

Update on ICT issues:

Clerk & Emergency Planning Mobile:

The contract agreed between Wickhambrook Parish Council and Three for the Clerk's mobile has now lapsed and should either be renewed, or a new contract agreed with an alternative provider. The move to a mobile phone with unlimited calls & texts & 4gb data has made a significant saving over the previous arrangement for fixed landline and broadband, and has enabled the clerk to conduct work out on site, take and save images of issues which need addressing and work more flexibly.

When this contract was last reviewed in 2021, the parish council moved to:

- a Samsung Galaxy A12 with unlimited calls and texts plus 5gb data; and
- re-purposed the previous mobile handset (a Huawei) with a SIM only unlimited calls and texts plus 2gb data for the emergency planning lead at £18.33 plus VAT per month

A summary of options identified is below:

The screenshot displays three mobile phone deal cards. The first card, from Three, is highlighted as a 'FEATURED DEAL' and offers 'Unltd texts' and 'Unltd minutes' for £8.00/mth with 50GB of 5G data and a 24-month contract. It includes a £120 cashback reward, bill capping, data rollover, free roaming up to 30GB, and free delivery. The second card, from Talkmobile, offers 'Unltd texts' and 'Unltd minutes' for £16.00/mth with 5G data and a 1-month contract, including free EU roaming, bill capping, and free delivery. The third card, from Vodafone, offers 'Unltd texts' and 'Unltd minutes' for £10.00/mth with 60GB of 4G data and a 12-month contract, including VeryMe Rewards and free delivery. Each card has a 'Visit now' button.

Or continue with the existing deal, which is £18.33 per month (Three) for both sims, without any change of device.

Taking into account the time and disruption likely to arise from changing contract, the clerk's preferred option is to remain with Three for the time being, and review if there is any change to pricing.

Recommendation:

Remain with Three at a cost of £18.33 per month (ex any out of plan charges).

**Hilary Workman
Clerk & RFO
November 2024**

Digital Inclusion:

There has been a lot of coverage in news media recently about the impact of businesses, local government, banking and health services moving increasingly to digital platforms when engaging with their customers. There is concern that individuals who are either unable (because of cost or skills) or do not wish to engage are increasingly excluded from accessing businesses and services which they need during the normal course of their lives.

In 2023, the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee published a report on digital exclusion in which it called for the government to devise a new strategy and create a dedicated unit to address the issue.

The committee identified various barriers to greater digital inclusion, and discussed where policy interventions were likely to have the greatest impact:

- **Affordable internet access.** The committee welcomed improvements in the availability of social tariffs. However, it said the tariffs were still expensive for the most financially vulnerable. It also suggested that internet providers and Ofcom needed to do more to promote social tariffs, highlighting that there was just 5% uptake by eligible customers.
- **Connectivity and coverage.** The committee argued that while the rollout of broadband and mobile data infrastructure had progressed, areas of poor connectivity persisted. It also expressed concern that the 'universal service obligation' minimum standard was not keeping pace with modern requirements.^[5]
- **Skills and motivation.** The committee found that millions of people still lacked the "most basic digital skills for work and life".^[6] It argued that the government's '[Essential digital skills framework](#)' provided a good basis for driving improvements but that it was not being used to its full potential.^[7]
- **Accessible services.** The committee found that the shift towards digital by default public services had not been accompanied by adequate support for those who struggled with digital access. It argued that libraries and communities had taken on additional responsibilities but had not been given sufficient resources or training. It concluded that too many online services had poor accessibility for those with additional needs. The committee also argued that adequate provision needed to be maintained for those who could not or did not wish to use online services. The committee warned that digitally excluded groups were at risk of being poorly represented in key datasets used to influence policy and service delivery, and therefore faced further marginalisation.^[8]

The committee concluded that the groups affected by these barriers faced "deepening isolation as society becomes increasingly digital".^[9]¹

One example of recent work to tackle digital exclusion is attached at Appendix A – Suffolk Libraries have been awarded funding through Suffolk's Digital Inclusion fund to administer a scheme distributing free SIM cards with pre-loaded data, calls and texts to people excluded through cost.

