

Present

Apologies

Absent

D Millar (Acting Chairman) F Courtenay (Due to illness)
H Bolton
D Easterbrook
T Goldstone
P Ley
E Staines
Mrs R Lock (District Councillor)
5 members of the Public

The Acting Chairman noting a quorum was present declared the meeting open.

He welcomed everyone to the zoom meeting, most attended from their own homes but Councillor Staines kindly offered his facilities to those who had inadequate internet to be able to attend the zoom meeting at his office in Huntshaw. Acting Chairman thanked him for his assistance.

Acting Chairman informed the councillors the meeting would proceed as follows:

Meeting is mainly to cover any news on accounts issues.
Apologies – These had been received from Francis
Public Participation
Accounts
Any other Business (anything the Chairman wishes to bring up)

Councillor Goldstone requested that, in accordance with Standing order 5.2, the names of councillors and the way they have voted should be recorded throughout the meeting.

5.2 If a member so requires, the Clerk shall record the names of the members who voted on any question so as to show whether they voted for or against it.

Public Participation

Acting Chairman Millar went on to clarify, any member of the public was permitted to speak for a maximum of 5 minutes. Due to Zoom communication issues Mrs Kate Goldstone understood that she had been invited to speak. She started off saying, she realized the Parish Clerk had had a **** time (immediately the Acting Chairman cut in and said he would not allow bad language in this or any Parish Council meeting). Mrs Goldstone apologised and went on to repeat what she had submitted to the Parish Clerk via email regarding Jean's suitability for the role as parish clerk. She pointed out the need for a job description and possibly a probationary period to assess performance.

Liz Meaney wished her concerns regarding the large amounts paid to Auditors to be noted.

Concerns were raised regarding missing cheques by Councillor Lock. Parish Clerk was asked why this was. The clerk stated that during the start of Lockdown it was agreed to pay Grant money to the Village Halls, Churches and Local Rag. So she went to Councillor Easterbrook & Ley to get cheques signed as they were the nearest and most accessible. It was considered easier to pass a new cheque book through the window to each of them rather than taking 2 cheque books and was able to show the 2 still in the previous cheque book. Councillor Lock pointed out the Cheque written out to the Auditors would not be presented in the accounts until 2020/21. Parish Clerk was asked what Came & Co. entry was. She replied 'Insurance' but the Parish Council had not taken out insurance for the last year.

Councillor Bolton asked what the entry for payment to cllr. Colin Webber of £378 for 'Snow Plough' was. Parish Clerk said we had received a Grant from DCC in that year of £500 and was used to buy a snow plough which Councillor Staines stored in his shed along with the salt to be used in case of bad weather. With the last bad weather Councillor Staines had gone out with tractors and supplied several men, free of charge, to clear the snow to provide access. Cllr. Staines pointed out that his business does not charge the parish for this service. He wanted the parish council to know that this is how the snow gets cleared and they store the equipment in their shed. It was agreed £378 should be added to the Assets figure.

Accounts

Cllr. Goldstone pointed out an entry that was dated from the preceding financial year. Jean acknowledged that this was a typo and the date was wrong.

Cllr. Goldstone requested that the council is provided with access to referenced accounts from 2017/18 in order to verify payments to the parish clerk. Cllr. Goldstone stated that he didn't think anything untoward had taken place but acting chairmain Millar suggested that this was the case. In response cllr. Goldstone pointed out that our job as councillors is to verify the accounts. Acting chairman Millar said that Jean would email the accounts and asked cllr. Goldstone if he would sleep well if he saw them in the morning. Cllr Goldstone responded to point out that it was not appropriate for the acting chairman to be concerned for his sleep.

Cllr. Lock pointed out that **all accounts should be on the website** and then everyone could see them.

Cllr. Goldstone pointed out that the 2019 accounts end on cheque number 426 and 2020 accounts start from cheque number 428 indicating that cheque number 427 was missing. The parish clerk responded saying it was an error.

Acting chairman Millar asked if there were any more issues with the accounts and was he able to sign these off tomorrow. He then asked for a vote. Cllr. Goldstone stated that as long as the agreed amendments were made then the accounts could be agreed. Cllr. Bolton asked if the account included the annual governance statement.

Annual Governance Statement

Cllr. Lock clarified that each Annual Governance Statement should be read out and councillors should answer yes or no to each question.

