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Fine words, but less democracy

PEOPLE attending the new-style Neighbourhood/PACT meeting in Hooe Baptist Church on September 6 were perplexed to find there was no chairperson, note-taker (minutes secretary) or agenda.

The meeting convener explained these were not allowed under the newly-introduced 'locality working' system. The meeting was further surprised to hear that no one had been told how the new system would work.

The council, in early February, agreed to introduce 'locality working', replacing area committees with six 'localities' broken down into 43 neighbourhoods. Meetings would be based on the existing police Partners and Communities Together (PACT) meetings starting on June 1. It's a shame the council failed to publish information about the scheme, or let people know how it would work. My search of the council's website could find no reference to locality working.

The Government in 2006 published a White Paper on 'Strong and Prosperous Communities' outlining the policy to give people more control over their lives; be consulted and involved in running services; informed about the quality of services in their area; and to call local agencies to account if services fail to meet their needs. Council officers in the report to Cabinet and council early this year did not consider this guidance important. Team Leaders and Service Co-ordination Teams, appointed to run the scheme, can only be approached by designated ward councillors. Lead ward councillors are apparently unaware that they are key facilitators in negotiations of electors' problems with service co-ordination teams and the locality lead, or that they have the power to demand answers through the new Community Call for Action legislation.

The decommissioning of area committees in April disenfranchised local people of the right to question councillors in open forum on matters of concern and the right to receive answers. This action by the council has removed the right for local people to be consulted on many of the issues that affect the community.

Plymouth's vision to become 'one of Europe's finest, most vibrant waterfront cities, where an outstanding quality of life is enjoyed by everyone' is meaningless if it denies its citizens the right to be involved in the decision-making process on how it is governed.

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