

THE CLERK'S COLUMN

April 2011

Spring

It's not just the lambs and hares that start jumping about at this time of year; the Powers that Be suddenly seem to realise that they haven't given local councils enough to do recently, so they start behaving as if Councillors and Clerks need to be bounced out of hibernation. So April showers of statutory obligations rattle down from above, mostly with deadlines to be met before the roses are in bloom.

Annual Assembly

By law, this has to be held between March and June, the idea being to give parishioners a chance to hear County, Borough and Parish Councillors give an account of what they have done, or what they have failed to do, over the previous year. At the same time, representatives of the voluntary parish organisations can report on their activities. These can be quite crowded and stormy affairs if things have been going wrong, so, from the peaceful atmosphere and the amount of elbow-room in the War Memorial Hall on 25th March it seems fair to assume that your representatives are getting things more or less right.

Audit

The Audit Commission have been quietly shortening the deadlines for delivering final accounts. So many a Clerk will be missing out on Spring sunshine because there's a difference of 24p every time they add up a column of figures, while everybody else's gardens are blue with the smoke of mowers' exhausts or with the language of those whose mowers won't start. The Commission usually sneaks in an extra requirement or two, but this time there is a welcome relaxation of one of the bits of scrutiny; we no longer have to fill in a 4-page form about whether we think our own local auditor is any good at his job.

Reviews

That relaxation made us think that at last the Government was reducing the burdens imposed by the "nanny state" and was willing to trust the professionals to get on with their jobs. Not yet. The Council is still required, before the end of May every year, to review all sorts of things and to demonstrate that we have done it. So your Councillors have been given a wadge of homework, having to revise Standing Orders, Code of Conduct, Financial Regulations, Insurance Cover, Risk Assessments, Contracts of Employment and Cemetery Fees. And so on.

Equality

Well, they may have removed one obligation, but they have come up with a whopping new one – a legacy from Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, which came into force on 6th April. This defines "Protected Characteristics" against which it is unlawful to discriminate and on which therefore one must not risk offering any comment, however difficult it may be to remain poker-faced. We now have a legal duty to people with these characteristics to:

- (a) eliminate discrimination, harassment or victimisation of such persons
- (b) advance equality of opportunity between such persons and those without such characteristics
- (c) foster good relations between those with, and those without, such characteristics
- (d) remove or minimise any disadvantages such persons might suffer
- (e) take steps to meet any of the needs of such persons which are different from those without the characteristics
- (f) encourage such persons to participate in public life or in any activity in which participation by such persons is disproportionately low.

Oh, I nearly forgot: the Protected Characteristics are defined as: Age; Disability; Gender Re-assignment; Pregnancy and Maternity; Race; Religion or Belief; Sex; Sexual Orientation.

And that's not all. We also have to publish

(a) by 31 July 2011 sufficient information to demonstrate that we have complied with the above, and thereafter at least annually.

(b) information on the effect our policies and practices have had on persons with Protected Characteristics

(c) before April 2012 (Springtime again) and thereafter at no more than 4-yearly intervals a statement of our equality objectives and

(d) details of the "engagement undertaken in developing" these objectives.

In view of the legal requirement to publish, the Chairman and Clerk would welcome, from any quarter, suggestions for the most concise wording of these pronouncements.

Five and Twenty Firemen

Do you remember a Nursery Rhyme, which must have meant something when it was written: *Four and twenty Tailors went to catch a Snail*

The best Man among them durst not touch her Tail...?

You might have thought that the Three Light-bulb-changing Operatives of Stoke City took the biscuit (See February's Column) but the Daily Telegraph recently ran an ElfnSafety story as a modern version of the nursery rhyme, and it wasn't printed on April 1st – they dealt with that with a story about bats causing losses of billions of pounds by bumping into wind-turbines.

Apparently when a cat was stranded on a roof in Suffolk the local Fire and Rescue Service despatched five appliances and 25 firemen at a cost estimated at £10,000. Rules about "working at a height" required a turntable crew, three crews trained in working at heights and another crew of part-timers. The cat had the last laugh, because as soon as a fireman on a ladder got near her, she jumped to safety with eight lives to spare. And the building was only two stories high.

