

**MINUTES OF THE
PARISH MEETING**
Held on
THURSDAY 14th November 2019
At 7.30 p.m.
in
RINGMER VILLAGE HALL
St Mary's Room

Approximately 54 people were in attendance including the Clerk and Assistant Clerk.

1. Chairman's Opening Remarks and welcome

The Chairman welcomed all to the meeting. The Chairman's opening remarks included;

- Ringmer Parish Council is a substantial Council in the Lewes District;
- The ever-increasing population for Ringmer. Which brings change for which the Council must be prepared for;
- A democratic decision was made for relocation of the office which was not taken lightly;
- The increase in workload for Councillors' and staff;
- The position of the Council being tenants at the Village Hall;
- The duty in law to provide an adequate working environment for staff;
- The current issues in the office;
- Other options considered in and outside of the Village Hall with relevant partners;
- Protocol for the meeting;
- The Parish Council being audited.

2. Notice Convening Meeting

The Clerk read the notice to convene the meeting.

3. Apologies

Apologies were received from Jenny Hill, Susie Parsons and Joanna Fletcher.

5. To discuss the planned move of the Parish Council Office to King's Academy, the way the decision was made and the financial implications of the move as recorded in the minutes of the Extra Parish Council meeting held on 8th August 2019 recorded as part of item 4 on the agenda.

After taking into account various factors and this option being a short-term solution and taking into account the constraints of the existing office, a proposal was received, which was seconded. It was then **resolved** to accept the proposal which was to organise an occupational licence at the school in order for Ringmer Parish council to relocate its offices temporarily, as long as the facilities are updated and the commercials are as expected, whilst the Parish Council continue to look to fulfil

the councils aspiration to acquire its own standalone office and keep a dialogue open with the Ringmer Village Hall Management Committee and not close an alternative option using the Ringmer Children's Centre if it becomes available.

- a) To agree a ceiling budget for preferred option including use of reserves

It was agreed to use the reserve for Special Projects/New Office which is the amount of £20,000 to cover the rent and set up cost and factor the rent and other associated costs in future budgets.

The Chairman invited the meeting to comment or ask questions regarding item 5.

Questions and comments were as follows:

Question - Clarification of the £20,000 mentioned on the agenda for a one year period?

Answer - Yes.

Comment – Concerns regarding the cost of rent for the amount of £15,000 and the £8,000 suggested amount to move. The precept percentage for staff and administration costs of the Council, lack of transparency, formal and informal requests made to amend the minutes which were rejected and the increase in the precept that this move will create.

Chairman Response – The precept amount is an historic amount. An example of another Parish Council's running costs, staff costs, and number of parishioners as well as the advice taken from the Chief Executive of Sussex and Surrey Association of Local Council's was also presented.

Question – What is a reasonable amount to pay for the work carried out by the Council to carry out its functions including maintenance?

No response.

Question – What extra jobs when all your money is going on staff?

Answer – The Parish Council will be administering a vast amount of Community Infrastructure Levy as Ringmer Parish Council is in receipt of 25% due to the diligence of the Council creating a Neighbourhood Plan. Community Groups and organisations will be able to apply for District CIL and Parish Council CIL, this will have to be done with the assistance of the Clerk, the same would apply if there was an application to the Public Works Loan Board which will require a referendum type consultation.

Questions and comments – What will be the financial implications in the first year? Will there be a use £20,000 of reserves in the first year? Will the current upfront rent previously paid to the Village Hall Management Committee be clawed back? The amount of rent which will be paid for the new offices will equate to £150,000 over the next 10 years.

Answer- With regard to the upfront rent no one complained about the Parish Council spending money or came to the Parish Council meetings when this was discussed. The Chairman informed those attending that the Governors of Ringmer Academy have agreed the expenditure of £22,000 to refurbish the building the Parish Council will be relocating to. The building will provide extra meeting rooms.

Question – What is the current rent at the Village Hall?

Answer - £2,300 plus meeting room hire.

Comments – The Parish Council has made a bad decision. There is not a proper trail in the minutes which shows the different options to different premises. The move is too expensive and not value for money. The opening of the meeting was aggressive. The Parish Council belongs to the community. The Village Hall is the best location, just as it has been over many years. The Parish Council needs to listen to residents the whole thing is unhealthy and unhelpful and a total waste of money.

Reference was made to the Chairman being aggressive, which he later apologised for if those in attendance felt that is the case.

Comment - If the drama club removed the scenery in the porch, extra space could be found, and a provision could be made free of charge for a container to hold the scenery.

Advised – That Village Hall is not responsible for the scenery. It is the responsibility of the Drama Club who pay for storage.

Comment – The Parish Council first moved to the Village Hall as the previous Clerk worked from home. The existing office was the preferred option, it was originally a card room. The then Parish Council rallied round to assist with the move and obtain equipment. However, the need for more space is quite apparent, and suggested the Parish Council finds away to remain in the Village Hall and not move.

