

Brixham Town Council Petition Scheme Proposal

1) Background

While Brixham town council currently does have a mechanism by which members of the public can suggest items for the agenda of a meeting, this is neither widely known, nor does it ensure the item has to be on the agenda for consideration. A direct mechanism by which the public can trigger a debate regarding the issues that concern them most and to hear councillors views on these important issues is therefore needed. At present Councillors and council officers have the final say over what can or cannot be put on the agenda.

Meanwhile, at national level, the government has recently introduced a petition scheme whereby members of the public can trigger a parliamentary debate on any issue if the petition receives 100,000 signatures. Likewise, for a number of years, Torbay Council has had a similar scheme where the achievement of 1000 signatures of local residents triggers an automatic debate at full council meetings.

2) Proposal

That Brixham Town Council create a petition scheme similar to that run by both Torbay Council and the government, whereby if a petition receives a set number of signatures, they trigger an automatic debate at the next full council meeting.

The proposal would be that if a petition secured 150 signatures from residents living within the TQ5 postcode area, the town council will have to debate the item at our next meeting. The council can then choose to:

- 1) Investigate the issue further.
- 2) Adopt the actions requested by the petitioner.
- 3) Refer the petition to a committee of the council for debate at that committee's next meeting, after which a recommendation will be given to full council for final decision.
- 3) Do nothing.

Any member of the public can submit a petition. However, the council would not accept any petitions that:

- a) are abusive or related to an individual.
- b) are identical to any that have been submitted within the past 12 months.
- c) relate to a licensing or planning application.
- d) relate to a subject the council is already consulting on or plans to consult on within the next six months.

The scheme would go live from January 1st 2015.

3) Benefits

The benefits of this scheme are as follows:

- a) It will make the council more democratic.
- b) It will give the public a greater say over the agenda of the council and will likely lead to higher engagement with council meetings.
- c) It will allow the council to consider issues and ideas that the public consider important.
- d) It will strengthen the public image of the council.

4) Costs and Risks

There are no costs associated with this proposal, except for administrative time. While a petition could suggest the spending of money, the petition would not be binding so the council could choose to do nothing during the debate on the petition.

The risks of the scheme are:

a) There may be no one who wishes to create a petition making the scheme redundant. Mitigation: The town council will announce the launch of the scheme on notice boards and in the local press. We will also publicise the scheme on the council website and through community channels.

b) A submitted petition may contain abusive language. Mitigation: The scheme will specify that abusive petitions or those dealing with an individual will be rejected automatically.

c) There may be a large number of petitions taking up a significant amount of the meeting. Mitigation: To ensure meetings are conducted in a timely and orderly manner, a maximum of 2 petitions will be debated at any individual meeting. Any outstanding petitions will be automatically carried forward to the agenda for the next full council meeting, subject to the limitation above.

5) Conclusion

A petition scheme, along the same lines as that at national and borough level, would help to make the council more open and democratic. It would enable members of the public to get their views heard and debated at council meetings. There are few risks or costs to the scheme and the council will not be bound by the petition other than to debate it. It is therefore time to adopt a petition scheme at Brixham Town Council.

Cllr M James