BARLING MAGNA PARISH COUNCIL

Report to: Full council

Report from: Clerk

Date: 11 April 2019

Clerk’s report to council for APRIL 2019

1. Current priorities

At this time of year, I have assumed that the main priorities for my time will be:

* Close of accounts for 2018/19
* Final PAYE payments and reports, plus the issue of P60s to staff and councillors
* Opening of 2019/20 accounts and the setting up of the agreed budget
* Preparation for audit

Each of these needs to be done accurately and carefully to avoid problems later and possible penalties.

1. Internal and External Audit of 2018/19 accounts

This year the external auditor has selected our council for the ‘Intermediate’ level of audit. Each year 5% of parish councils are selected for this which involves a more in-depth review of documentation. I am confident that we can meet the required standard of scrutiny. As previously agreed, our internal auditor for the year will be John Watson and I have arranged for a first meeting with him for 15 April when almost all the documents will be handed over. One aspect which we know will be scrutinised more carefully this year will be the links between the hall bookings and the accounts.

Unless we apply for an extension, we must have completed our internal audit, signed the Annual Governance and Accountability Review and submitted all necessary material to the external auditor by 1 June. If this does not fit our scheduled pattern of meetings, it will be necessary to call an extraordinary council meeting for this by the end of May as we have done before. Should it prove necessary, I request permission to seek an extension from the auditor after consultation with the Chairman and Vice-Chairman.

1. Website

Our newly-refreshed website went live on 3 April. The ‘desktop’ version looks good and is already attracting approving comments. There may be a little more fine-tuning on the ‘mobile’ version to arrive at the best presentation. As requested, the webmaster has given the clerk more control over the day to day working of the site.

1. Social media

* Facebook – our information postings are now routinely shared by residents on their own pages. The number of friends to our Facebook account has grown by a further 9 in the past month.
* Twitter – Our tweets have achieved 1,496 ‘impressions’ in the month to 11 April. Twitter impressions are the number of times a tweet shows up in somebody's timeline. More important will be the number of ‘engagements’ - any way someone interacts with one of our tweets including retweets, clicks and likes. Our best engagement rate for the past 28 days is 11.6% (which is good).

1. Grounds maintenance

Several members have commented favourably on the quality of the lawn and trimming of the borders at the parish hall. The area that was overrun by brambles next to the kitchen has now been cleared. The fence is missing at this point: the boundary of the land which is the ditch. Also the party fence with our neighbour in Little Wakering Road is in a poor state, probably owing to the brambles and weeds which grew there. Our neighbour has requested that the parish council should restore (renovate or replace) it.

1. Play Areas

I have arranged the annual RoSPA inspection for May. Further fencing repairs will be necessary in 2019/20. I remind the parish council that it holds an unspent gift of £600 from the Village Fair in 2017 towards new play equipment. I expect to bring report on current discussions on a partnership with the District Council regarding the Parry to the May meeting.

1. Fire precautions

Gillian Gates and I have attended a fire safety training session run by an experienced firefighter and organised by Hullbridge Parish Council. It is clear that we will need to do more to comply with current good practice in ensuring fire safety: more fire drills, more frequent testing of fire escapes and alarms. There continues to be no response from Essex Fire & Rescue Service for their promised visit to examine the state of fire safety and precautions of the parish hall. However, Cllr Pearmain is in discussion with a fire officer known personally to him regarding an advisory visit and I am grateful to him for this.

1. Rochford 2020 planning

I have reminded Sutton with Shopland PC that we need to reschedule the planning meeting for the shared project between the two parishes as a contribution to the events planned as part of the tourism venture Rochford 2020.

1. Wildlife Reserve - utilities

* The main contractor finished work on 27 March, some 6 working days behind schedule – in part due to bad weather but also they agreed that they had underestimated the task of excavating and laying the pipes while preserving as much of the verge of the path intact as possible to avoid disturbing the habitat. They have now submitted their bill and Enovert is sending the parish council a cheque to cover this. I inspected the work as it progressed and walked the site with the contractor upon completion, checking inside the inspection hatches and noting the drawcord for the electrical ducting. The contractors donated a quantity of ducting which we can use for future drainage work.
* I am seeking current prices for the approved purchase of the power chipper, which will again be funded by Enovert under its agreement with us.
* Essex & Suffolk Water engineers are once again proving really helpful in working towards the connection of our pipe to the main and fitting a meter. At the time of writing, this is expected to be at the Mucking Hall Road end. I am exploring options for the connection of the barn end of the new pipe to our existing plumbing.
* Meanwhile, we remain in dispute with WAVE about their bills for water consumption over the past 12 months (during which time we have not enjoyed a water supply). I also await further contact from Southend on Sea Borough Council, which owned the private water main previously supplying the site, and which has a stated intention – once the new supply is installed - to invoice us retrospectively for use of their main over several past years.
* In terms of bringing an electrical supply to the site, the steps we are following are:

1. Supply UK Power Networks with a detailed large-scale plan of the site and a technical specification of the supply required
2. Once UK Power Networks is satisfied with these, they will commission a survey to determine the best way to bring a main supply to the site and quote a price for this. My current information is that the total cost of this should not exceed £7,000.
3. I have been in discussion with Enovert Community Trust and explained that we wish to do this now, funded by savings from within the agreed total budget (which is achievable). This should be attractive to Enovert as their grant will achieve far more in terms of outcome than they first thought. There are two time pressures affecting this process. The first is that the Enovert grant must be spent by May or we must seek an extension, offering a justification. We should not assume that this will be granted automatically. Secondly, we have absolutely no leverage with UK Power Networks, which will move at its own pace. I hope to report more on this at the 11 April council meeting.
4. I do understand the enthusiasm for an electrical supply in time for the Fun Dog Show on 13 July but I recommend we should not expect this and should gently discourage the idea that the matter will be resolved by then. Originally it was not planned to install electricity at all in 2019/20, so if everything falls into place and it happens it will be a bonus. At this stage no one can predict the timetable with any confidence.
5. Wildlife Reserve – donations

I understand that the pruning steps have now been received by the volunteers, following a generous donation by a third party, and that two replacement benches will follow shortly. As requested at the last Council meeting, I have sought the advice of our insurers about any restrictions imposed under our current cover for the use of equipment.

1. New permanent mobile telephone as the Council’s main public access point

It turns out that the main headline deals for BT customers are not available to us as we are on a business tariff (the minimum monthly charge is 120% more for business customers than for personal ones!). I have consulted residents about the best network to use and I am now in discussion with PlusNet about a SIM-only contract, which I hope we can start to introduce before the May Council meeting.

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