Chairman response – Things have moved on, there is more work, the Council has to be more professional these days. The Parish Council has tried to work with the Village Hall Management Committee but, there is nowhere for the Parish Council to remain. The Parish Council has been considering the need for a new office since 2017.

Comment – At a recent Village Hall Management Committee meeting a suggestion was made about the Council moving to the cloak room. The Village Hall is the hub of the village; however, staff should be able to go to the toilet without walking round when the hall and room adjacent to the office is being used. When the relocation was discussed at the meeting held on 8th August, Council Members were advised that there are no other options including the cloak room for consideration.

Response RVHMC – RVHMC has worked with the Parish Council and saw the move to the cloak room as a temporary measure but various problems have delayed progress. The Chairman of RVHMC apologised for passing the Council wrong

information as he thought the cloak room would have been considered to be a permanent option.

Comment – The Parish Council shut down the proposal of moving to the cloak room, this should have been discussed and looked at further as this would have been a short term move. It was stated that the Parish Council should not waste money and money should not be spent on office space in order for the Council to be shut away at the Academy.

Chairman response – The Parish Council will not be moving staff to the cloak room as it has the same issues as the current office and therefore, will be no better off. The cloak room houses the electrics to the Village Hall and there is no light nor proper ventilation.

Comment – The Academy is not at the centre of the village and will be harder for older people to visit the Parish Council if the office is no longer at the Village Hall. Older people will find it difficult to walk further. Also, there has been no response to the letter sent to the Chairman.

Chairman response – The new office will have its own access and will be next door to the Children's Centre so will be easily accessible.

Comment – Concerns regarding security as on the Academy site.

Chairman response – The Academy will be paying to ensure that no one can access the school from the new office.

Comments – The current office is not fit for purpose. The toilets which are not easily accessible if there is a room booking, there is a lack of ventilation is below the required standard, whatever the Parish Council do will incur a cost of approximately £40,000, even the temporary move to the cloak room will cost in the region of £50 – 60,000. The reason for paying 10 years in advance rent was to assist the Village Hall Management Committee to proceed with extending and the creation of a new library.

The Parish Council has a duty of care for its staff, there has been no progress with the village hall. The only offer on the table with the scheme of 2007 is to have an office on the first floor which is not suitable. A shop was considered but Council agreed it was too expensive, converting a house was considered but would have been refused planning. Space surrounding the village hall was also not accepted. The suggested extension to accommodate chairs. So that the new storeroom could house an office was also refused. The Council has tried its best and has to look to the future.

Most people do not know where the existing office is. Once the Parish Council move, there will be more space for storage. The Academy is the cheapest and most viable option.

Comments and questions – The lack of transparency, the minutes do not reflect how the decision was made. The National Association of Councils Guidance on Transparency was referred to. The minutes do not contain a lot of detail and should be as public money is being used. The Parish Council is not exercising constraint especially

if there is an increase in the precept. The lack of information on the Parish Council website as there are no Councillor email addresses. There has been a lot of discussion on Facebook why has there been no response? Why don't the Parish Council have a Facebook Page, nor was there a full reply to an email sent to the office the only thing was received was thank you for your email your comments have been noted. Why has one residents request to change the minutes been denied?

Chairman response – The Chairman quoted from the Local Government Act 1972 regarding minutes advising that they are not verbatim, they are for recording the Council's decisions, they are minutes not hours. People should come to Parish Council meetings and find out more.

Comment – The Chairman is being aggressive.

Comment – People cannot always come to meetings if they are working or have childcare issues.

A query was made as to what was missing from the minutes which was not responded to.

Chairman highlighted – Councillors had all the information regarding various options for moving offices including Ringmer Academy rental costs a decision had to be made.

Comment – It feels as if this matter has been shrouded in secrecy.

Comment and questions – Why was this not made more public, only mentioned in the Council meeting minutes of April 2019 and June 2019 prior to the meeting held on 8th August? Why was this not included as an item for the Annual Parish Meeting? Why was this not published in the newsletter given the brevity of this matter?

Ringmer Parish Council should re-open discussions with the Village Hall Management Committee, or is the Council committed to going to the Academy?

Response - The Clerk was requested to advise how a Council decision can be undone. The Clerk informed the meeting that once a resolution has been passed it stands for 6 months, it can only be undone by a special resolution where 6 Members of the Council need to provide a motion in writing to undo the resolution. If this is not done, then that resolution will continue.

Comment – This appears to be a “done deal.” However, it is only a temporary solution and a long term one needs to be considered. The option of the cloak room could have been a temporary solution, however, there was a misunderstanding that it had been presented as a permanent solution.

