

17th February 2021

RE: SPC Meeting 17/02/2021 Brian Lester

To Stretton Parish Council

I would like to send you a copy of the statement which I read out at the SPC meeting on Wednesday 17th of February 2021, and as correspondence, I will expect to see it on the SPC website.

My Statement begins here.

I have yet to receive a reply to my last communication by email to Stretton Parish Council, or any verbal communication. This related to Brian Lester being removed from the Parish Council.

I have now read the document 'Review of the process leading to the disqualification of Mr Brian Lester from Stretton Parish Council' which has been posted online.

This document has been produced to – and I quote from the last SPC meeting – 'take the emotion out of it' – which I consider to be a very inappropriate way to speak about the action taken against Brian Lester.

The 3rd statement (in section Summary Position) in this report states that "Mr Lester had no access to the internet to join meetings due to Zoom". At the last meeting I pointed out that Zoom meetings can be joined on an 'audio only' basis by a landline telephone, but SPC had failed to let Mr Lester know about this. Had he known this he would have been able to attend some of the meetings, except of course when he was in hospital. In the document – Holding Remote Meetings – Last updates June 2020 – published by NALC (National Association of Local Councils) it lists various available on-line meeting platforms and says

"One factor that may affect your choice is the technology available to councillors and staff (e.g. if not everyone has a computer/laptop then you will want to pick a platform that allows individuals to join by telephone)."

<https://www.nalc.gov.uk/library/news-stories/covid19/3232-nalc-holding-remote-meetings/file>

Despite clear instructions from NALC on running virtual meetings, including councillors without the ability to connect via the internet, no attempt was made to include Brian Lester in the meetings.

However, on the second page of your report you state that

"It has only recently come to light that attendance via phone is possible on Zoom. This assumes that the Councillor should have known how this was possible."

This is a preposterous statement – how can somebody with no IT knowledge possibly know what is or is not possible in on-line conferencing software.

The report continues in the same way relating to Apologies for absence from meetings. I question how somebody who was barely able to walk to the back door is supposed to get a letter to the clerk.

In the report you state that LRAC do note:

“Apologies from Councillors need to be in writing to the Clerk. It should then be minuted and either accepted or not by council at the meeting. If that hasn't happened and the Councillor has missed 6 consecutive meetings then it is automatic disqualification.”

Mr Lesters apologies **were** minuted, but the Council did not ‘accept them or not’ – are the council also to be disqualified for not ‘accepting them or not’?

The report continues, and then concludes that SPC did nothing wrong, although it “should have worked closer with Mr Lester”, and, that there was “no other motive to remove Mr Lester from the Council”.

Some of the parish do not believe that statement.

Brian Lester’s legacy is that he was democratically voted on to the Parish Council in six years ago and then removed by his fellow Councillors in 2021, for not attending meetings during a six month period when, due to the global Covid-19 pandemic, meeting were run on Zoom for which he thought he did not have the IT necessary to attend and, during some of that period, was too ill to attend.

Stretton Parish Council of January 2021’s legacy is that, as a mainly **unelected** body, they caused one of their members, a farmer in the village, to be removed from the council on a technicality, having failed to ensure that he could have been included in meetings when he was well enough to do so. This removal of an elected Parish Councillor was done during the global Covid-19 pandemic, was done behind closed doors with no visibility to the public and was done at a time when mental health in the farming community is at an all-time low.

The report concludes that the village and the Parish Council need to work together. I cannot agree more with that statement, however, the village and the Parish Council will never work together if the Parish Council treat a member of the village, who had been voted on to the council by villagers, in such a way and show such lack of compassion.

My statement ends here.

Thank you and

Regards

