

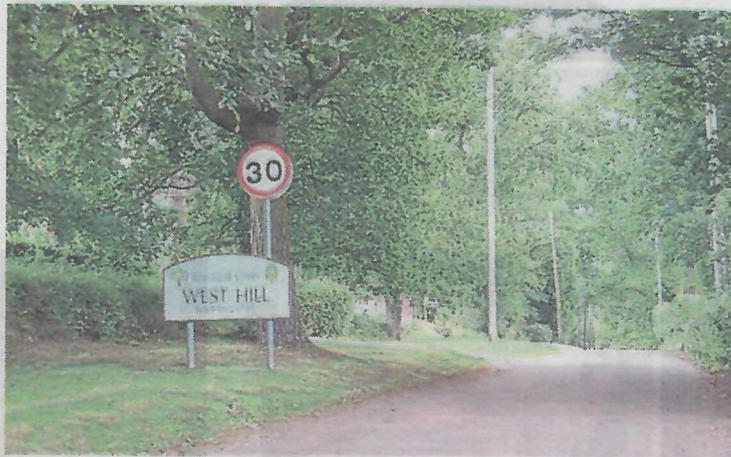
Parish clerk resigns in councillor dispute

by **Philippa Davies**
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THE clerk of West Hill Parish Council has resigned after saying she was being bombarded with 'unacceptable' correspondence from a local resident who then became a councillor.

Anne Oliver said she had been spending a 'disproportionate and ever-increasing amount of time' responding to Cllr Peter Bennett's communications and she could not continue in her role.

Extracts from her resignation letter are published on the parish council's website. In it she describes how, since 2019, Cllr Bennett had been sending 'unfounded' allegations and complaints about herself, the chair of the council and councillors, along with requests for information. She said his communications were 'totally unacceptable, often factually inaccurate, contradictory and frequently insulting' and demonstrated 'a lack of under-



West Hill village. Image: West Hill Village website

standing of council processes, history, powers and duties'.

Cllr Bennett has said he 'does not accept' the clerk's allegations.

The dispute began in 2019 and escalated after Peter Bennett became a member of the council in 2021. The clerk said she, the council's chair and its members have tried to respond appropriately to Cllr Bennett's communications and have

also appointed independent professionals 'at considerable cost' to settle matters, but 'the situation persists and seems wholly intractable'.

In a response provided to the *Herald*, Cllr Bennett said: "I regret the clerk's action in publishing extracts of her second resignation (the first was withdrawn) since I was elected by majority vote in November 2021. I became the only democratically

elected councillor on the council since it was formed. All other councillors are appointed by those already in post. That is what they tried to do again in 2021. More than ten voters called for an election.

"A councillor is not to be subjugated by anyone and has a duty to question, challenge and maintain the law for the benefit of the community. That is what I do. I always have properly considered the clerk's advice but it is for me to make my own decisions.

"The clerk's comments have been selected with apparent help and her allegations are not accepted. I have not seen the full letter. Most of my correspondence has been in response to hers. I will not comment on her personal attacks at this time which will be subject to outside scrutiny. I am aware of actions to generate hatred against me which will damage the community and lead to more wasteful cost which could have been prevented by the clerk and council. I ask people to keep an open mind and by all means question the council. I do hope that at least seven new candidates come

West Hill Parish Council



Mr T Lethaby
Editor, Sidmouth Herald

6th March 2023

Via email Timothy.lethaby@newsquest.co.uk

Cc Philippa.davies@newsquest.co.uk

Dear Timothy Lethaby,

Clerk resigns over 'intractable' dispute with member (1st March)

It is important that your reader's are not misled by the reported comments of Councillor Bennett of West Hill Parish Council. I seek 'droit de reponse' on behalf of the West Hill Parish Council to ensure the facts are available to your readers, and for the corrections/defence to criticism to be published in your publications.

Cllr Bennett is reported to have said,

- **I regret the Clerk's action in publishing extracts of her second resignation..."**
It is the Clerk's role to produce the draft minutes of Council meetings and add such, and associated papers, to the Council website. This is an example of Cllr Bennett failing to understand Council's proper processes which demonstrate the required transparency of local government. Further, it is important to state that the Clerk has not communicated with your paper or journalist.
- **" I became the only democratically elected Councillor on the Council since it was formed".**
At the Local Elections of 2019 six candidates applied to become Councillors and they were appointed uncontested. It would have needed at least 8 candidates to necessitate an election. Two of those Councillors are still serving members of the Parish Council.
- **"All other Councillors are appointed by those already in post"**
When a vacancy then occurs, known as a 'casual vacancy', the Returning Officer of East Devon District Council is notified and the vacancy is declared and publicly notified. At least 10 electors can then claim that a local election is held. If no election is required, then the Parish Council makes a public call for nominations and candidates are interviewed by the Council to assess for eligibility and suitability. Two Councillors have been Co-opted to the Council since Cllr Bennett has been on the Council.
- **"That is what they tried to do again in 2021"**

A casual vacancy was notified by the Parish Council to the District Council Monitoring Officer who then issued the required notices, and as a result at least 10 electors called for a local election. I was one of those electors. The Local Election with three candidates was then held.

- **“I have not seen the full letter”**
The full resignation letter of the Clerk received by the Chairman was read out at the public meeting of the Council, and Councillor Bennett was present.
- **Comments regarding the Clerk**
Councillor Bennett has been advised of the Council’s complaints and disciplinary policies, and the requirements as to the information required for any investigation to be undertaken. The Council still await this information if he wishes to pursue his allegations.
- **“most of my correspondence has been in response to hers”.**
Peter Bennett, as a resident or as a Councillor, has been the instigator of correspondence raising a wide variety of issues over several years. These are documented in the Minutes of the Council, and the Council has only been responding to that correspondence when required to do by law or in order to provide advice or clarify the individuals misunderstanding/misinterpretation of what has been said and/or of policies.
- **“I am aware of actions of general hatred against me ...”**
The West Hill Parish Council throughout its dealing with Peter Bennett, whether as a resident or as a Councillor, have been very professional and in full accord with Council’s policies and procedures and with the law. The Council have worked to resolve his issues, at cost to the local community - financially and in its ability to put resources to community issues, rather than correspondence, requests and complaints.

It is hoped that at least 8 candidates nominate themselves for the forthcoming Local Election, so that electors are given the opportunity to choose their Parish Council’s membership at an election.

Yours Sincerely,

Della Cannings QPM

Cllr Della M CANNINGS QPM

Chairman West Hill Parish Council

Email della.cannings@westhillparishcouncil.gov.uk