

Freshford PC Chairman's Report – 11 May 2020

1. PC Clerk

The PC is pleased to welcome our new Clerk, Selina Jobson, who's appointment was approved by the PC in the April 'meeting' which was conducted by email to address only the important business that could not wait.

Selina is currently Clerk to Winsley PC, and brings a wealth of experience which has already proven invaluable in these unusual times.

2. Impact of Covid-19

We are all aware of the Government guidelines on dealing with this unwelcome virus.

The LiFERAFT initiative was set up covering the whole community of Freshford and Limpley Stoke, and a strong community support network has been put in place with FLISCA and the two Parish Councils (Freshford and Limpley Stoke) working closely together. LiFERAFT is undertaking its own communications which are being managed by Jonelle Daniels.

This welcome initiative enables the 2 PCs to focus on PC business, which whilst some initiatives are currently on hold – such as the bus stop move and traffic measures – most other business needs to continue.

Excellent guidance is being provided by NALC (National Association of Local Councils), ALCA (Avon Local Councils Association), BANES and the PC also has the benefit of Wiltshire advice through Selina.

3. PC Meetings

The PC meeting in April was undertaken via email due to the inability for the PC to meet face to face. Only important matters that needed PC decisions were addressed, including:

- Appointment of Selina Jobson as Clerk
- Approving payment for local contractors
- One Planning Application response

The Government have stated that the planning process is to continue 'as normal'.

Legislation has now been passed enabling Councils to undertake virtual meetings instead of face to face meetings.

The PC already has a Microsoft Office 365 licence, and the uplift to include Microsoft Teams was the least cost option (c.£54) which will currently support up to 250 meeting attendees.

Therefore, the PC is now in the position to undertake online meetings which anyone from the community is free to join if they wish. The link to each meeting will be communicated with the Agenda, and a link is always available from Selina Jobson.

It is recognised that individuals have widely different IT platforms and configurations, and some will have initial configuration issues. This will apply to any video conferencing solution selected.

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The initial meetings will be able to be accessed via online conferencing using Microsoft Teams, which is free to anyone wishing to join the meeting. If there is a proven need for phone access as well, then an upgrade to provide this facility will be considered.

4. Parish Communications

Problems were experienced with the Parish Communications facility – often referred to as the Community Email Database - when setting up communications for the LiFERAFT initiative.

The key issues were that operational limits were hit and also a large number of emails were either not being allowed to be sent or were being rejected by the receiving email systems. So the issues were a) the number of emails being sent, b) email security systems identified Parish Communication system emails as spam.

The Parish Communications mechanism was moved from Gmail to MailChimp. This has resolved the issues being experienced, and also had the welcome side effect of improving the presentation of Parish Communication emails. The MailChimp environment also provides newsletter functionality, which provides an option for delivering the Bulletin electronically.

5. Freshford Surgery

A Parish communication has gone out confirming the news that the Beckington Practice will not be involved with setting up a Freshford Surgery facility as part of the Freshford Memorial Hall development, which is a great loss to the community.

The provision of community health facilities from within Freshford has been an extremely important part of the local community. Whilst many residents have been continuing to use the surgery at Beckington as best they can, this has always been on the understanding that the practice was committed to setting up a surgery facility as part of the Memorial Hall development.

Now that this decision has been taken, alternative solutions need to be found. The Memorial Hall has approach the Coombe Down practice, who are interested in further discussions.

In the meantime, BANES CCG has joined with Wiltshire and Swindon CCGs, which provides an opportunity for a health facility covering the whole community as the county boundary divide is weakened and possibly removed.

So there is hope moving forwards, and Freshford PC should support all efforts to bring community health facilities back to the village.

Proposal Freshford PC resolves to provide full support to all activities required to create a new local surgery facility in Freshford and to work towards creating a community health facility within the village.

6. SSE Maintenance Contract

The SSE Lighting Maintenance contract was due to be signed as the old maintenance contract ended at the end of March.

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The annual maintenance contract cost has been increased by c.20% by SSE, which prompted the PC to compare costs with alternative options.

Other PCs within our area of BANES are grouping together and negotiating a wide reaching maintenance contract with Volker Highways, as other PCs have experienced extremely high increases in the cost of their maintenance contracts with SSE.

These investigations have been delayed due to the Covid-19 situation.

On taking a closer look at the fine detail of the SSE proposal, and piecing together detail across the 2 documents, the following has come to light:

- The contract is stated as being a 3 year agreement – 01 April 2020 to 31 March 2023
- The Annual Maintenance charge is £1134 for the first year
- There is a 20% uplift between 2019/20 and 2020/21
- Following years are subject to an annual adjustment based on the NEDO Indices
 - Current NEDO adjustment is c.3.7%
- The schedule of works state:
 - No routine maintenance in financial periods 2020/21 and 2022/23

Which implies a 20% increase in maintenance costs, uplifted year on year, with no scheduled maintenance to be undertaken in 2 of the 3 years, therefore providing an effective three-fold increase in costs.

The new maintenance contract is being queried, and also a cost comparison needs to be undertaken against the potential Volker Highways maintenance contract when pricing is available.

7. The Bulletin

The production of the Bulletin was in full swing, and then the Covid-19 restrictions came into force, which removed the ability to get the issue completed and printed.

Moving forwards, the general plan was to move to reduced content and provide the Bulletin electronically via either a newsletter and/or an online presentation. A reduced number of printed Bulletins would be produced and provided for those who do not have online access.

The driver for this approach is cost savings as the pool of available sponsors was disappearing, and once the current restrictions are over future sponsorship must be in doubt. Therefore, the move to an electronic solution is quite timely.

8. VE Day Celebrations

There is little opportunity for the Parish Council to organise any meaningful community celebrations of the 75th anniversary of VE Day.

LiFERAFT is providing access to information packs providing suggestions for games, bunting, even retro food to provide people with ideas on options on how to have VE Day celebrations whilst adhering to Government guidelines.