



**Minutes of the Extra Ordinary Meeting of Lapley, Stretton & Wheaton Aston Parish Council held on Tuesday 21st July 2020 held virtually via Zoom conferencing system**

**Remotely in attendance:**

Cllr T Noblett	Wheaton Aston (Chairman)
Cllr W Millington	Wheaton Aston (Vice Chairman)
Cllr Sue Whittingham	Wheaton Aston
Cllr R Nelson	Wheaton Aston
Cllr A Anderson	Stretton
Cllr M Smith	Wheaton Aston
Cllr S Whittingham	Wheaton Aston
Cllr V Renfrew	Lapley
Cllr B Cross	Wheaton Aston
Cllr. M. Griffiths	Lapley

**Also in Attendance:**

Mrs A Watson	Parish Clerk
Mrs K Daker	Assistant Parish Clerk
Cllr M Sutton	Staffordshire County Council
21 members of the public	

**Apologies:**

Cllr E Dadd	Stretton
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**Absent:**

**37. To consider apologies**

Apologies and reasons of absence were accepted from Cllr E Dadd

**38. Declaration of Interest/Dispensation**

Nothing to declare

**39. Office relocation**

**The following statement was read out by the Chairman:**

*The meeting has been called to discuss the moving of the offices from Codsall to the Parish Clerks residence. A groundswell of opinions, some incorrect, have been received by the Councillors of which the majority are against this move.*

*I will set out below the thinking behind the proposed move.*

*Before I do please remember that the Parish Clerk is employed by the Council to guide the Council through the multitude of regulations that are on the Statute Books and does not set out to run the Council or make decisions for the Council. She is an employee for the Council.*

*We understand a letter has been circulated to some areas of the parish. Unfortunately, the letter is not signed so we cannot contact the person concerned. Also as this person did not contact us before issuing the letter its contents are misleading and inaccurate and sadly it raises a concern for us as personal details relating to the clerk have been shared.*

*Before the COVID outbreak the pc was considering a change of working venue for the Parish Clerk for the following reasons:*

- 1. She is currently based at SSC offices in Codsall where the PC pay rent, and business rates totalling over £3,000 per annum.*
- 2. SSC are refurbishing their offices over the next 18 months and we had been told the office would have to be moved to another office costing nearly £4,000 pa.*
- 3. So there was consideration taking place about the Clerk working from home but attending the hub at the SSC Codsall office at least once a week and the PC post still being delivered to Codsall. And, like at present, if any residents wanted to meet with the Clerk she will be available at Codsall or in the village.*
- 4. As the Clerk was contracted to work at a designated office this would be a change to her contract and therefore the PC would, as a responsible employer, consider other offices/premises for the Clerk that would be less costly than renting an expensive office at SSC business hub, but would have enough space for filing cabinets, printer, desk and chair required to enable the clerk to undertake her role. We have to be mindful of security and GDPR and obviously lockable cabinets are required. All this was under consideration before COVID caused lockdown and the PC asked the Clerk to work from home.*

*The Clerk has worked from Codsall as her base for over 4 years very successfully. She is always available for councillors and residents via email, phone or meetings at Codsall SSC when their hub is open, or in any of the villages. This will not change in any way. In fact since lockdown the use of zoom has meant more accessibility.*

*The Clerk does not have space at her home for an office because of her family circumstances. She has been working from her bedroom which is obviously not ideal for anyone and not a permanent solution.*

*The clerk has been unable to access the office at Codsall because it has been closed, whilst it is now reopening there is limited access and it will mean a mixture of homeworking and office working for the foreseeable future. We were originally told our office at Codsall would need to be vacated in November for the refurb project. This has now been put on hold until next summer. However our lease runs out in January and therefore a decision needs to be made.*

*It was therefore decided to look at the cost of providing a home office for the Clerk to be installed in her garden, and as her contract of employment states it is an office based position, it is the PC who have approached the clerk to consider working from home. Obviously several quotations have to be considered and this is what the PC have been doing. The quotations range from nearly £10,000 to £20,000 with all the work involved in setting up the office. Obviously we would not be choosing a £20,000 quote but it has to be declared.*

*The PC took advice from the SLCC (Society of Local Council Clerks) and were advised that the purchase of a home office is an appropriate solution. A contract would be put in place to ensure the PC is protected should the clerk change roles and leave.*