Elections

Another feature of the Spring bonanza is the election season. On 5th May the War Memorial Hall turns into a Polling Station. Oh yes, we're being asked to vote nationally on whether we want AV or not (whether we understand it or not), but at the local level the other votes – for Borough and Parish Councillors – are more important. As it happens, there are fewer candidates than vacancies on the Parish Council, so there will not be a poll for Parish Councillors and all those standing will continue in office; however, it has to be understood that this doesn't mean that they are *unelected*; it means that they are *elected unopposed*, so their democratic credentials are no different from those elected in a contested poll. With the resignation of Cllr Dudley Alleway, who was warmly thanked for his four years of loyal service to the Council by the Chairman and all present at the April meeting, there will be one vacancy to be filled by co-option.

So, if any residents wish to put their names forward as candidates for co-option to the Parish Council they are very welcome to contact the Chairman or the Clerk as soon as possible.

It is of vital importance to the Parish to have devoted and energetic Borough Councillors, but we can only enjoy their services if we turn out and elect them; low turn-outs are not good news. In some places, like Australia, voting is compulsory, though, judging from noises from Down Under, this does nothing to increase the popularity of their Governments. The ancient Greeks are famous for having invented democracy, and they had nothing but scorn for those who failed to vote and participate in *public* life; they derisively called them *private citizens* and their word for them in their own language was *idiot*.

PARISH COUNCIL MEETING 7th April 2011

Briefly, here is a selection of some of the proceedings. More details can be found in the Minutes.

Planning

The village Conservation Area does contain some curiosities. One is the exclusion of the larger part of the Water Meadows; another is the inclusion of both sides of Dunkirt Lane, where all the houses on the south-eastern side are modern. However, as its name implies, a conservation area exists to prevent any drastic alterations to the scene; so a proposal to build a sizeable extension to one of the modern dwellings was turned down by Test Valley.

This Council is also insistent on the observance by architects of the Village Design Statement, which has to be taken into consideration by the Planning Service. Several recent applications for development of sites on Cattle Lane have involved interesting designs which, like the one which is the subject of an application at Two Rivers in Cattle Lane, would deserve critical acclaim if they were built somewhere else. But this village does not want important sites to provide demonstrations of architectural virtuosity or the latest ecological technology. This time Councillors were asked to look at the design of a lime-rendered house with one steep-pitched roof area, not hipped like most in the neighbourhood (apart from one where the roof had once been thatched), and two heavy flat-roofed areas topped with green sedum on each side of a cubic conservatory. The fact that the walls would be lime-rendered and the pitched roof slated was not enough to persuade Councillors to agree with the applicant's claim that this was "sensitive and respectful towards its context." So we have asked the Borough planners for a polite request to return to the drawing-board.

Traffic

We're stuck with diversions until after the end of May, which has only served to underline the inadequacy of Cattle Lane for anything much wider than a dairy cow, let alone massive lorries and, now, buses. Cllr Maureen Flood had been in touch with the Operations Director at Andover Bus Station after receiving numerous complaints over the Post Office counter; he has asked for reports of any incidents of bad road manners by his drivers. It is a worrying fact that there is no speed limit between the bottom of Duck Street and Monxton Road. So anyone, including unfortunately drivers of buses, white vans and "Chelsea Tractors," is at liberty to drive there at 60mph. And they do.

However, Cllr Flood brought some good news. Cattle Lane won't now crumble away and float off into the water meadows, because Hampshire Highways have undertaken to include the lane in next year's "Restoration Project."

We have also had a meeting with Hampshire Highways about traffic calming installations for the road between St.John's Cross and Bulbery, with encouraging results, though no promises yet.

Meeting times.

A majority of Councillors would be happier with a later start for meetings. The Clerk, who, despite his address is not an owl, doesn't have a vote, so future meetings will start at 7 p.m. The Chairman will bring his gavel, with the aim of finishing by 9 p.m. and no-one is to mention airborne porkers.

Quite a lot of other important items came up; they are all in the Minutes for those who want to know. Cllr Dudley Alleway will be sorely missed at the next meeting, which will be

- (a) the statutory AGM, with a whole lot of formalities to get through
- (b) at 7 p.m.
- (c) the 2nd Thursday, May 12th
- (d) in the Pavilion.

Adrian Stokes, Clerk