

Parish Office

The lease for the Parish Office within the Arts & Craft Centre falls due for renewal in January 2021, the current COVID pandemic has meant that the way we operate has changed and we have not met face to face for 9 months. There is every expectation that this will continue for some considerable period to come, as such it is correct that we review the need for a permanent physical space.

On July 9th 2020 I wrote to all councillors seeking views on the current office and of those that responded the main views were that the current rental of £5K did not represent value for money and we should explore options.

Myself and Nicola, vice chair, and the clerk shared thoughts and Nicola produced a paper outlining the issues and options. An online meeting was then arranged with the Strategy Group in order to debate the topic and formulate a recommendation to put to the full Council.

Key issues were Document Storage, Workspace, Councillors Meeting Space and Access for Residents.

Locations considered were Craft Centre, Duchy Barn & shed, Sports Club and Local Business premises.

Current Storage

We currently make use of a filing cabinet and a double door cupboard. These are used to store a range of items such as graffiti removal kit, receipts and signed Minute records.

There is a legal requirement for us to retain the signed minute records in perpetuity, other items are held out of choice and some with a practice of short retention periods.

All minute records for the last 8 years, in addition to the signed minutes, have been held electronically, backed up and are available on our website.

On that basis it is recommended that we handover our written minutes, on permanent loan, to the Essex Records Office for digitisation and storage, whom are obliged to do so.

This leaves us with a need to have reasonable storage but just for the double door cabinet. The view agreed was that we could store anything paper based in sealed plastic boxes with silica gel damp protection. This will be easily accessible to the Parish Clerk.

On that basis it is recommended that we store the cabinet in the Duchy Barn shed for which we have a considerable lease ahead and will not incur any additional cost to the Council.

Workspace

This was considered in relation to the Clerk and the benefit of having the office space available. The Clerks view was that in practice Councillors and others would drop in for a chat meaning that additional time would need to be spent at home to catch up. Almost all of the Clerks work is done electronically and it is not necessary for her to have physical documents to hand any longer. The current office was cold and working from home was far more efficient.

On that basis it is recommended that a Workspace is not an issue for consideration.

Meeting Space for Councillors

The current COVID safe practice of online meetings has become the "norm" for councillors, not only does it solve any travel issues in getting to a venue, it also means that Councillors can join from any geographical location with a reasonable internet connection.

If on occasion it was felt that a face to face meeting was required then it is proposed that a venue is hired for a short period as needed. It is thought that this should be the Sports Club as the Council has an interest in the building and it is likely to be more readily available than the Duchy Barn.

On that basis it is recommended that the Councillors continue to make use of technology based online meetings in the first instance with occasional venue hire if needed.

Access for Residents

It is recognised that access to the Council for residents is important. At the peak of the office being open to the public it probably attracted 6 visits a month. This was often as a matter of convenience rather than a need for a face to face meeting, such as to report a pot hole. This could have been

done successfully online, by email or telephone. After due consideration of venues and the Clerks safety and well-being it was agreed that the Clerk would attend the Coffee Mornings at the Duchy Barn, on a regular week once a month. This would be of value to the community and a location that is more convivial, benefitting both residents and the use of the Duchy Barn. In the event of a resident wishing to discuss a confidential matter it was agreed that other arrangements could be made such as moving to a quieter location in the village for a coffee, a subsequent phone call or meeting after the coffee morning closes.

On this basis it is recommended that the Council access for residents is managed through the Duchy Barn coffee mornings.

Conclusion

Having reviewed the current key issues related to the use of a Parish Office it is believed by the Strategy Group that given our current work practices and solutions detailed above, the continued rental of a Parish Office and the cost incurred is not justified.

The Strategy Group recommends to full Council that we resolve not to renew the lease on the Parish Office.

Kevin Taylor
Chair
October 29th 2020