

1. COMMUNICATIONS AND THE WEBSITE

In recent years the Parish Council has often expressed a desire to improve communication with the public but has not lived up to its own expectations. There are also basic requirements defined in guides and regulations such as the Transparency Code for Smaller Authorities and The Good Councillor's Guide to Finance and Transparency. These have already been embraced and adopted by the PC, as recorded in various Minutes of council meetings.

To clarify how the PC should be communicating today the key items that the PC seems to have particular trouble with are highlighted in bold in the following extracts.

Transparency Code for Smaller Authorities

*Part 2: Information which **should be published***

10. *Smaller authorities should publish:*
 - a. *all items of expenditure above £100 (see paragraphs 13 - 15);*
 - b. *end of year accounts (see paragraphs 16 and 17),*
 - c. *annual governance statement (see paragraphs 18 and 19),*
 - d. *internal audit report (see paragraphs 20 – 22),*
 - e. *list of councillor or member responsibilities (see paragraph 23), and*
 - f. *the details of public land and building assets (see paragraphs 24 - 27),*
 - g. **Minutes, agendas and meeting papers of formal meetings** (see paragraphs 29 and 30).

17. *The statement of accounts should be accompanied by:*
 - a. *a copy of the bank reconciliation for the relevant financial year,*
 - b. **an explanation of any significant variances** (e.g. more than 10-15 percent, in line with proper practices) **in the statement of accounts for the relevant year and previous year,** and
 - c. *an explanation of any differences between 'balances carried forward' and 'total cash and short term investments', if applicable.*

Minutes, agendas and papers of formal meetings

30. *Smaller authorities should also **publish meeting agendas, which are as full and informative as possible, and associated meeting papers not later than three clear days before the meeting to which they relate is taking place.***

(Parish councils were required to comply fully by July 2016)

Councillor's Guide to Finance and Transparency

PUBLICATION OF MINUTES, AGENDAS, AND PAPERS OF FORMAL MEETINGS

*Councils must **publish the draft minutes** from all formal meetings (i.e. full council, committee and sub-committee meetings) not later than one month after the meeting has taken place. Even if the minutes have not been finalised the draft minutes should be published.*

*Councils must also **publish meeting agendas, which are as full and informative as possible, and associated papers** not later than three clear days before the meeting is taking place.*

2. **CURRENT PARISH COUNCIL AGREEMENT/RESOLUTIONS.**

Weston under Penyard – Communications and The Website

In 2015 the Parish Council started to improve its communication with the public and to comply with the Transparency Code, as documented in the relevant minutes:

From PC Minutes 2nd Nov. 2015

11. TRANSPARENCY CODE AND COMMUNICATION

..... It was resolved that the **minutes of Parish Council meetings be distributed to all members on the Wednesday of the following week of the Parish Council meeting**. Example: PC meeting 2 November 2015 minutes distributed 11 November 2015

Comment:

- 1) The intention was to issue the draft minutes within 7 working days of the meeting (Monday through Wednesday). If the meeting is held on a Thursday then logically the draft minutes should be issued by the second Monday following. If in doubt the resolution should be replaced with a more logical one directing distribution within 7 working days.

From Minutes 7th Dec 2015

13. WEBSITE/COMMUNICATION/TRANSPARENCY CODE

Reference was made to the email from C Bailey 28 November 2015. **The meeting reviewed the items with the following agreements regarding submissions to the website.**

Minutes of all 2015 Parish Council meetings.

Draft minutes of Parish Council meetings **once distributed** (one month is allowed under the Transparency Code). **Approved minutes when agreed and confirmed and signed** by the Chairman at the relevant Parish Council meeting.

Agendas and associated documents when issued.

Schedule of future meetings once agreed.

List of Parish Council members and their responsibilities.

Residents who wish to raise issues with the Parish Council address such matters to the Clerk.

Standing Orders

Code of Conduct

Freedom of Information

Financial Regulations

Parish Council budget

Annual accounts and pages 1, 2 and 4 of the external audit papers once approved

Asset Register

Comment:

- 1) Unless the agreements and resolutions on transparency and the website have subsequently been rescinded or amended then they must be complied with. It is not up to the Parish Clerk or any individual member of the PC to decide that non-compliance is routinely acceptable.
- 2) The agreement was that the draft minutes should be posted on the website “once distributed” i.e. at the same time as they are sent to the councillors. Similarly, agendas and associated documents should be posted “when issued” i.e. not later than three clear days before the meeting.
- 3) “Associated Documents” or “Associated Meeting Papers” should go hand in hand with the agenda and the minutes. Without this the public and councillors cannot be sufficiently prepared for a meeting and the resulting (brief) minutes have little meaning without the support of the associated documents. A prime

Weston under Penyard – Communications and The Website

example of this is the latest draft minutes for January 2019 in which the entire Item 6 Planning is completely meaningless for the public since the “representation tables” are not provided in the form of associated documents. The correct use of these papers promotes more efficient and effective PC meeting. For the sake of good communications the submission of “verbal reports” should be avoided.

- 4) Historically the associated documents are an important part of the PC’s records and must be carefully retained alongside the minutes. Sadly, the PC website has been changed and none of these important papers issued over the past couple of years can be found on the website. This should be corrected as soon as possible. The website is the single most important repository for all PC documents.

3. THE WEBSITE

Back in July 2017 the PC had a good website and were posting all the necessary documents in compliance with all their requirements, including those highlighted above. A series of changes of parish clerks and website formats has been a challenge for the PC but in the end, they are responsible for compliance. To remove this continuing risk and disruption the PC they should consider removing this web coordinator role from the Parish Clerk and employ a professional to do this specialist work. Website competence, in addition to the other essential administrative and accounting skills can be asking too much of most parish clerks.

The content of the website is still much less than the one it replaced in 2017. It should include:

- Links to many other communications of interest to residents
- Links to relevant content of the Herefordshire Council website
- Links to important documents so virtually everything required by councillors and the public is easily found in one place e.g. NALC, HC Core Strategy, regulations, guides, statutory laws

It is also lifeless without pictures and does not stimulate interest.

REQUESTS TO PARISH COUNCIL

- 1. Will the PC please ensure that it immediately complies with the resolution dated 2nd November 2015 relating to the issue of draft minutes to members, as stated above?**
- 2. Will the PC please ensure that it immediately complies with the resolution dated 7th December 2015 relating to documents to be submitted to the website, particularly the draft minutes, agendas and associated documents, when issued to members?**
- 3. In order that previous minutes can have the necessary meaning will the PC please post on the website the associated documents that have been removed during the recent reformatting of the website?**

John Smart
26th February 2019