

[REDACTED]
Stradbroke, Suffolk, IP21
Tel: 01379 [REDACTED] - Email: [REDACTED]

20th November 2018

To: Stradbroke Parish Council
Stradbroke

Dear Councillors

Having attended the PC meeting, 12th November 2018 and the following Finance Committee meeting on 15th November, I was concerned to hear that the Council is in need of boosting its general reserves.

I was also concerned to hear that the PC is in dispute again with the Stradbroke Trust regarding the latest rent review, to the point that the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) has been appointed to mediate.

Prior to the November meeting I did question the PC as to why negotiations had reached the stage of mediation, because in my experience, this usually indicates that the Landlord is raising the rent to an unacceptable level. Assuming that is the case, for the PC to appear to be trying to extract an unacceptably high rent from the Stradbroke Trust at a time when it is known the PC is short of funds, does not put the Council in a very good light.

In view of my concerns I have the following queries / observations:

- 1) There was a document being studied at the Finance Committee meeting called Terms of Reference which councillors recommended. I can't find this document on the PC website. Could you provide me with a copy please.
- 2) I can't find a copy of the PC's end of year Accounts for Year 16/17 on the website – could you provide me with a copy please
- 3) PC meeting 08.01.2018 – When Stradisphere requested a donation of £800 towards running costs – why did the PC not request to see copies of the charity's accounts / running costs before it agreed a £300 donation? Stradisphere has since shut down with a statement that it suffered continuing losses over 5 years. Why did the PC not investigate in more depth before committing public money?
- 4) Could you please identify at which PC meetings the following items were authorized:
Payment recorded: 30.04.18 – Legal advice Richard Buxton £1,950
 31.10.18 – Referral fee RICS £425
- 5) Clerk's hours:
The Clerk's hours were increased at some stage to take into account extra work on the NP – does this situation still exist, or have the hours reduced down again please? The Clerk stated at the November meeting that she was undertaking extra work on recording burial details online. At which PC meeting was this work authorized please?

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6) I don't pretend to fully understand the PC half yearly accounts (2018) but the following figures seem to particularly stand out as overspends – do they include VAT figures:

Travelling expenses - £350 (more than anticipated)

External expert advice and opinion - £3,400 (unbudgeted)

Phone kiosk, noticeboard and parish map plus repair/resite gate - £1,155

Neighbourhood Plan - £4,000 (to be paid from reserves)

Recreation - £800 (to be paid from reserves)

The Internal Audit report for 2017/18 states “the Council experienced a significant depletion of Reserves in the year of account” and I would like to know why such high costs, particularly for external expert advice and the NP, were sanctioned by the PC when they don't appear to have been budgeted for. Please can you tell me at which meetings these were authorized?

I note from the Audited Year End Receipts and Payments Account that costs for the Stradbroke Monthly far outweigh the Receipts. The parish magazine used to be virtually self funding and I wonder if you can give a break down of what costs are involved now to have made such a change. The Internal Audit for 2017/18 states that a balance of more than £2,000 held by the PC on behalf of the Stradbroke Monthly has now been transferred to an independent Stradbroke Monthly account which is not managed by the Council. Does this mean that the PC now has no control over the Stradbroke Monthly? Also how will the Stradbroke Monthly finance production with such an apparently large deficit (Receipts £1,183 to Payments £5080)?

There have been a number of closed sessions in PC meetings over the past year or so. Also, I believe that the NP Committee was changed to a Working Party at some point over the past year. The Terms of Reference for the NP Committee were clearly set out and the Committee would have been bound by the PC's standing orders – therefore all meetings / documentation open to the public. Could you advise please when the last minutes were taken for the NP working party/committee? Are these available to view on the PC website please?

The PC is bound by seven principles of public life one of which is Openness, and with the number of closed sessions and the change of the NP Committee to a Working Party, unfortunately, the impression the Council is giving at times, is one of unnecessary secrecy.

I realise this is a busy time for the Clerk and maybe a member of the Finance Committee would be able to help in clarifying some of the above. I would be grateful for a response well in advance of the December PC meeting. Thank you for your help in these matters.

Kind regards

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