

BISHOPSTONE VILLAGE WEBSITE AND THE ACCESSIBILITY REGULATIONS – BPC(14)21

Introduction

1. This paper seeks the agreement of the Parish Council to:
 - (a) take over formal responsibility for the village website;
 - (b) meet the cost of transferring the hosting of the website to a new provider; and
 - (c) meet future annual hosting subscriptions.

Background

2. The village website (www.bishopstone-salisbury.co.uk) has been around in its current format for the last ten years. It is now looking a bit tired by comparison with other sites and is in need of a refresh. It is provided on a platform hosted by an American company called Weebly. The site was set up by a group of volunteers (Toby Mills, Roger Stockton and myself). It is largely, now, managed by me, acting in a private capacity, and for the last few years I have paid the annual subscription costs from my own pocket. The reason for these arrangements is set out below.

3. In 2018 regulations were introduced making it a requirement that all websites owned by parish councils are compliant with certain accessibility standards. This means that a website (and the information published on it) is accessible to all users, specifically for those with disabilities or impairments that require the use of assistive technology. The website must meet the needs of those users with disabilities that include, but not limited to:

- impaired vision
- motor difficulties
- cognitive impairments
- learning disabilities
- deafness or impaired hearing

4. Websites must be published in a way that allows users, including those using technology such as screen readers, to access the information on the page. This includes the text, files and documents published on it. The website must be able to have its text enlarged and be sufficiently clear, have a good level of colour and contrast and a page layout and navigation that does not present any barriers for users with disabilities.

Situation in Bishopstone

5. The Bishopstone village website does not comply with the above regulations. I have had it in mind that, if the matter was ever raised, I would argue that it is not a parish council website but a village website and the accessibility regulations do not apply. However, it is true that the parish council has a number of pages on the website, which contain, amongst other things, information such as that on the annual return on expenditure which the council is required by law to publish on a website. In order to

maintain that the site is independent of the parish council I have, since 2018, paid the annual fee to the hosting platform from my own pocket (£50.00), rather than having it paid by the parish council.

6. Whether the excuse that it is not a parish council website would stand up if we were challenged I don't know – it might be argued that at least the parish council pages should comply with the regulations. One option would be for the Parish Council to set up its own website, separate from the rest of the village activity, and for that to be compliant with the regulations. I think that this would be a backward step. Also, leaving aside the question of regulatory compliance, in principle it must be right that all the information carried on the village website, both related to the parish council and other material, is accessible to all. **I therefore think that we should continue with a single village website and that this should be made compliant with the regulations.**

Way forward

7. I consider that the village website remains a valuable asset. Other social media platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp) now play a valuable role in communicating information to village residents and more widely. However, the website continues to play an important function as a source of material that can be consulted at any time. It is also much used by those from outside the village, including visitors to the area, to access information about the village.

8. I had started to review the website and was wondering what to do about the accessibility issue. There is no doubt that converting all the material on the current website to make it compatible with the regulations would be a major exercise and is way beyond my own expertise. I then discovered a company called TEEC, based in Newbury, who help parish councils migrate their websites to a format and presentation that is compliant with the accessibility regulations. This would, simultaneously, produce a fresh and more up to date looking website such as I wanted to achieve. For an annual subscription they will also take over hosting the website (currently done by Weebly based in San Fransisco) – which would deliver a number of useful back up services. The one-off cost for the migration would be approx £1,200 (inc vat) and the annual hosting fee would be £120 (compared with the £50 I pay Weebly). A copy of their proposal is attached at Annex A and I will show examples of their websites at the meeting.

9. I am happy to continue, for the present, to manage the website - but having the Council take over formal responsibility does not necessarily mean that the Clerk has to manage the website. This role should be kept separate and can be taken on by someone else in future if desired.

Consideration

10. I have consulted both Toby Mills and Roger Stockton about the TEEC proposal. They helped set up the website in its current format ten years ago and are currently leading the FTTP project. Both supported the change. Toby's comments were:

“The village website has grown massively, is looking a little tired and could do with a good makeover. In addition to making it accessible by the visually-impaired it also needs to work on mobile phones and small tablets. We could do this ourselves but it would take quite a lot of work and is beyond my capability.

I looked at the proposal from TEEC and I too think it is good value. They would get us back to a good looking, easy to use website for a pretty reasonable cost and the annual charge is also affordable. Looks like they will then give you an easy to use way of editing it and will provide much better support than Weebly will. Weebly has been good but it is now time to move on.

If the Parish Council will take all this on then that must be a bonus for the village....

My recommendation is go with TEEC”.

Recommendation

10. I am still in discussion with TEEC on a number of detailed issues and I will report further at the meeting. Subject to the outcome of those discussions I should like to recommend that:

- (i) the website should continue and remain as a single entity covering all the village interests;
- (ii) the Parish Council takes over formal responsibility for the website, meets the cost of transferring the hosting of the website to a new provider (TEEC); and meets future annual hosting subscriptions.

Mike Ash
Clerk
November 2021