

The D&H Parish Council Website

In the minutes of the meeting of 28th January 2016, Appendix 1B, the following was recorded and confirmed by the parish council at their subsequent meeting:

“with regard to the website: Mr Walsh assumes that our own website is in direct competition with his. This is not the case. The new transparency rules have made it mandatory for parish councils to display their information on a website so that it can be easily accessed by all members of the public.”

Presumably advice on the transparency rules was given by the clerk who should know about these things.

However, the Research Department at EdWeb Towers decided to look into the final sentence to see how correct this was by looking at the relevant legislation and seeing if other parish councils in South Gloucestershire Council area had interpreted this legislation in the same way as ours.

The Legislation

The relevant legislation is The Transparency Code for Smaller Authorities updated 27 March 2015. Part 3 section 32 states that:

“data and information specified in this Code must be published on a website which is publicly accessible free of charge.”

They give an example of one way of achieving this - using the smaller authority's or local authority's website. It does not specify that the website has to be smaller authority's own website, only that the website has to be *“publicly accessible free of charge.”* Thus, the Dyrham and Hinton community website would have qualified as a “platform” for PC information. There is no stipulation that the data has to be on the public body's website to ensure it is preserved, as stated by D&H PC, as the information will be on the PC's computer anyway and it can be accessed by request or by a Freedom of Information application. So, the interpretation of this Act by D&H PC seems to have been wrong.

Transparency

I'm sure everyone will agree with transparency in the affairs of public bodies. It should be easy for parishioners to find out what's going on. In our parish, there are noticeboards, emailed agendas and minutes sent to some parishioners - and two websites to achieve this. However, our parish council has refused to send the community website, or even myself as a parishioner, its agendas and minutes. This is hardly in the spirit of transparency.

Another requirement of transparency is the publication of agendas well before a meeting. However, the recent PC meeting was held without the publication of an agenda.

Compliance with the Legislation

Parish Councils have now had 20 months to put this legislation into practise. Our staff surveyed their compliance:

There are 40 PCs in South Gloucestershire. 23 have websites and **17** don't i.e. more than half don't. What's relevant to this website's (D&H.com) case is that of the 17 that don't have their own website, **11** make use of the community website in their parish to publish parish council information. So, our PC could have continued using dyrhamandhinton.com

So, not many take the legislation as seriously as our clerk, nor does it seem other PCs have interpreted the rules as their having to have their own website and not use the community website.

Competition

We are a small community of about 250 persons, not all able to access the web. You may well ask why we need a second website to convey PC information to the parishioners and at expense to ratepayers.

Readers may not understand Google ratings. Dyrhamandhinton.com (this website) by virtue of its wide readership (all round the world, not just in D&H) e.g over 9000 page hits in the last 7 months and 81,000 since it started 5 ½ years ago, has ridden to the top of Google search if you put in “dyrham and hinton”. Webmasters are very sensitive about their ratings as it is a measure of their success. Mysteriously, the PC new comer (dyrhamandhinton.org) now appears as no 2 or 3 after only 12 months. So how has it happened?

I had to buy the address “dyrhamandhinton.com” and “dyrhamandhinton.co.uk” in order to use it. By using my phrase “dyrhamandhinton” in the parish council’s address – dyrhamandhinton.org, it may have caused Google to consider it the same as the .com version and give an equal rating. Could this confusion have been avoided. Yes, by thinking up a different name or putting even “pc” in their title. What have other local PCs done?

Of the 23 PCs that have a website, 19 put either “parishcouncil” or “pc” in their address. Only D&H and 3 others don’t. Of these 3, only one has a community website as well, and the latter website address does not have its parish name in it anyway. So, D&H PC website is the only one in South Gloucestershire that shares (or has taken, in this case) the address of its community website. A friendly group would either think of something different or at least ask the webmaster of the existing website for his permission, which they didn’t. Indeed, at no stage did D&H PC even mention to me that they were having their own website. I had to read it in their minutes.

Conclusion: I’ll leave it to you to draw your own