*The cost of renting the office at Codsall would, in 3 years, cover the cost of purchasing a home office and after that time the PC would be saving rental money. The PC would of course pay towards the cost of electricity and broadband as employers who have home workers would normally do and there would be extra mileage cost to the PC as with any home worker.*

*The building would be insured and if the clerk was to terminate her employment with the council on a determined timescale, there would be an agreed schedule of payment for the clerk to reimburse the council for the depreciated, valued, cost of the home office.*

*If the clerk were to move house it would be up to her to bear the cost of moving the home office or reimbursing the PC.*

*If the clerk was off long term sick, there is already an arrangement with another clerk to stand in.*

*This is to be considered to be a cost saving exercise for the PC in the long term and these cost savings can then be used in the Parish for the benefit of residents.*

*I hope this information helps you to understand why we are considering this option. The PC obviously has to be very mindful of costs and also has to think of the wellbeing of their staff and councillors and residents. The PC has debated this matter over several months and does not take any decision it makes lightly and no decision has yet been made. However, the overwhelming opinion from the many emails received are of the opinion that the Parish Clerk should be housed in an office anywhere but not in the footprint of the Parish Clerks home. The offices at Codsall, when available, should serve the Councils purpose but bear in mind that the next year's precept may be adjusted to cover for the increased costs.*

Alternative local locations for a suitable office base have been investigated and deemed unsuitable. From the objections received it appears that many residents were not aware that the Parish Council office resides in Codsall. The Clerk has been based in Codsall for over four years and has been available for meetings at either Codsall or in the parish at the village hall or on site

**Councillors were asked to respond to the following questions:**

**Question one:**

**Does the council wish to redact the decision made (minute ref 34, 2/7/2020) to move to permanent homeworking from a rented office in view of the objections received from residents?**

**Yes- 82%                  No- 18%**

**Question Two:**

**Does the council wish for the Parish Council Office to remain in South Staffs Business Hub, Codsall?**

**Yes-82%                  No- 18%**

**Resolved:** The Parish Council office will remain in rented accommodation at South Staffs Business Hub in Codsall. The rental cost is to be confirmed dependent upon office availability. Previously the office that the PC had been offered is £287.50 p.c.m. plus business rates.

Councillors are in agreement that the suggestion to move to homeworking was cost effective and savings made could have been used to reduce the precept or provide better services in the Parish however it is essential that concerns raised on any matter are heard and evaluated.

Many councillors expressed concern and dismay that the correct information was not sought and both councillors and employees received unpleasant correspondence and comments on social media on the matter.

It was commented that the decision to investigate working from a home office was reached democratically in several public meetings. Public comments throughout this process would have been an asset.

**Cllr Noblett invited residents to speak**

It was noted that it is difficult to keep informed with PC business and an honest answer was given to how much had been noted regarding the Council's activity over the past year. Parishioners would like to raise the PC profile and engage more, this would be welcomed by the PC. More communication between PC and parishioners would result in a constructive working relationship.

The PC is more accessible with the use of Zoom and the attendance this evening reflects this. Different avenues of engagement will be explored. Many objections to the proposed set up of homeworking are based on how it would be managed and if it is financially viable. A legal agreement would have been implemented to outline the expectation of both the Clerk and PC and protect both parties.

The Council were acknowledged for their intention to save on rent, cost saving exercises are being explored across many sectors.

It was confirmed that there is an action plan in place with the Assistant Clerk and a locum Clerk in the long term absence of the Clerk and Assistant Clerk for business continuity purposes.  
 It was requested to review this situation and appraise all alternatives at regular intervals.

**40. Date of next meeting:** Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> September at 7pm via Zoom conferencing systems

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89510371211?pwd=dGhPMklhL0R0ZDhVVDVDRjQS9BMGpqQT09>

**Meeting closed 7.53pm**

Signed..... Chairman.....

**Council Attendance**

Date	RN	BC	MS	WM	TN	SW	SueW	ED	AA	VR	MG	Total Attendance
28/5	X	Ap	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Ap	Ap	8/11
2/7	X	Ap	X	X	X	X	X	Ap	X	X	Ap	8/11
21/7	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Ap	X	X	X	10/11