Comment – It is accepted that the Village Hall Management Committee want to leave the door open for the Parish Council to return and perhaps transparency needs to be improved.

Comment and summary of Ringmer Parish Council's position

The Parish Office has always been in the Village Hall, the Council as employers have sought advice regarding the current position for employees. It became quite apparent that we, as the employer, need to do something now and make some other arrangements. The Parish Council would like to have remained in the Village Hall. Some of the issues we had to consider was the access to the toilet or the staff being trapped when the Rogers Room when it is being hired. The current arrangements are inadequate. The Academy was the cheapest and quickest option and is the only option to the Council to provide an alternative suitable facility. The building is situated next to the Children's Centre, there will be a boundary fence outside. Money is an issue; the precept is always under £100,000 and has hardly ever increased over the past 10 years, it has been a case of the Parish Council just ticking over, things have changed now. The precept also includes Sussex Police, East Sussex County Council and the Parish Council, for example if you are paying £50 of the Parish Council element, this may increase to £60. This will include the rent. It is a case that an option could not be found at the Village Hall.

There are roughly 5,000 people in Ringmer, the Council is not being lavish with your money, but it does have to provide adequate accommodation for staff. If the staff are providing a service, you would want to receive a good service, so this has to be an investment of residents as well.

Chairman's Comment - This decision has not been taken lightly.

Question – Is there a target for the Parish Council to get back to the Village Hall.

Chairman's response – It is the aim to work with the Village Hall Management in the future and perhaps work on a partnership CIL Bid. CIL being Community Infrastructure Levy which the Parish Council is paid 25% contribution due to the foresight of the Parish Council creating a Neighbourhood Plan. It may also be a case of taking out a Public Works Loan Board in the region of £300,000 to extend the hall. There should be a concrete proposal presented to Council. It should be the aim where there is development to try and get something out of it for the benefit of the community.

Questions – Has digitalising happened in the office? Could there be more flexi working and working from home?

The Assistant Clerk requested to speak, which was granted. The Assistant Clerk informed Members that she and the Clerk do the work to the best of their abilities and pointed out the difficulties of working in the current office and emphasised the lack of privacy and how hard it is having 2 people work in such a small space as the need to stop working when people come in. She asked for the keyboard warriors to leave the matter alone and it's all very well having a say on Facebook, at the end of

the day the office is no longer adequate. The Assistant Clerk advised the meeting that the Clerk does work from home. The Assistant Clerk made a plea that the right working environment be provided as she and the Clerk just want to do their jobs.

Question – How many emails and letters have you received about this?

Response - About a dozen.

Comment – The Parish Office should be in the centre of the village.

Request - Before the meeting ends will the Parish Council reconsider the decision it made and move.

Comment and Question– I did not like to be named a “keyboard warrior.” It is more of a case about transparency. Why doesn’t the Parish Council have a Facebook page in accordance with the guidance of NALC? Why was there no response to the comments on Facebook?

Response It is for the Parish Council to decide if they would like to have a Facebook Page. There is a draft Social Media Policy to be adopted, however this will not include responding to comments. It will be for the purpose of providing information.

Further response – The Parish Council comes under governance, the Clerk, Chairman or Councillors cannot respond individually. The Parish Council makes a decision as a whole. Individual Councillors cannot engage in social media. If we do have social media, it is for the purpose of providing information. We have set up meetings in the form of Councillor Surgeries in pubs and cafes which were advertised, nobody turned up. It is very easy for people to say we do not engage, but Council has tried. Whilst there are not any emails on the website, our contact details and addresses are. With regard to the decision and the minutes, we took the decision based on the information we had. Whilst the Council has a duty to parishioners, the Council also has a duty of care for their staff.

A request was made for the Clerk to speak which was granted. The Clerk explained that the resolution was to accept the proposal and ensure everything was in place before the Council made a final resolution regarding the licence, commercials and rental amount. The Clerk expressed that Ringmer has a very impressive community spirit and was honoured to be appointed as Clerk to Ringmer Parish Council. The Clerk informed the meeting that she has built up a good rapport with various hall users and did not anticipate when first employed by the Council to be in the position of relocating, but, due to lack of privacy when residents share things with the Clerk and want to talk to the Clerk it makes it awkward and the current office prohibits this. The Clerk also mentioned if anyone wants to see the Clerk, they should receive a good service and the Clerk does make herself available to the public other than the times currently stipulated. The Clerk did raise that in the past a suggestion of an office portacabin outside the storeroom at the Village Hall. The Clerk did mention that there has to be a certain element of trust.

Comment – The Parish Council needs to have discussions around having Facebook and transparency.

At this juncture in the meeting the Chairman closed the meeting at 9.10pm and thanked everyone for attending.

6. Public Question Time

There were no further questions.

Please not these minutes will be accepted at the Annual Parish meeting or next Parish Meeting if called.

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