

Hilton Parish Council

Hilton Village Hall, Peacroft Lane, Hilton.DE65 5GH

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3 March 2020

Dear [REDACTED],

Further to your emails to the clerk of 23rd January 2020, 12th February 2020, 25th February 2020, I am pleased to inform you that at the Parish Council meeting of 26th February 2020, the Council agreed its response to your questions and statements of the 23rd January 2020.

As you agreed, the discussion was heard in public ahead of public speaking to give members of the public the opportunity to respond to the responses of the councillors. There were no comments from the members of the public present. Your personal data was protected and throughout the discussion, you were only referred to as the Resident.

Using your numbering and lettering, the Council's response is as follows:

1 a) The statement that 'a handover was refused by the current Chair' is untrue. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

b) and c) The line by line breakdown of the total budget is a tool to help control and monitor the annual budget; it is not, in itself, a restrictive process. There is no requirement for the current Council to take any cognisance of the detailed breakdown decided by the previous Council. In summary:

- We have not overspent the budget in 2019/20.
- All major items of expenditure are discussed and agreed in the PC meeting, and minuted, prior to any monies being committed.
- As a public body we have to demonstrate value for money which is what we are doing. We are fundamentally not operating as a business as we are not trading with a profit objective.

Having better financial management does not constitute 'being run as a business'.

d) Significant on-going savings in salaries are entirely down to the Clerk not being paid for 40hrs a week, and not employing an assistant for the Clerk. Additional money has been saved in 2019/20 as we have only employed a Clerk for 4 months – with all of the work of the Clerk, and more, being done, voluntarily, by Cllrs.

From our experience of 10 months running the Council, and supported by advice from a number of professionals, an average 15 hrs a week is more than adequate to cover the role.

e) It is true that I argued against the previous Council's proposal for a website in early 2019, but for clarification, this was not based on the cost, but the unsuitability of the proposal. The website that we have adopted is an industry standard platform used by many parish councils and DALC. There is no specification in any regulations as to what degree of history should be stored on the website. We chose to focus on the most current information. All history is retained in the PC office as required by the guidelines.

The website is up to date and will continue to be so. It contains the information specified by the "Joint Panel on Governance – Governance and Accountability for Smaller Authorities in England", and the Local Government Transparency Code. In fact, we go beyond the legal requirement and disclose all income and expenditure, in a categorised format, and full procurements details of all large items of expenditure.

f) The website contains all the information required by the "Joint Panel on Governance – Governance and Accountability for Smaller Authorities in England" and the Local Government Transparency Code.

We have made available all items of income and expenditure, categorised and shown by month. This is in excess of the Transparency Code requirements.

The cash book analysis is accessibility compliant as it is capable of being re-sized. We accept your point on printing so have now saved it as an Excel file from the previous pdf version. The totals on the cash book need to be read in conjunction with the reference in the minutes for late invoices. There is not a requirement for there to be totals on the minutes. The cash book and the minutes tie in precisely when you add all the numbers together.

As no payments are made by cheque then there is no need for a bank reconciliation as there are no timing differences. There is no requirement to show the split of the current cash position between accounts. It adds no value and serves no purpose. The nature, style and timing of information provided now, is in excess of that provided before May 2019.

2 a) No councillors have claimed expenses. You refer to refund of monies spent on behalf of the Council. This is not specifically excluded in the Standing Orders or Financial Regulations.

It is not true to say that VAT cannot be reclaimed back unless invoiced to Hilton Parish Council. This has been done successfully this year as it was for the period prior to May 2019.

The Auditor was incorrect in his report for the year 2018/19. We will continue to use such a process where it is expeditious to do so and where there is no practical alternative. Details are always presented in the PC meeting and are publicly available.

The Internal Audit report has not been removed from the website. It is part of the AGAR pack.

For clarification, the refund of monies to myself that you refer to was in my role as Treasurer to the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group. [REDACTED] the NPSG had secured a grant from Locality/Groundwork to fund its activities. A condition of the grant is that suppliers are paid in accordance with their terms of payment. There were several occasions when the previous Parish Council did not honour this requirement and I settled the invoices to keep the Council 'honest'. Also, it is a requirement of the grant that any unspent funds are returned at the end of the financial year. Again, the previous Parish Council did not do this and I again, returned monies to Groundwork so as not to jeopardise the ability of the Council to receive a grant for the following financial year.

b) We are following the Financial Regulations and Standing Orders. All expenditure is authorised in advance where the regulations require it and covered by resolutions in the Minutes.

There are exclusions to the three quotes rule in addition to the de minimis provisions – ref s 11.1 (a). The Christmas trees are a proprietary product sold at a fixed price and is therefore covered by subsection (vi). Three quotes were obtained for the noticeboards.

c) All monies spent, subject to the de minimis provisions, are always approved prior to spend. All discussions around significant spend are held in public and resolved appropriately.

d) The Working Groups have never made decisions to spend money; they make recommendations for spend to the full Council. It is only there that decisions are made. Arguably, committees are less open. All decisions are made in public.

e) The agendas contain details of all items of expenditure to be made in that month, and all income received. This is more open and transparent than prior to May 2019. We have made a significant forward step in giving more timely and useful information to allow the public to understand the state of affairs. No decisions are made on items not on the agenda.

f) As the staff are salaried and no incremental cost is incurred then no one is paying twice for anything. On the few occasions that work that you describe has taken place, this has been done with the full agreement of the landowner and has been done to be responsive to an environmental concern highlighted by residents.

g) The figure you quote is the bank balance and not reserves. Reserve allocations is part of the budget setting process which details quite clearly our progressive plans for the village. The proposed reserves are contained within the budget document which can be found on the Finance part of the website.

The above response will also be précised in the minutes.

I trust this response satisfies all your emails referenced above.

Yours sincerely

Charles Cuddington

Chairman

Hilton Parish Council