone on their side where they might have felt they were battling against the council behemoth alone.

When council officers write a letter, send an email, make a phone call or attend a meeting they are being paid. Residents are not. Effectively, every letter or email sent, phone call made or meeting attended by a resident means that person is paying twice. This needs to be borne in mind, as with the stress felt - whether anxiety or rage - due to council activity, or inactivity. If these things were fully felt, viscerally, by council officers they would be unlikely to impose as much on residents' goodwill as they do.

