

## **METHERINGHAM PARISH COUNCIL COMMITTEES**

While examining the Parish Council's administration documents both at the Parish Office and Online, together with the policies and procedures, I consider it appropriate to make comment on the committee structures with recommendations of how to make changes in the future.

### **ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE**

Over the last three years the Environment Committee (EC) had been instructed by Full Council to procure contractors for undertaking the following projects;

- Repairing Village C14 Market Cross
- Renovation of Fen Road Pubic Toilets
- Replacement of gas hot water boiler at the Pavilion

Although the Environment Committee Members may have carried out their work with good intention, I have ascertained that on at least four seperate occasions they brought only single quotations/estimates to Full Council with recommendations for approval. This was in blatant disregard of both the Parish Council's Standing Orders (SO) and Financial Regulations (FR). Whilst understanding that Full Council should not have accepted these recommendations they should, nevertheless, have requested the EC to obtain further quotations or estimates in accordance with the SO and FR for consideration at a subsequent meeting. In any event the Proper Officer (PO) should have advised Full Council accordingly and if disregarded, it would be minuted. I have been unable to trace any such minutes.

From discussions with the Temporary Clerk (TC) there appears to have been a misguided view amongst Council Members that for projects under the value of £25,000 it was not necessary to strictly follow the SO or FR. The responsibility of all Parish Council Members, including the Environment and other Committees, is to ensure that the procurement of works is carried out correctly and in strict compliance with the Parish Council's adopted regulations based on the Local Government Act 1972 and subsequent legislation.

It is noted that accounts for the repairs to the Village Market Cross were recommended for payment even though they were 13% over and above the accepted quotations. Although the work may have been necessary, paragraph 10.3 of the Financial Regulations requires that any increases in excess of 5% should be quantified, substantiated and justified along with who authorised the work to be carried out before any payments are made.

Furthermore, the Proper Officer was instructed by the EC Chair to settle the account in full for the Pavilion replacement boiler via a personal email which was also copied to the Parish Council chair.

I am also very concerned over the failure to make enquiries for obtaining grant aid towards financing almost £40,000 of the Parish Council's capital works when so

much funding was and still is available. Having inspected almost 1,000 of the Council's emails only the following relate to grant aid;

1. From North Kesteven District Council advising of available grants.
2. From the Proper Officer (KS) to the Chair stating they were too busy to look into it and that the Chair would organise it.
3. The Chair forwarded the email to Members requesting someone deal with

Looking at the last three years budgets, and the massive capital spending programme that allocated the Council's reserves prepared by the Proper Officer (AD) amounting to a large six figure sum, the availability of up to 90% grant aid funding was again not mentioned.

A fully experienced PO should be aware of grant aid availability to be able to advise Council Members accordingly.

## **EVENTS COMMITTEE**

Originally the Parish Council's Events Committee was a working group until it would appear in 2021/2022 when Councillor Holmes (Chair) decided to change it to a Council Committee with delegated powers in its terms of reference. However, the Standing Orders and Financial Regulations were not amended to accommodate this change. Having non-members in its formation, the delegation of spending to a budget is in contradiction with the Local Government Act 1972 and subsequent legislation along with the Parish Council's policies. This matter has been raised by the internal auditor in the last two years audits and the inadequacies have still not been addressed.

As mentioned in my Fayre and Feast FOIA review, there appears to be a WhatsApp group which supports this Committee. I have had opportunity to look at some of the WhatsApp traffic on the social media site and found quite a lot of inappropriate language which should not appear on a forum where members of the public may have free and unrestrictive access. Referring to a number of the WhatsApp messages I am of the opinion that the writers are Bullying and Harassing other Council Members and the Clerk and may have been in contradiction with the Parish Council's adopted Dignity at Work/Bullying and Harassment Policy.

I note that Councillor Redpath accepted a new committee member onto the Events Committee through the WhatsApp group without reference to the adopted Council Policies or Procedures. Also of concern is that Councillor Redpath stated the Events Committee should proceed on their own to prevent the Chair (KP) and the Parish Council's protracted requirements in an attempt to ignore the adopted Policies and Procedures.

With reference to an email dated Tuesday 24 September 2024, Councillor Worthington did not comply with the Council's adopted Standing Orders and Financial Regulations insofar as agreeing to different payment terms for the Fayre and Feast and without proper authority.

With regard to the Digby Military Wives Choir participation at the 2024 Fayre and Feast, it is noted that arrangements were carried out through Councillor Redpath and that the subsequent invoice only paid the Conductor with no donation made to the choir members for their services.

It is noted that the band and sound system was provided by Naughty Step with their lead singer and his partner on the Fayre and Feast Events Committee. Although the total cost amounted to £950.00, no other quotations were reviewed or obtained.

