



HALE PARISH COUNCIL

of the Halton Borough in the County of
Cheshire



MINUTES of the **EXTRA ORDINARY PARISH COUNCIL MEETING** held on
Thursday the 29th August 2019 at **HALE VILLAGE HALL, HIGH STREET, HALE VILLAGE, L24 4AE**
COMMENCING AT 7.30PM

Present: Cllrs Healey, Trevaskis, Cleary, Mitchell, Hunter, Spargo, Wright, Anderson, Williams and Kierman

There were 56 members of the public present.

1. To receive Apologies

None

2. To receive Declarations of Interest

None

3. To adjourn the meeting for a period of public participation

The meeting was adjourned

A member of the public made a statement commenting on how concerned and unhappy he was with regard to the internal audit report which highlighted many failures and called for councillors to resign.

A further member suggested that he thought a public meeting might be appropriate however given the public attendance tonight perhaps this was it.

A further resident expressed his concern at the catalogue of failure but expressed some sympathy with councillors concerning the role they had undertaken on a voluntary basis. He further commented that the National Lottery must have been satisfied with the accounts of the Parish Council back in 2015 when they agreed a substantial grant to rebuild the village hall and wondered what had gone wrong.

A resident suggested that the price of failure would be an increased Precept to pay for putting things right.

There was a general consensus that the audit report was totally unacceptable and that residents were seeking to know what was to be done to rectify matters.

The Clerk then made a general statement concerning the internal audit. He said that current failings did not just arise from 2018/19 – many had been there previously, and it was wrong to condemn some current members of the council who had been there only a short period of time and had no real training for their role. He alluded to the lack of documentary information which was in many cases held by past members and not in the Parish Council records thus making management more difficult and also the lack of the completion of documentation when applying for the National Lottery Grant which had proposed a new way of managing the village but had not involved the Charity Commission or the completion of proper documentation. It was also true he believed that previous Clerks had been grossly underpaid and provided with insufficient paid working hours which meant they could not possibly have sorted out previous issues hence the problems had escalated. It could be no coincidence that previous clerks had resigned, the latest after only one

meeting. So, errors in previous years, changes in membership without adequate training, total under resource of the clerks position and lack of knowledge of clerks has led to the current situation. He expressed the hope that residents and members would not engage in a witch hunt but would support the Parish Council in the actions it now needed to take to put matters right something that might take many months. He also confirmed that the accounts of the Parish Council were sound despite lack of governance and that having looked at the position for this year the deficit budget could now be addressed and that there was funding available for the remainder of this year. A new budget would be presented to Council probably at the September ordinary meeting.

The Chairman thanked members of the public for their representations - many of which he agreed with. The Chairman accepted there were a number of issues to resolve and reiterated that by releasing the full audit to the public, the Council wished to be as transparent as possible in relation to the current position of its affairs, some of which even predated his tenure as a Councillor and have existed for over a decade.

It was explained that many of the more recent issues that relate to the accounts have primarily occurred due to inconsistencies in staff and changes to the membership of the Council - with past employees and members not handing over all documentation on their departure leading to gaps in the records of the Council and presenting a backlog for new staff who then have had to spend many months chasing their tails on inadequate hours and inadequate pay.

The Chairman advised that a number of these items have been discussed historically and it was reassuring to see so many new faces who would be able to hear the work that has already been done to address a number of the issues in the audit report.

It was clarified that at the end of each closing year, there has always been a full set of accounts and there is a full list of all transactions that the auditor is satisfied with. The Chairman confirmed these were the only documents that were required to be sent to grant providers such as the National Lottery and the issues do not necessarily rest with the final accounts, but rather the inconsistency throughout the year with the governance behind the accounts - most of which has failed in the audit due to the high turnover of staff not being able to present the accounts to the Council on a regular basis.

Notwithstanding the above issues, no fraud or corruption has been found and all payments made by the Council relate to resolutions of meetings. It was acknowledged that while not ideal, in order for business to carry on as usual in the absence of a Clerk, the bank accounts were placed in the name of the Chair. It was noted that whilst the Council has historically always contracted the services of an accountant as opposed to an auditor, this is the first time the Council has undertaken a full audit upon the recommendation of the Chairman from a fully qualified independent Parish Council auditor. This, alongside the appointment of an experienced and CILCA (distinction) qualified clerk who is an approved NALC/SLCC trainer as the new Clerk, also recommended by the Chairman, should ensure the Council is in a much stronger position moving forward than it ever has been before.

The meeting was re convened

4. To approve and authorise the Chairman and Clerk to sign Section 1 (Annual Governance Statement) being part of the AGAR for the year ending 31st March 2019 (papers enclosed)

It was resolved that the Annual Governance Statement (Section 1) being part of the AGAR for the year ending 31st March 2019 should be approved and that the Chairman and Clerk should be authorised to sign same.

A recorded vote had been requested:

Those in favour: Cllrs Healey, Trevaskis, Hunter, Spargo, Wright, Anderson, Williams and Kierman

Those against: Cllrs Mitchell and Cleary

5. To approve and authorise the Chairman and RFO to sign Section 2 (Accounting Statements) being part of the AGAR for the year ending 31st March 2019 (papers enclosed)

It was resolved that the Accounting Statements (Section2) should be approved and that the Chairman and RFO should be authorised to sign same.

A recorded vote had been requested:

Those in favour: Cllrs Healey, Trevaskis, Spargo, Wright, Anderson, Williams and Kierman

Those against: Cllrs Mitchell, Cleary and Hunter

6. To receive and note the Internal Auditors Report as required by Audit Regulations (papers enclosed)

The Internal Auditors Report was formally received

7. To consider the Internal Auditors Report comments and receive from the Clerk an update on some of the issues and agree in principle the actions that now need to be taken over the coming months to address the failures highlighted and agree the required action plan.

The Clerk went through all the items on the Internal Audit Report and updated members as to the current position and what further actions were required. The report showing this is attached.

It was resolved as follows:

1. That new banking facilities should be arranged with Unity Trust Bank who used a dual on line authorisation system for on line payments which met statutory requirements (in the meantime the existing system with Nat West would have to continue in order that business could be conducted until the change had taken place)

2. That the Clerk would scope the use of a pre-payment card or similar with Unity Trust Bank to be used instead of the debit card currently in operation.

3. That Cllrs Trevaskis, Spargo, Anderson, Mitchell and Kierman should be signatories on the new bank account and authorised to release online payments

4. It was resolved that a small discrepancy of £15.31 in the accounts of 2018/19 should be written off as it would not be cost effective to try and locate this error at this time.

8. To consider and agree how to implement the specific recommendation below as contained in the Internal Audit report

Therefore, to ensure the council can effectively implement the action plan and embed the changes required, we recommend there is a period of consistency in the officer resources that will be tasked with supporting the council with implementation of the internal audit action plan.

To consider appointing the present Clerk on a replacement permanent contract for 16 hours per week in order to comply with and achieve the internal audit action plan above at a rate of £19.17 per hour (SCP 34) with existing travel and telephone expenses.

It was resolved that the present Clerk should be appointed on a permanent basis in order to bring stability to the officer role at the remuneration rates, hours and expenses quoted above with immediate effect.