Acting chairman Millar stated that this is the first time he has heard of this being done. He said that in the four years he had been on Alverdiscott and Huntshaw parish council and before that Braunton parish council he had never heard of this. Cllr. Lock stated that this was because, for the last 2 years Alverdiscott and Huntshaw parish council have not submitted any accounts. Cllr. Lock stated that every council and parish council that submits Agar 3 forms must read out this governance statement. Acting chairman Millar stated that he didn't think he had to read through that whole 'matrix thing'.

Cllr. Goldstone then reminded the clerk that the responses of every councillor must be recorded in accordance with standing order 5.2, as requested. Acting chairman Millar then stated that cllr. Goldstone had made his point clear at the start of the meeting and there was no need to re-state this requirement as it wasted time.

Cllr. Lock offered to read out the statements since Jean is required to record the responses of each councillor.

Agar Statements and Votes

- 1) We have put in place arrangements for effective financial management during the year, and or the preparation of the accounting statements. The council prepared its accounting statements in accordance with the Accounts and Audit Regulations.**

Goldstone: No

Bolton: No

Millar: Yes

Easterbrook: Yes

Ley: Yes

Staines: Yes

Yes: 4

No: 2

-
- 2) You made proper arrangements and accepted responsibility for safeguarding the public money and resources in its charge.**

Goldstone: No

Bolton: No

Millar: Yes

Easterbrook: Yes

Ley: Yes

Staines: Yes

Yes: 4

No: 2

-
- 3) We took all reasonable steps to assure ourselves that there are no matters of actual or potential non-compliance with laws, regulations and Proper Practices that could have a significant financial effect on the ability of this authority to conduct its business or manage its finances. You have only done what it has the legal power to do and has complied with Proper Practices in doing so.**

Goldstone: No

Bolton: No

Millar: Yes

Easterbrook: Yes

Ley: Yes

Staines: Yes

Yes: 4

No: 2

-
- 4) We provided proper opportunity during the year for the exercise of electors' rights in accordance with the requirements of the Accounts and Audit Regulations. During the year gave all persons interested the opportunity to inspect and ask questions about this authority's accounts.**

Goldstone: No

Bolton: No

Millar: Abstain

Easterbrook: Yes

Ley: Yes

Staines: Yes

Yes: 3

No: 2

Abstain: 1

-
- 5) We carried out an assessment of the risks facing this authority and took appropriate steps to manage those risks, including the introduction of internal controls and/or external insurance cover where required. You considered and documented the financial and other risks it faces and dealt with them properly.**

Goldstone: No

Bolton: No

Millar: Yes

Easterbrook: Yes

Ley: Yes

Staines: Yes

Yes: 4

No: 2

- 6) We maintained throughout the year an adequate and effective system of internal audit of the accounting records and control systems. You arranged for a competent person, independent of the financial controls and procedures, to give an objective view on whether internal controls meet the needs of this smaller authority.**

Goldstone: Yes

Bolton: No

Millar: Yes

Easterbrook: Yes

Ley: Yes

Staines: Yes

Yes: 5

No: 1

- 7) We took appropriate action on all matters raised in reports from internal and external audit. You responded to matters brought to its attention by internal and external audit.**

Goldstone: Abstain

Bolton: Abstain

Millar: Yes

Easterbrook: Yes

Ley: Yes

Staines: Yes

Yes: 4

No: 0

Abstain: 2

- 8) **We considered whether any litigation, liabilities or commitments, events or transactions, occurring either during or after the year-end, have a financial impact on this authority and, where appropriate, have included them in the accounting statements. You disclosed everything it should have about its business activity during the year including events taking place after the year end if relevant.**

Goldstone: Abstain

Bolton: No

Millar: Yes

Easterbrook: Yes

Ley: Yes

Staines: Yes

Yes: 4

No: 1

Abstain: 1

Cllr. Lock then pointed out the signing requirements for the document.

Acting chairman Millar then sought clarification from cllr. Lock regarding the documentation distribution requirements. Cllr. Lock said that **the documents should be on the website.**

Cllr. Lock pointed out that there was one more form: the internal auditors report form. She pointed out that she had ticked the 'No' column for points: C, K and L.