The Fayre & Feast market traders were all contacted by one Councillor through their own personal or work email address in contradiction of the Parish Council's adopted E-mail Policy. This information was not issued to other Council Members and the Clerk until only one hour before the event was officially opened.

## **FINANCE AND STAFFING COMMITTEE**

The Staffing Committee has appeared to have carried out everything it was required to do under both Council policy and Government legislation during this financial year. However, in previous years the Staffing Committee, in my opinion, have not fully explored its options thoroughly or considered the cost implications when making their recommendations for consideration by Full Council.

I have inspected the last three years accounts with the Temporary Clerk (TC) including the current financial year and discovered many inaccuracies, anomalies and unresolved accounting mistakes. It is not possible to cover them all in this review, but the following are typical examples;

- a. The accounts do not appear to separate Section 137 (4.a) expenditure (all expenditure spent not within the statutory powers of the Council) which the legislation requires. This expenditure should not exceed the yearly multiplier which is set by Central Government and this year it is £10.81 times the population of the parish. This sum should be fully demonstrated in the published accounts.
- b. The Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) is paid to parish councils at a rate of 15% of the full CIL received from developers when building houses and commercial properties within a parish. The Parish Council has been eligible to receiving CIL monies since 2019/2020, but just one return was submitted to North Kesteven District Council (NKDC) and only £125,94 allocated. NKDC requested the Parish Council to submit returns of how this revenue had been spent and at least six reminders per year were sent by them until the TC reconciled and submitted a return. Subsequently, the Parish Council received a total payment of £21,173.08 of CIL. All of this money was allocated as income and possibly the reason why the accounts showed £47,242.00 worth of income for that year. The concern is that these figures had been submitted as income in the Parish Council's AGAR returns to Panel Kerr Foster Littlejohn LLP. The TC has recently allocated £10,000.00 on accounts monies spent on the Public Toilets with an additional £4,069.00 for the replacement Pavilion boiler to the CIL monies and has now submitted this return to NKDC.
- c. The Library income of between £,4000 and £5,000 received from the Lincolnshire County Council appears to have been deposited into a separate

bank account and never shown as income in the AGAR returns. Irrespective of the source, all income should be totalled and filed in the AGAR returns.

It is understood the Parish Council have decided to employ a locum/temporary RFO which should help resolve the accounts going forward. However, it is doubtful whether the appointment will be able to reconcile all the financial irregularities over the last few years. The Parish Council may have to employ an accountancy firm or practice conversant with local authority accounting methods in order to fully audit the previous years accounts. The Internal Audit carried out by the Lincolnshire Association of Local Councils (LALC) and others is not a full financial audit, but only an audit of council procedures and competencies.

## **CONCLUSION**

I would recommend the Parish Council should have a Planning Committee or working group who are given opportunity as a Statutory Consultee to make comment on all planning applications within the parish, whether to North Kesteven District Council, Lincolnshire County Council or Government National Infrastructure Projects (NSIP's). This is a fundamental responsibility in representing the parish with considered opinions on all planning matters. However, it is noted that until the appointment of the Temporary Clerk in September 2024 only one response to such applications was made by the Parish Council over the previous three years.

The Parish Council should ensure a strict regime is followed regarding all administration procedures including procurement of all future capital projects. They should also consider amalgamating the Environment Committee with a Planning Committee since many of their respective responsibilities are closely interlinked. I also consider they should meet on a regular basis.

I recommend that the Events Committee returns to being a working group conforming with the Parish Council's Standing Orders, Financial Regulations along with Local Government legislation. To also be reformed in line with the structured document prepared by former Councillor N E Byatt on one event I have viewed at the Parish Council Office which addressed the original working group.

Furthermore, the WhatsApp group should only be used for conveying information that is or will be in the public domain. The WhatsApp group should be administered by the Clerk at all times in accordance with the adopted Press and Media policy. Since the current WhatsApp site is unacceptable I would recommend closing it down and a full copy record should be held by the Clerk for future reference.

I advocate that when making decisions or recommendations on any given instructions, the Finance and Staffing Committee should research all available options, including costs, and report back to Full Council accordingly. This should all be undertaken in accordance with the Parish Council's Standing Orders, Financial Regulations and Local Government legislation.

The last two years internal audit reports were conducted by two different auditors engaged by the Lincolnshire Association of Local Councils (LALC). The internal auditors expressed concerns on several occasions and raised numerous matters

relating to the administration of the Parish Council outlined in the internal review. Therefore, it is recommended that all of these issues are addressed and resolved prior to the next inspection by the internal auditor.

**Michael Credland BEM**

14 February 2025

