

Statement from the Employment Committee

Back in May 2012, like many other councillors on the newly formed council, I knew we were going to have a tough job on our hands, but as volunteers I don't think any of us really understood at that time just how big the task was going to be and the amount of gross mismanagement we would be left to sort out.

Along with others on our new council, I have had significant commercial experience and managed teams of staff but I was very horrified to find that despite having a payroll of at least 10 employees, many of whom were working for the Pavilion, previous councils had not seen it right and proper to have an employment committee to manage its considerable work force.

This council immediately brought together an employment committee to provide correct procedures for its employees and to ensure that it acted in line with current legislation in its role as an employer.

It is not one individual's job within a council to manage council employees. A Parish Council has full responsibility as a corporate body for all employees and previous councils should have taken the appropriate steps to ensure that they were managed properly using the procedures laid down by the council's own terms of reference under employment law.

Pleading ignorance or lack of control over an employee is not an excuse. There is plenty of help and support available if you wish to deal with a problem. Let us not forget we are also the custodians of the parish funds for our community - so if we get it wrong it can be extremely costly. And as we all well know, the parish of Longstanton has got it wrong several times, most recently in the initial stages of taking over the Pavilion in 2010.

It is no secret in the village that from pretty much the first weeks of office our Clerk was on sick leave and we inherited several outstanding employment issues in this regard. This left us floundering initially, as in the absence of a trained and qualified Clerk we had no access or information to guide us on our way.

Our first point of call was to meet with SCDC and advised them of our immediate problem - we had no Clerk. They have been very helpful with advice and support and pointing us in the right direction, recommending the services of G. Stoehr. Fiona McMillan and her team of legal advisors have also been at the other end of the phone when we have needed her.

We had the immediate issue of having to run the Pavilion with a number of employees needing to be paid their salaries etc. This proved very difficult due to a complete lack of records or resources to access. We managed, got help, and as a result of this experience the committee has now outsourced all payroll operations to a third party, which in turn now complies with our own financial regulations and procedures.

We concluded very quickly that it would be necessary, following several financial irregularities with the VAT and the financial data available, for a full investigation of all activities relating to the council management to take place. Gill Ashby and myself were asked to do this investigation on behalf of the council. Under advice from SCDC, we also instructed solicitors.

Despite any reports to the contrary that people may have heard, I can absolutely confirm that we found no record of any disciplinary procedures having being put in place or undertaken in

respect to any members of staff within the Council at that time. We found no records in the formal minutes acknowledging any problems with accounts or personnel issues. We have still (as Cllr Ashby mentioned earlier) not had a copy of our Clerk's appraisal for the period up to January 2012, despite the fact that this document is clearly referred to in the minutes of March 12 - 2012 when the then Chairman, Mr Brian Robins, wrote, "Cllr Robins said that the Clerk's Appraisal just needed to be signed off and the recommendation to initial the agendas is being done".

Unfortunately, due to matters still outstanding, I am not able to give full details of our investigation but what I will say is that the investigations carried out by the employment committee went as far back as 2009 and concentrated around the period 2010 - 2011.

Our insurance company has been fully aware of our investigation, in the course of which we also concluded that we had to call the police over some of our findings. We have been advised that because of previous councils' lack of "minimum standards of control" any insurance claims may not be accepted. For obvious reasons I cannot go into any more detail except to say that it was a very sorry state of affairs.

Going back to last year, the committee also had the unfortunate but necessary job in August 2012 of closing the Pavilion and making its staff redundant. This was a task that nobody wanted to have to do but one that unfortunately was inevitable in the circumstances.

Gail Stoehr thankfully joined us in October 2012 as a temporary interim Clerk. Her services were a blessing and gave us some insight into how to run a professional council.

Bookkeeper Sarah Gwynn arrived to head up the accounts re-write. This was not an enviable task, but one she undertook and managed well, disentangling the financial mess as left.

In moving forward in 2013 the committee is pleased to be working with outside sources to help us work towards a calmer and well managed future. We are now members of CAPALC (Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Association of Local Councils) and have found Ian Dewer and his team invaluable, especially in bringing together a parish disciplinary panel which met on Friday 10th May.

We have also more recently had Jane Bowd accept the role of Temporary Interim Clerk for Longstanton. She replaces Gail Stoehr who unfortunately due to the nature of her outsourcing company could only stay with us for 6 months. I hope you will all make Jane welcome. Details of her availability will be posted on our web site.

So to close, it's been an exceedingly difficult year. We have given a lot of our own personal time to help sort out the many problems we inherited and I think that while we are not completely though it yet, we have done the best job we could have done. There are few of you out there who believe you could have done things much more quickly. Let me assure you, we have taken the best advice from a number of parties and the conclusion is the same - we have done this the correct and proper way, given the complex nature of the problems, and we have done it in a way that ultimately protects the interests of the council and community.