There may be some activities which the parish could consider to help reduce digital exclusion and reach more residents who need help accessing services, for example:

- trying to identify who might be excluded and why
- teaming up with other organisations to increase their reach
- ensuring that as much information as possible is also available in paper format

Not all of these activities need be cost bearing, and some could be piggy backed on other parish activities (for example, a table at Warm Winter Wednesdays).

¹ House of Lords Library - <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/digital-exclusion-in-the-uk-communications-and-digital-committee-report/> 20/11/2024

[.gov.uk Domain](#)

In view of the current drive to encourage councils to move to a .gov.uk domain including emails, and in order to lead by example, SALC have now made the move to .gov.uk and has provided the information below on its web page:

What is a .gov.uk domain

A domain acts as an address to help people find you (like a street address). The difference between a .co.uk domain and a .gov.uk one is that .gov.uk are only available to government departments and agencies. This means registration is strictly controlled and this can help provide assurance that your council is an official layer of local government. The Parish Council Domains Helper Service have released a short video explaining the 'what and why' of .gov.uk domains - [click here to view the video.](#)

What are the benefits and risks

As a tier of the public sector, it is vital that town and parish councils work securely and effectively. The benefits of having a .gov.uk domain includes better controls and protection against cyber harm and consistency on the way information is handled and stored. This will result in enabling a more efficient way of handling freedom of information or subject access requests. Administratively it is also easier when somebody leaves the organisation for a host of reasons including ensuring data is deleted which is currently not possible where individual private email addresses are used.

What to do if your council is considering moving

You should contact the Parish Council Domain Helper Service to help you get started by [completing this form](#). This will register your interest and result in you being invited to one of their virtual introductory sessions which will last approximately 45 minutes. You will be able to choose a date and time with new dates being added throughout the year. The service will provide guidance at key stages including picking the best Approved Registrar, setting up your new domain and maintaining good practices after your new site has gone live. The Service will also tell you how you can access funding (£100 plus VAT) to help with the initial set up costs. This funding is only available for this financial year and will be awarded to the first 1000 councils. So far, almost 500 councils have benefitted from the funding and it is expected that all funding will be allocated by February 2025. It has now been confirmed that funding will not be available in future years and the Parish Council Domain Helper Service would encourage councils who have ambition to move in this financial year, to engage as soon as possible. All funding is allocated on a first-come, first-serve basis.

Frequently asked questions are attached as Appendix A. I contacted both One Suffolk and they have advised that:

The pricing for the gov.uk domain names is £138 for a 2 year registration and they provide very generous 10GB mailboxes at a discounted rate of £24 per year per mailbox (for more than 5 email addresses)

The process to get all of this sorted is actually very simple, requires no complex setup and usually takes around 1 week from start to finish.

**Hilary Workman
Clerk & RFO
November 2024**

However, there are implications for the website – because we have a shared website, and the government won't agree to the domains being split out, the .org address would forward to the .gov.uk domain address – this may cause confusion, and additionally, some users may not appreciate parish news under a .gov.uk domain.

The costs (for the domain registration and mailboxes) would be on top of the current costs for our website provider. It may be possible to either:

Keep going with Microsoft basic but change the domain name; or

Move mailboxes, which would then be supplied and managed by Community Action Suffolk (or another provider) and cancelling the Microsoft basic subscription.

Whilst the advice in the Practitioners Guide now contains stronger language around the merits of moving to a .gov.uk domain:

In particular at 5.2.10 of the Guide stating "*all parish, town and community councils are eligible to use, and are advised to use, a .gov.uk domain for their websites and email communications...*"

at present, the parish council is already able to manage parish council mailboxes through Microsoft.

I have raised this with another experienced clerk who supports a number of parishes and at present am inclined not to rush to move domains, until issues such as shared websites are resolved or explained with more clarity.