**BPC AGAR Viewing and**

**Finance Committee Concerns 2022**

**From:** [Objector]
**Sent:** 02 September 2022 10:58
**To:** [All Cllrs]

**Cc:** Bleadon Parish Clerk
**Subject:** 01 September 2022 AGAR Viewing

Dear Councillors,

Firstly, I would like to thank the Chair, Cllr Hemingway, for attending last night's meeting, I think that we're all looking forward to the end of this frustrating AGAR process next Wednesday. However, I feel that last night's meeting was not as productive as it could have been, and was a lost opportunity to resolve outstanding frustrations for all involved.

As indicated in Cllr Hemingway's previous email, no further information was added or updated to the AGAR information file brought to the meeting, although I did manage to check some invoices again, thank you.

Following the August group AGAR meeting, the Chair reiterated that she would not be answering any AGAR related questions, and that all questions should be sent to the clerk/RFO via email. She acknowledged that if this process did not fully answer my/resident's questions it may result in further questions and/or a challenge to External Audit. I believe that this non-interactive approach, removing resident's from informative discussion and resolution with financially knowledgeable councillors and/or the RFO/clerk, creates unnecessary work, emails and frustrations for all involved in the process, which I believe could be avoided.

Please note that External Audit has confirmed that residents need to approach the clerk/BPC with their queries before going to the Auditor with any resulting concerns or AGAR objections. Last night the Chair stated that, rather than address my/residents' concerns and questions now, and then possibly repeat the process again later via an External Audit AGAR challenge, she would prefer to wait to discuss any questions raised by the External Auditor. In our discussion Cllr Hemingway understood that this chosen process may take months or years, with last year's 2020/21 AGAR challenge still awaiting investigation by External Audit, and that this process would effect resident's precept.

Is this hands-off, third party AGAR approach via emails and the External Auditor the one agreed and approved by the majority of councillors at full council? Especially as councillors are aware that the External Auditor will charge £355 per hour to investigate any challenge? Do councillors feel that the current AGAR approach is the most effective use of public funds? How are BPC budgeting for any AGAR challenges?

The Chair continued to say that the clerk had comprehensively answered my previous questions, and was not willing to briefly go through them with me to understand why I was saying they had not been fully answered. I feel that for the next few days until the end of the current AGAR process we will now have to continue to go through another circular, frustrating, very long winded email exchange process, potentially resulting in another AGAR challenge to External Audit if answers are not forthcoming. As always I'm happy to discuss these issues with councillors and/or RFO face-to-face to ease the process and to clarify and expedite matters.

So, apologies in advance to all involved, including the additional work and emails that this BPC chosen approach will generate for the clerk.

Kind regards,

[Objector]

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**From:** [Clerk]
**Sent:** 05 September 2022 12:12
**To:** [Objector]

**Subject:** RE: Internal Audit Report, Finance Committee & Ad Hoc Budget Meetings

Dear [Objector]

I see you have written to the councillors so I will ensure that your comments are brought to their attention when we meet on the 12th.

Thank you

[Clerk]

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**From:** [Objector]
**Sent:** 02 September 2022 12:58
**To:** [All Cllrs]
**Cc:** Bleadon Parish Clerk
**Subject:** Internal Audit Report, Finance Committee & Ad Hoc Budget Meetings

Dear Councillors,

As AGAR is drawing to a close and all our time is short, so the red comments below indicate information that I am requesting.

I am concerned to read the internal Audit Report dated 20 February 22, which states,

      "***Good practice noted at this review.****..*

*"The Finance Committee takes an active scrutiny role...*

*"Whilst bank reconciliations are taken to Council/Finance Committee meetings..*."

I am still waiting for this year's AGAR related [11 Jun 22 Internal Audit Report](https://www.bleadon.org.uk/media/other/24400/AGAR22-p3InternalAudit.pdf), please send me a copy. Please also send me a copy of any official internal and/or external responses/actions following the Feb and June report recommendations.

In the meantime, please explain how the above Internal Audit statements made it through potentially two full council meetings without any apparent minuted discussion/note that this was incorrect, there has not been a Finance & Personnel (F&P) Committee meeting since it was disbanded in May 2020?

On a number of occasions, some councillors concerned with the financial processes within BPC have tried to publicly reinstate the long-standing F&P Committee, via full council meetings. To date they have been outvoted by the majority of other councillors. The last time was in Sept 21 ([Min 345.7.7](https://www.bleadon.org.uk/media/other/24400/BPCcouncil-meeting-minutes-345-130921.pdf)) in this AGAR period.

In relation to the Feb 22 Internal Audit report and Finance Committee meetings, at the 'private' AGAR meeting last night with the BPC Chair, Cllr Hemingway believed that the agreed notes from the meeting of four councillors and myself in Aug 21 (as attached) were presented to full council as an official Personnel Committee meeting, minuted on official BPC headed paper. Please send me a copy of these assumed Personnel Committee meeting minutes, and the associated full council September 21 appendices/papers/reports/etc. that were considered and rejected by councillors at the time (See ICO comment and BPC access to information statement below).

