

3. OTHER CAPITAL PROJECTS

REPLACEMENT GAS FIRED HOT WATER HEATER/BOILER IN PAVILION

From the Minutes of the Parish Council Meeting held on Wednesday 25 October 2023 it was recorded *To consider and resolve to repair a leaking water boiler in pavilion. To retrospectively agreed to repair due to water ingress into the school. It would be to allow a £5,000 budget for repairs.*

I cannot find any record at the Parish Council Office of quotations, estimates or even a mention except for an email sent from Councillor Worthington's personal account to the Clerk/Proper Officer. This was copied to the Chair with a quotation received from CMH Heating, Lincoln for £3,069.00 for supply of the water heater and £850.00 for labour plus VAT. It is not certain who accepted the quotation, but the works were commenced on site.

From the Minutes of the Parish Council Meeting held on Wednesday 29 November 2023 it was recorded *Works have commenced and the pavilion water boiler is being replaced and would be fitted week of 27th November 2023.*

- On 01 December 2023 CMH Heating was paid the sum of £3,683.84 with no indication of VAT. The PO emailed Councillor Worthington on 11 December 2023 asking *"Is everything completed regarding the boiler and were there any updates?"*.
- On 15 December 2023 Councillor Worthington emailed the PO stating *"Boiler all done and the keys will be returned through the letterbox"*.
- However, two days earlier on 13 December 2023 the PO had paid CMH Heating £1,199.21 including VAT.
- On 01 January 2024 the PO paid CMH Heating £3,683.84. Later the same day, the PO cancelled the entry of £3,683.84 including VAT from the cash book. These figures have been taken from the cash book details published on the Parish Council's Website. The TPO has been asked to verify that no monies were debited to the bank account at the end of trading on 01 January 2024.

These payments should have been authorised at the Full Parish Council Meeting held on 27 November 2023 and since there was not a Full Council Meeting in December 2023 these large sums of money were paid without correct procedure or authorisation. This was contrary to the Council's Standing Orders and Financial Regulations along with their legal obligations. It is considered that such a cavalier approach is unacceptable, either to the parishioners, local governance administered by North Kesteven District Council and the Central Government's external auditors, PKF Littlejohn LLP. I am very surprised the Lincolnshire Association of Local Councils appointed internal auditor did not identify these discrepancies and include within their report.

It is acknowledged that over the last three years the Parish Council at times did not have a Proper Officer (PO) in post or an authorised Acting PO. Nevertheless, and albeit the primary role of the PO, Council Members all have an obligation to ensure

that the Parish Council is run lawfully and in accordance with the Standing Orders, Financial Regulations and adopted policies. In contradiction, there appears to be a misconception that once a budget has been approved by Council that the financial allocation can be used without further approval. Once a budget has been fixed, and the project authorised, it is the responsibility of the PO to invite quotations/estimates for approval by Full Council, or in an emergency, to an extraordinary meeting.

CONCLUSION

Although the procedures for awarding works contracts are clearly detailed in the Parish Council's Standing Orders and Financial Regulations they have not always been complied with in connection with the procurements that I have investigated, including two projects still not carried out. Whilst these works may have been considered as an emergency requiring immediate action, the Council's Financial Regulations do not facilitate for this and stipulate that for works under £5,000 a minimum of three quotations must be acquired. However, in the Regulations the PO together with the Chair/Vice Chair are authorised to sanction work in urgent or emergency situations up to a maximum value of £1,000. I recommend that this figure be increased at least to a minimum of £3,000. In all other situations the Parish Council must follow the Standing Orders, Financial Regulations and all other adopted policies.

With regard to recent building work carried out at the C14 Market Cross and Fen Road Public Toilets only one quotation was received for each of the two projects. A minimum of three tenders/quotations/estimates should have been invited in compliance with the Parish Council's adopted Financial Regulations. Consequently, it would not have been possible to make a comparison between competitive tenders. As far as I can determine neither the then Proper Officer or any Council Members were suitably qualified to scrutinise the submitted and accepted quotations to demonstrate the Parish Council were achieving the best value for money.

Since public money was being expended on the two projects, and other breaches and financial anomalies I have identified in this review, I recommend the Parish Council commit to having the works post quantified and evaluated. This should be carried out by a professional in the construction or property industry, such as a quantity surveyor or building estimator. Such action should satisfy the FOIA requester regarding the procurement of capital works, which I am unable to carry out within my remit. The Council may also consider seeking the opinion of a heritage architect in respect of weathering to the stone on-edge cappings and copings installed around the walling of the C14 Market Cross. It is anticipated Heritage England and/or the Local Planning Authority may request this information in the future.

Michael Credland BEM
14th February 2025