Cllr Goldstone then asked if this is the right time to bring up the blank cheques issue. Acting chairman Millar said yes. Mr Goldstone said that it had become apparent that the practice of using blank cheques had persisted in this parish council until very recently. Cllr. Goldstone sought clarification from signatory councillors that confirmed they had signed cheques with neither the payee nor the amounts completed. Cllr. Goldstone then asked for the meeting minutes to show that councillors Peter Ley and Donald Easterbrook signed cheques without the payee or the amount being filled in. Cllr. Easterbrook responded to say they have always been done like that. He went on to say that they trust Jean. Cllr. Goldstone then pointed out the efforts that had been made by central government back in 2013 to stamp out this practice and legislation was updated at that time. It was pointed out that taxpayers are entitled to know that councillors have been signing cheques for public money without the payee and amount being filled in. It was further pointed out that dealing with the signing of blank cheques is one of the fundamentals of financial risk management. Cllr. Easterbrook pointed out that people around here trust one another and that Jean has never put a foot wrong. Acting chairman Millar then announced: the practice of using blank cheques would no longer happen in this parish council. He then asked if there had been a big sum of money that's unaccounted for. Cllr. Goldstone responded to point out that this is an aspect of financial risk assessment which is the responsibility of the parish clerk.

Parish Clerk

It was proposed that since Jean was the subject of the forthcoming discussion she should step out and she agreed. Cllr Bolton asked for someone else to take minutes while Jean was out of the meeting. Cllr Lock agreed.

Acting chairman Millar asked cllrs. Bolton and Goldstone if they knew how long she has been in the role. He stated that she had been in the role for 25 years. Cllr. Goldstone asked the chairman why he was singling out two recently co-opted councillors. The chairman responded that these councillors were calling for Jean's resignation. It was pointed out that others also have views on Jean Huxtable's performance. Acting chairman Millar pointed out that Jean had made mistakes and she had put them right.

Cllr. Lock pointed out that nobody was suggesting that Jean had been responsible for anything untoward with the money and that she had been inclined to resign twice in the past.

Acting chairman Millar suggested that the charges incurred from the auditors, due to failure to submit financial records, should be considered in the context of the savings that Jean Huxtable had provided to the council. He pointed out that Jean Huxtable is on the lowest salary for a parish clerk and that other parish clerks claim expenses which have never been claimed by Mrs Huxtable.

The acting chairman stated that his view was that the council should stick with Jean and show her support. Cllr. Easterbrook also voiced support for Mrs Huxtable in her position as parish clerk.

Cllr. Goldstone pointed out that there is no need to sack Mrs Huxtable. All the council needs to do is accept her resignation.

Cllr. Bolton suggested that we move forward with a proper job description and contract of employment for the parish clerk.

Cllr. Easterbrook spoke – but was unintelligible due to connection issues.

Cllr. Staines asked cllr. Goldstone to confirm what he'd offered to do regarding the council website. A subsequent discussion took place regarding the 'transparency code for smaller authorities' indicating that **data must be published from a website**. Cllr. Staines pointed out that some parts of the parishes have very poor internet connection speeds. Cllr. Lock pointed out that every parish clerk regardless of size has a website and in Hatherleigh they pay £96 for their website and just because some people don't get it doesn't mean to say others don't.

Acting chairman Millar then put forward the proposal that the council should vote to not accept Jean's resignation before the next elections next year. Seconded by E.Staines. Votes were as follows:

Goldstone: Accept resignation

Bolton: Accept resignation

Millar: Don't accept

Easterbrook: Don't accept.

Ley: Don't accept.

Staines: Don't accept.

Motion carried 4:2 – to not accept Jean Huxtable's resignation.

Acting chairman Millar asked Jean Huxtable if she was happy to remain parish clerk. She stated that she would do so as long as he was chairman.

Acting chairman asked for responses from councillors.

Cllr. Bolton suggested that the council is required to provide a proper job description and contract of employment as these are standard requirements. Acting chairman Millar the pressed cllr. Bolton to provide the council with the required parish clerk job description before the next council meeting.

The Parish clerk reminded the council of the need to make it clear what's required for forthcoming councillor co-options. It was agreed that email to chairman and / or parish clerk would be acceptable. The acting chairman asked for the details to be published on the website. Cllr. Bolton pointed out that details are already in the Local Rag magazine. Cllr. Bolton pointed out that the Local Rag entry requests responses to any member of the council – this was agreed as acceptable and the acting chairman asked councillors to circulate any responses received.