

Modern IT Comes Within Reach of the Smaller Council

by Paul Russell

The Parish of Lydiard Millicent is situated on the border of Swindon Borough Council and Wiltshire Council unitary authorities. It is a small parish with a precept of £20,000 and an income of £10,000 per annum making a total annual budget of approximately £30,000. It is made up of eleven members, a clerk employed for nine hours per week and a Responsible Financial Officer working one hour a week.

Up until recently all of the Council's electronic files were stored on both my computer and the RFO's computer. The Council did not have an IT budget and all the admin was carried out, probably like many Councils throughout the country, in the hope that nothing would go wrong with the systems. However, concern was expressed by Council that electronic file storage and emails should be tightened up. On top of that, in July 2014 I decided to move to Wales, some 90 miles away from the village.

Council therefore considered what options were available to create a virtual office. There were obvious issues with me being unable to access the financial information, the Council only having one official email address and the increasing demands for openness and transparency. The issue of business continuity and safe file storage was also considered.

I was familiar with the MicroshadeVSM remote hosting option having installed it at Stratton St Margaret Parish Council and I submitted a report to Council for consideration. Unlike other options, all of which have some limitations, the Clerk's Tool Kit provided within the Microshade VSM hosted environment includes a number of sector specific software options including the RBS accounting system and Pear Mapping.



For around 1.2% of its annual budget Council agreed to enter into a three year contract with MicroshadeVSM to provide its hosting facility for the following reasons:

1. It offered hosting for the RBS Alpha accounting system & the full Microsoft Office 2010 suite.
2. It guaranteed safe and secure storage of all of Council's electronic files including its financial records, something not in place previously.

3. It provided a windows working environment on state of the art servers with high quality processors, something that would always be out of the Council's financial reach.

4. It provided the flexibility to enable me to continue working for the Parish Council despite being based in Wales.

5. It created a virtual office environment that enabled both me and the RFO to access a single generic account and access all Council's electronic information including its email system.

6. The Council now had all the fundamental elements in place to ensure a smooth succession strategy when it was required.

Once a month I am available at the Jubilee Club House in Lydiard Millicent to deal with any parish issues. The club house doesn't have internet access but by using a WIFI Dongle (as cheap as £10 per month) I can access the internet and all the Council's information.

Finally the support provided by Microshade's team based in Plymouth is second to none; any issues are dealt with swiftly and efficiently. In my case most issues are my fault anyway!

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