

Appendix 1 to Agenda of meeting to be held on Tuesday 5th April 2016

Report by Clerk (Agenda item 16.190 and 16.191)

A copy of this report was originally emailed to all Terling & Fairstead Parish Councillors on 29th March 2016.

I attended a training course at the EALC on 22nd March covering the new Transparency Code for Smaller Authorities and the grant funding which is being made available by the Government to help smaller authorities to comply with the new code.

The Transparency Code has been issued to meet the Government's desire to place more power into citizens' hands to increase democratic accountability. The Code was mandatory from 1st April 2015. NALC has been slow in making recommendations and it has only been recently that the guidance as to handle the new requirements have been made available.

As T&F Parish Council has already agreed to opt into the new audit regime, with effect from 2017-18 we will no longer be subject to an external audit but we still have to complete an Annual Return. (Incidentally, retrospectively in our case, NALC are advising smaller Councils to act exactly as T&F did recently i.e. do nothing - thereby opting in). As the EALC explained, the aim of the new audit regime combined with the Transparency Code, is to get the electorate to be the auditors for smaller councils.

The requirements of the Code are onerous, and will entail considerable extra work by Clerks. In recognition of this, grants are available to cover the added staff costs, training, and some IT costs. I will explain this later.

With regards to meeting the requirements of the Transparency Code I am pleased to report that I am satisfied that T&F already covers most, although not all, of the requirements. I have already checked with Colin that he willing to take on the extra burden of what will have to be loaded onto the Community website.

Here is the link for the new Code which must be read by members of the Finance Committee please (but all Councillors should read it to enable you to understand the changes in the audit process – you are as a Council asked to approve the accounts so this is important).

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/transparency-code-for-smaller-authorities>

In summary, all Councils with a turnover of less than £25,000 must publish certain Council data on a website. Included are: the annual governance statement, a list of councillors and their areas of responsibilities, minutes, agenda and papers of formal meetings. We already comply with most this, bar one very small administrative detail with regards to 'subject to approval minutes' which I will amend. However, I must also in future publish all accompanying documents relating to items on the agenda (if they are required for Councillors to make an informed decision). I must also remove 'correspondence' from meeting agenda (on the advice of the EALC).

We must also now publish: our internal audit report and a list of all items of expenditure of £100 and above. The first is easy to do, the second requirement can be met by my publishing the full cashbook (payments) at year end. We must also publish on line the bank reconciliation at year end, the explanation of variances (Ian prepares this), and the internal auditor's report. T&F will be required to explain any 'not covered' responses highlighted in the internal auditor's report and this explanation must also be put on the website.

There is also now a requirement to publish details of public buildings and assets – as T&F have none this does not apply (I have checked and being Custodian Trustees of the Village Hall does not apply as neither the Village Hall nor the land is owned by the Parish Council.) The War Memorial, bus shelter and phone boxes also do not need to be listed.

To facilitate the extra workload, there is a Transparency Grant Fund available to smaller councils. At the most basic level the grant will cover the costs of my training this week and the extra hours I will be spending working to ensure T&F comply fully both in the current financial year (ending 31st March) and for 2016-17.

There is also funding available for smaller councils to purchase a laptop (up to £350 ex VAT), a printer/scanner (up to £100 ex VAT) and up to £300 for the cost of running a website (T&F has already decided not to have its own website, preferring to share the community site, but the Parish Council does pay the hosting fee of around £50 p.a. and the grant will cover this).

The IT Committee will need to decide what it wants to recommend, but I would strongly advise that T&F should take advantage of the funding and purchase a laptop and a scanner/printer with the funds. Although I would prefer to use my iMac and my existing set up in my office at home it would be useful to have a laptop so I can work away from my office, and of course it can be used by others. I do not currently have the facility to scan documents, my present printer has the facility but refuses to interact with my Mac. The purchase of a scanner will be essential for me to carry out my tasks in future.

I will be adding the relevant approval for the grant application to the next agenda in order to meet the required deadlines.

I suggest the Finance Committee read the attached carefully and Ian in particular digests what is now required for the audit regime.

I also suggest the IT Committee decide whether to recommend the purchase of a laptop and scanner.

If you have any queries regarding any of the above please let me know BEFORE Tuesday's meeting so that I can try to find the answers.

Jayne Halfhide
Clerk
29th March 2016