All attendees at the August 21 meeting were fully aware at the time that it was not an official Personnel Committee meeting, including the then Chair of the parish council who attended the meeting, Cllr Williams. It was noted on the subsequent full council Sept 21 agenda that this was a ['private meeting](https://www.bleadon.org.uk/media/other/24400/BPCcouncil-meeting-minutes-345-130921.pdf)', as I believe are all conversations that are not held in publicly summoned meetings (i.e. private conversations between councillors and parishioners/businesses/district councillors/NSC officers, etc.) Similarly all undocumented working group meetings with the public can be considered 'private', with decisions and expenditure only allowed via full council as per [Risk Assessment Section 4 - Liability](https://www.bleadon.org.uk/media/other/24400/risk-assessment-policy-2020.pdf).

As far as I'm aware councillors are supposed to discuss suggestions, concerns, issues, etc. with residents and then consider whether to take the outcome to full council, otherwise how can councillors represent their parishioners? As discussed with Cllr Hemingway, this seems to have been an BPC internal miscommunication of the August meeting. Ironically the purpose of the recommendations/suggestions that were 'struck' from the meeting, were to improve internal and external BPC/resident communication along with better openness and transparency, whilst potentially reducing the clerk's workload!

Cllr Hemingway also said that the Chair is responsible for the Agenda, not the clerk as I/members of the public have been previously informed, please confirm this statement. As the then Chair Cllr Williams attended the August meeting, I'm confused by this statement. The four councillors at the August meeting were unanimously in agreement with the recommendations, believing that this would greatly improve the known and ongoing transparency and communication issues. Therefore, how did the agenda item, potentially created by the Chair who was in agreement at the August meeting, get 'struck' off by a majority decision, with no public explanation in September? (NB: 6 Cllrs attended the Sept 21 full council meeting, 3 of whom were at the August meeting).

One of the recommendations of the August 21 meeting was to reinstate the previously long-standing F&P Committee, which Internal Audit states in this year's AGAR February 22 report is 'good practice'.

From at least May 2005 ([Min 173.7.d](https://www.bleadon.org.uk/media/other/24400/200505minutes-annualcouncilmeeting.pdf)) up until 30 Apr 2020 ([Min 322.13.b](https://www.bleadon.org.uk/media/other/24400/draftminutes-322-may-19.pdf)) BPC had a F&P Committee, open to the public, and attended and minuted by the residing clerk (presumably all working 18 hour contracts?). In May 2020 ([Min 334.7.2](https://www.bleadon.org.uk/media/other/24400/BPC-July20-200720-council-minutes-334-v3.pdf)) the F&P committee fell off the agenda, being removed from Personnel, with no public explanation. BPC now appears to be using undocumented, ad hoc budget meetings.

In my July AGAR queries re: lack of openness and transparency, and no quarterly F&P meetings, BPC's response via the clerk was "*If there is a perceived lack of understanding by Councillors then they do not help themselves when they do not seek clarification*". In my recent AGAR queries, question #8, I asked for "The dates of all finance working group/meetings relating to, and held in, 2021-22 (potentially relating to Section 1), and any associated documentation", BPC response was " *Any such working group meetings took place on an “ad hoc” basis the planning group being a good example. This process was agreed on the recommendation of the Personnel Committee in order not to increase unnecessarily the Clerk’s working hours."*Please send me a copy of the agreed Personnel Committee meeting agreeing this 'ad hoc' meeting recommendation and related full council minuted agreement with associated appendices. NB The last published minutes are Aug 2020, even though the May 21 draft minutes were accepted by full council in June 21 ([Min 343.7.1](https://www.bleadon.org.uk/media/other/24400/BPCcouncil-meeting-minutes-343-140621.pdf)). Please send me the dates of all finance related working group meetings, as previously requested.

As I hope can be seen from above, the reason I am asking for copies of documentation during this AGAR period is because unlike the previous BPC clerk, BPC doesn't currently publish its appendices, papers, reports, etc. with its Agenda and Minutes. This is what the August meeting and September 2021 Agenda items aimed to try and resolve, including reducing the number of requests to the clerk, which has become time consuming and laborious for all of us.

It is interesting to note that the February 22 Internal Audit Report indicates that BPC is registered with the ICO, whose [Model Publication Scheme 2021](https://ico.org.uk/media/for-organisations/documents/definition-documents-2021/templates/4018916/template-parish-councils-20211029.doc) states "*you should look to provide as much information as possible on a routine basis*" and [BPC's version](https://www.bleadonparishcouncil.co.uk/content/large/documents/policies_%26_terms_of_reference/publication_scheme_adopted_-_july_2020.pdf), which states '*reports presented to meetings*' are available on request and/or on the website.

I look forward to receiving your prompt response.

Kind regards,

[Objector]