

Response to Cllr Streatfeild – 3rd February 2022

Good evening, ladies & gentlemen. Most of you hopefully know who I am, but for those who don't, I'm Pete Sargent and from May 2015 to May 2021 I was Chair of the Parish Council.

This meeting has been called following publication of an 'open letter' by Cllr Streatfeild on social media. In this he makes allegations about myself and the Council to which I think I should have a right to reply. He states that he has written evidence to back his claims but has failed to produce it when asked.

He states twice that no bank reconciliations have taken place for a year. I personally oversaw the monthly reconciliations up until May last year and these are in the Council's account files. These are one of the first things the auditor asks to see when the end of year accounts are submitted in each April.

He states that the Council are in financial trouble. There has been some unanticipated expenditure during this year but based on the budget forecast recently published on the Council's website they should still have about £115,000 available to spend at the end of March. This is over a years' worth of precept. This not a crisis but will simply require prudent management over the next few years.

He claims that I have refused to give financial information to himself and to Jacqui Harding when she was Chair. He has only once asked me for information and that was by text. When I replied stating that the request should come from the Chair, I heard nothing more. To my knowledge I have never refused any requests for information from Mrs Harding during her time in office.

He alleges that myself and Mr Harrington-Lowe often acted in a 'maverick' fashion. The dictionary defines maverick as a 'determined individualist'. I put my hand up to this. I'm a project manager and believe in making things happen rather than just constantly talking about them. I pulled together and led the team of volunteers who installed the playground slide, the team who created the new library and the team who have pulled the Village Hall back from the brink. Together with Mr Harrington-Lowe, I successfully negotiated the purchase of St Francis Fields for the village. Actions I feel speak louder than words.

He suggests that the architect who attended our meeting with the Blue Cross back in 2018 charged a fee for his services. Mr Rob Pollard gave his services pro-bono as he was a keen supporter of the project. However, we did buy him a beer afterwards as a thank you.

Cllr Streatfeild states that there was no need to create the Community Interest Company, as the Council could run St Francis Fields themselves if they held a 'Certificate of Competency'. However, at no point over the past four years has the Council been able to fulfil the necessary legal criteria for this, and frankly it is unlikely to do so any time soon, so his argument holds no water.

He states that the current directors of the CIC were not democratically elected. The same applies to the members of the present Council who were either 'elected unopposed' in 2019 or have been subsequently co-opted as he was.

He states that myself and two of the CIC directors are members of the Bonfire Society. Quite correct, but what that has to do with anything I fail to see. The original directors of the CIC all volunteered their services at the open days. I did not choose them, they chose themselves. The Bonfire Society were not involved in any way at all.

When Lauren Sapsted sent in her written offer asking to lease the stables, I circulated it the same day to all Councillors, all of whom responded positively apart from Cllr Farmer. The subsequent lease was negotiated by a solicitor with the help of a land agent, and they suggested that the legal fees of £3,000 should be shared. I proposed this to Ms Sapsted and we agreed to spread her contribution over the two year period of the lease. I sent an email to all Councillors that same day clearly stating this, well before the lease was signed. Anything Councillors may have read on Facebook will not have originated from me because I don't use social media. There is no loan of £3,000 outstanding and no monies have ever been advanced to her to my knowledge. The situation with the business rates has proved complicated, but I'm led to understand that this is being resolved.

The Council has a 'duty of care' to its tenants. Councillors claiming publicly that a tenant owes money lays the Council wide open to potential legal action.

Regarding St Francis Fields, the Council has always stated that it would attempt to build some affordable rental properties, for which purpose it will require someone to build them. He suggests that I have been negotiating with a builder with the intention of selling off some of the land for a commercial housing development and recommending that Council consider this. I did indeed talk to a local developer, but at no point did I suggest or agree to selling any part of the site for commercial purposes.

He states that whilst Chair I initiated works on St Francis Fields without going through the proper procurement processes and that unexpected

invoices kept repeatedly appearing, yet he gives no detail to back this statement.

At their meeting last April, Council approved the proposal to set up a pop-up pub. As soon as lockdown lifted, the group of six who were organising this (of whom I was one) took the initial financial risks to get it up and running. There were essential electrical works required for safety reasons and so I booked the approved contractor and paid him. This happened after I had left the Council. I assumed that in due time I would be refunded from the pub profits, however the CIC felt that the works constituted improvements to the buildings and that the Council should pay instead. The pub incidentally was a great success and Mr Streatfeild was one of the customers!

He states that I was 'unexpectedly forced to stand down'. This is far from the truth. I advised Council in the previous Autumn that my circumstances were changing following the death of my father and that I might not be able to continue to reside in the village. I confirmed this at last February's meeting and stated I would wait until the new Clerk was in post and settled in. I stood down in May.

Regarding the future use of the stables, Cllr Farmer has repeatedly made it clear that she wishes to run a DIY livery. Mr Streatfeild claims that no Councillor would benefit financially from this scheme, yet in Cllr Farmer's proposal put forward a couple of years ago she clearly states that if customers wanted 'full livery' she would be happy to provide this service for £100 per week.

Cllr Streatfeild's 'open letter' is full of errors and tries to twist the facts. He claims to have written evidence to back up his claims yet chooses not to make this public. He states that there are serious tensions within the Council, ignoring the fact that he is the root cause of most of them. He is playing cheap politics and appears to be a man without shame.

In my opinion his actions are bringing the Council into disrepute, and he is not fit to act as a representative for Northiam residents. He should do the decent thing and stand down.

Pete Sargent – 3rd February 2022