

West Rainton Parish Council - 21 December 2017

Item 11: Complaint from a Parishioner re cemetery policy

Report of G Keedy, Project Officer

1) Background

A parishioner has a long outstanding complaint (since December 2005) against the Parish Council relating to a Cemetery policy issue which he regards as having been unlawfully adopted (ie. possible discrepancy between summons and minutes in contravention of LGA 1972); applied inconsistently and unfairly.

This relates specifically to the Parish Council's policy not to allow the reserving and purchasing of grave plots for future use and a dispute about regulations relating to memorial headstones. Associated minute extracts are shown in appendices 1 and 2.

He has associated complaints pertaining to alleged inappropriate attitude and behaviours adopted towards him by the Parish Council at that time.

2) Findings

The complaints have been investigated as far as practicable by Project Officer.

A combination of factors has made it difficult to fully establish the sequence and full nature of events including; the passage of time, incomplete or unavailable Parish Council records and the inability to now interview key people involved at the time.

Throughout the long history of this complaint, the parishioner has, at various times been in separate correspondence with the Parish Council and their MP. Additionally, complaints were made against individual councillors serving in the mid-late 2000's to the Standards Board for England (abolished in 2012).

The complainant has provided some documentation to Project Officer which provides insight. Documentation held by Parish Council supports that the complaints remain unresolved.

What is clear is that the complaint has not been concluded satisfactorily after many years and consequently the parishioner understandably remains dissatisfied.

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3) Recommendations

The lack of a conclusion to date has undoubtedly caused ongoing distress to the parishioner and their immediate family.

There are indications that Parish Council governance arrangements may, historically, not have been as robust when compared with current practice.

Customer service has moved on significantly in recent years and there is now a marked difference in the Parish Council's approach to community and resident engagement.

Whilst for the reasons outlined in section 2 above, it has not been possible to provide definitive answers to the many facets of this case, the Project Officer is of the view that on the balance of probabilities, the core of the Parishioner's complaints are legitimate.

In reality, the policy issues as they affected the parishioner at the time cannot now be changed.

However, Parish Council is in a position to recognise the likelihood of previous shortfalls in governance and customer service as they pertain to this case; and the affects these have had upon the complainant and their family over a prolonged period.

Accordingly, Parish Council is requested to consider making a formal written apology, acknowledging the distress caused and providing assurances of robustness in current governance.

Furthermore, Parish Council is asked to address the policy issues raised by way of inclusion as an agenda item for consideration at the January 2018 meeting.

It is believed that these actions may be sufficient to satisfy the complainant and bring this matter to a conclusion for the benefit of the parishioner and the Parish Council.