

## **Dyrham and Hinton's Two Websites: [Dyrhamandhinton.com](http://www.dyrhamandhinton.com) and [Dyrhamandhinton.org](http://www.dyrhamandhinton.org)**

Residents will no doubt be aware there are now two websites for Dyrham and Hinton – the original community website, [www.dyrhamandhinton.com](http://www.dyrhamandhinton.com) and the parish council's new website, [www.dyrhamandhinton.org](http://www.dyrhamandhinton.org). Like me, you may well wonder why we need two websites for a community of about 130 households and 260 persons over 16.

Formerly, the community website, which has had 70,000 page hits in its five years of life – so, reasonably well viewed - provided pages for the use of the parish council free of charge. This arrangement worked well until last year.

In September 2015, the PC surprised me by proposing their own website. I must admit to being very hurt by this decision and by the way it was implemented as I had put a lot of time and resources into the community website especially the parish council pages. I have tried to find some explanation for their decision. The chair told me:

1. *Residents had spoken to her about various shortcomings of the Dyrham and Hinton website.*

No resident had contacted me with a criticism since I started the website, indeed I have had nothing but compliments even from her and her council up to then. I asked if I could contact these residents and discover what they would like to have improved, but the clerk refused to contact them on my behalf, so I don't know if the chair's statement is true.

2. *There had been several instances of either delays putting PC items on or taking them off.*

So I asked the clerk to supply me a list of occasions where there were delays putting items on or taking them off so I could look into them. She did not reply.

As far as I am aware, there were only two occasions where there were delays in putting items on and none of taking them off. Once, I was slow in publishing a message about potholes in Dyrham (hardly a hanging offence!) and another time I was in the High Arctic, 800 miles from the North Pole, where the Internet is not available.

I think the actual reason for the split was that the community website had embarrassed the PC by drawing residents' attention to a new rule the PC had introduced that no resident was allowed to contact a councillor by email. There is no official published support for their rule – (see (1) below) and no neighbouring council has such a rule. Even our clerk's council, Dodington, where she is chair, publishes councillors' email addresses, presumably for residents to contact them.

In December 2014 Transparency rules were introduced and in late 2015, new requirements of Local Government Transparency in England came into force (see (2) below.)

This law requires parish councils to publish various data sets so that residents can see all is above board. However, nowhere does it require small councils to

have their own websites only that the data should be available to the public - quote "The data and information specified in this Code must be published on a website which is publicly accessible free of charge". That is the only reference to websites.

So the requirements of this bill could have been fulfilled by the existing website and for free, thereby avoiding a charge on those who pay council and national tax (see (3) below).

I feel by having two websites probably makes the necessary information less available and so defeats the aim of this bill as residents are more likely to access the community website on a regular basis and now will have to look at a second to find out if their council is acting lawfully.

If the purpose of the Transparency rules was to make sure the public was better informed about their local councils, surely that is best achieved by increasing the opportunities for the public to access this information? Instead, our PC has refused to send this website copies of the minutes and agendas. Now I have to take photographs of these documents on the PC's notice board to publish on the community website! I question whether this is in the spirit of transparency and whether the decision to start an alternative website was in part an act of hostility to me and the website I run. I leave it to residents to make their own decision.

I think also the choice of the PC's website address was hostile as it is so similar to the community website's and gains them my Google rating. Other parish councils have, in my view, correctly chosen to include "pc" after the name of their parish in their website address e.g. [www.dodingtonpc.com](http://www.dodingtonpc.com).

I think the PC's behaviour in this matter has been regrettable, particularly as they summarily dismissed my complaint about this. After some research, I discovered PCs are immune to complaint! According to a Parliamentary briefing paper (4) they can do anything they like as long as it is legal. It suggests residents who have any other type of complaint have no recourse except at the next election and at Open meetings. The next Open meeting of our PC is on the 28th April.

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**Notes:**

**(1) Official Guidance on Contacting Councillors**

There is no mention in the papers below that residents can or should be prevented from contacting councillors by email, in fact quite the opposite:

1. National Association of Local Councils - "The Good Councillors' Guide" and "All about Local Councils"
2. "Governance Toolkit for Parish and Town Councils":  
<https://www.scams.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Parish%20Toolkit%20April%202009.pdf> )

**(2) Transparency Rules for Parish Councils:**

These are given in:

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/388541/Transparency Code for Smaller Authorities.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/388541/Transparency_Code_for_Smaller_Authorities.pdf)

**(3) Funding for the PC's Website:**

Residents' council tax has been spent on setting up, training the already overworked staff member and running their website. I note the Council Tax apportioned to PCs has increased by 3.2% this year. The PC has also got a grant from the National Association of Local Authorities - a taxpayer-funded body.

**(4) Parliamentary Briefing Paper**

<http://www.nalc.gov.uk/library/our-work/1864-parliamentary-briefing-paper-2/file> (page 15, Section 5)