

Hilton Parish Council Finance Meeting Questions and Points

- 1) The Article in the January 2020 Dove Valley Life Highlights is a very positive spin on the position of the Council but leaves several open questions and points to be raised.
- a. A handover was offered but was refused by the current Chair who said that the new Council was more than capable of working things out. [REDACTED]. Also, the current Chair had been a member of the Council for over a year before the new Council took over office so was more than familiar in the running of the Council.
 - b. The article points to several areas where savings have been made but for balance, why does it not indicate the areas where there has been overspend for Transparency and Openness. Can you explain why that is? Why does it seem the Council is being run as a business and not the Public Body it is?
 - c. The current Council has overspent against the budget set for the year 2019/20 by the previous Council at the start of 2019. It has never been discussed in the Councils meetings since May 2019, nor has the Council agreed to vary or amend the budget that was set for 2019/2020. There is no record in the Councils minutes, on the website or resolutions made to agree the overspend against the budget re-items listed below. Can you explain why that is?

Budget Item	Overspend
S137 Grants	£863.38
Website	£1,920.00
Christmas Lights	£4,482.00
Noticeboards	£2,466.00
Dove Valley Life	£162.00
Locum Costs	£835.90
Total including VAT	£9993.38

- d. Savings in Salaries have been mainly because the Council has not had a clerk for the majority of the year, but additional Locum fees have had to be paid. The Council has now had 3 Clerks in 11 months and if the rumours are true, they have all left for the same/similar reasons. It seems the current Council does not understand what the Clerks role is or the hours they require to complete the role. Most Councils of this size have a Clerk and an assistant because of the size of the role and workload, Willington for instance. When will this be realised so the Village can be served and maintained properly by the Council?
- e. The Council has spent a lot of money on the Website which was not in the budget and something the current Chair vehemently argued against at the start of 2019 interestingly. However, a very large portion of the historical information of the Council has not been copied over to the new website, which is concerning. The new website is not easy to search for information and is not being kept up to date. There are several minutes of meetings that still show as draft on the website that should be formally approved as per the Councils policies and regulations. Will the Council commit to restoring the historical information missing from the website but more importantly will the Council commit to keeping the Website up to date with the minutes and information it should be making available as part of the transparency regulations it has signed up to and are part of its policies?

- f. The most concerning point of the Website is it does not include the Correct Financial Information as part of the Financial and Transparency regulations. The Council is not providing enough information in relation to the accounts and so is not being open and transparent. The cash book from 01.04.2019 to 30.11.2019 on your website does not comply with the accessibility code, it is difficult for an able-bodied person to view let alone a person with disabilities or visually impaired, it cannot be read if printed off. The totals quoted in the minutes do not correspond with the figures quoted in the cashbook month by month, other than for October and November. No information is provided on the bank reconciliations to support the cash book and there is no separate information on the Reserve Account. There is no split between the Current Account and Reserve Account, and it is not evidenced in any minutes. Does the Council still have a reserve account? Will the Council commit to making available the financial information on the website as part of the financial and transparency regulations it is signed up to and was done by the previous Council?

2) In relation to the cash book and finances of the Council there are separate questions and points.

- a. Councillors Pollard, Cuddington, Campion and Coney have claimed expenses between 01.04.2019 and 30.11.2019 totalling £2,556.32. All of these should have been paid directly from the Council to the suppliers and are against the Councils current Standing Orders and Financial Regulations. Where VAT has been claimed against such purchases (expenses), has the VAT implications been carefully considered for example, VAT cannot be claimed on items that have not been invoiced to Hilton Parish Council? Claiming of expenses by Councillors also goes against the report from the Internal Auditor for 2018/2019, where Councillors claiming expenses was clearly raised. The Council has not discussed or corrected this in their meetings. The Internal Auditors report has also been removed from the new website, can you explain why this is?
- b. [REDACTED]
and why the Parish Council did not obtain 3 quotes for the Christmas Lights or for the Notice Boards installed by the Council, no answer was offered then. A disclaimer has now appeared on Hilton Parish Council's website to say it can do that in certain circumstances but gives no detail to the regulations that it refers to. This seems to be trying to cover the fact that the Council purchased Christmas Light services and the Notice Boards without obtaining 3 quotes to demonstrate value for money as stated in the Councils Financial Regulations item 10. The Council has also not dealt with items properly in meetings or made appropriate resolutions to spend the money. Can the Council clearly explain why they are not following their own financial regulations and Standing Orders and are not demonstrating value for money with their spending?
- c. The Council now regularly agrees to spend money after the fact when the Standing Orders, Policies, Procedures and Financial Regulations state that all decisions should be agreed and resolved properly in a meeting before any spending takes place. Except for emergencies or minor items by the Clerk. Can the Council explain why this is now the case and will the Council be correcting it, as is not operating transparently?

- d. Hilton Parish Council has set up Working Groups in place of or instead of Committees with proper Terms of Reference. This is enabling the Council to make tricky decisions outside of meetings without any records. This is not dealing with financial items/spend properly as part of the Financial Regulation and Standing Orders. Committee structures are much more open and transparent than working groups. Why has the Council decided that working groups are more appropriate?
- e. The Agendas for Hilton Parish Council meetings do not explain items to be discussed, just headings or bullet points. This is not informing members of the public of the detail that is to be discussed or giving them the opportunity to ask any questions or make constructive comments and so is neither open nor transparent. The agendas contain no Financial Information to be discussed so in effect there are no payments to be approved. The agenda just states Finance and then the Parish Council makes various decisions on items not contained in the agenda. Can the Council explain why they have taken this backward step and feel it is appropriate to operate like that?
- f. Hilton Parish Council staff have been seen around the village cutting hedges and repairing/removing fencing that are either privately owned or owned by other local authorities for example, South Derbyshire District Council. The Parish Council should not be spending public money on land that they do not own, lease or manage. In effect resident are in some instances paying twice through their Council tax to the Parish Council and to the District Council for work that is not the responsibility of the Parish Council. Can the Parish Council explain why this is the case and who is paying for this work to be completed, as there is no income within the current accounts?
- g. Hilton Parish Council is currently sitting on a substantial amount of public money (as per the December 2019 minutes £187,869.36) in reserves. This is over one year's current precept payment with no statement or justification on what the money is earmarked for. The regulations for a Parish Council state that you cannot sit on over a year's precept without resolving/ringfencing the Council's intentions for that money. This highlights the Councils lack of ambition and intention to improve the Community of Hilton. I am sure this will be a matter for the internal and external auditors as it forms part of their process. Can the Council please explain why this is and tell me what reserves have been ringfenced within the accounts at present?

Best Regards

