

WEBSITE ISSUES

For: PLC (Public Liaison and Communications) Committee

Date: 23 May 2007

Please log onto www.wyeweb.org before reading any further.

INTRODUCTION

Last week David Hewson of 'Saved' fame launched a new website. At first it was off-line and he gave various people in the village passwords to enable them to access the site and experiment with it. He then turned it 'live' so that anyone who knows its address can go on the internet and access it. (I don't think you'll find it at the moment simply by googling 'Wye'.) David Hewson states on the site that it is a volunteer community venture based in the east Kent village of Wye. 'Our mission is to inform our own residents and visitors about what is happening in Wye and how they can enjoy the area.' Elsewhere he states 'We hope this site will be a joint venture between individuals and organisations such as Wye Parish Council and the Wye Business Association.'

So far David has not contacted Wye with Hinxhill Parish Council and it is not clear whom he means when he talks of 'We'. However, individuals, businesses and some organisations are beginning to join the site and the Parish Council clearly needs to decide whether it wishes to do so.

I suggest that this decision should be taken within the context of the long-term needs of the Parish Council (and of the community more generally). The issue of developing a website for the Parish Council (either an independent one or as part of a community website) has been the subject of informal discussion for some time and the new PLC Committee needs to make a number of informed recommendations to the Council about how to take the matter forward. This has suddenly become more pressing now that www.wyewe.org has been launched upon the village.

With this in mind I made a brief tour of the wyeweb site at the week-end and wrote down the points outlined below. Paul has also given me some comments which I have incorporated and which have helped me formulate the rest of this paper which I hope may help committee members in their deliberations.

WYEWEB SITE DESCRIPTION AND QUERIES

| <u>Site sections</u> | <u>Composition</u> |
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| Home page | <u>Articles</u> Will appear in reverse chronological order as with a blog. Can only be submitted by someone who has registered with the site. <u>Questions?</u> - There are obvious legal implications here. A single individual or a group of individuals will presumably have to <i>moderate</i> the Home page to ensure that nothing is submitted that could incur any liability or allegations of libel. David Hewson is doing the monitoring at the moment. - What about accuracy? Will there be a Home page editor to ensure that articles are factually correct? |
| About Wye | <u>Articles</u> Same as above. <u>Questions</u> Same as above. The editorial function would possibly be even more important here but one suspects that only those with a particular interest in history, the countryside, footpaths etc would bother to submit articles and one would assume they would first pass the articles to colleagues in their particular organisations to read to ensure accuracy. |
| Viewpoints | <u>Articles</u> As above. |

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| | <p><u>Questions</u> Same as above. The function of the person or team that <i>moderates</i> this section will presumably be key since there is the possibility that some articles could express views that might give offence etc</p> |
| Village Calendar | <p>An extremely useful section which would enable the village to co-ordinate its activities much more effectively. Only people who have registered and belong to wyeweb can submit diary entries.</p> |
| Classifieds | <p><u>Adverts</u> Only people who have registered and belong to wyeweb can submit adverts.</p> |
| Forum | <p><u>Discussion</u> Only people who have registered and belong to wyeweb can participate. I am not sure if non-members can read all the entries all the time.</p> |
| Weather | <p>A direct link to the BBC weather on bbc.co.uk</p> |
| Directory | <p>This is a directory of mini-sites. Last week anyone who signed up to the site was automatically assigned a mini-site and a listing under 'Directory'. This has now changed and mini-sites are only allocated on demand. David Hewson has indicated that they are meant for businesses and organisations rather than individuals.</p> <p>Mini-sites Mini-sites appear to have four sections: Home – Contact – Photo gallery – Downloads and are limited to 5 pages. David Hewson has commented that 'You are limited currently to five pages for each mini-site. If the demand is there we can increase this though'.</p> <p>Contact – giving the name of the owner of the mini-site, email address, any independent website that the owner has that can be linked to the mini-site, owner's address and phone number</p> <p>Photo gallery – appears to be a section where the owner can upload photos. When you click on a photo it is enlarged and has a caption telling you what it is. However there is no attached text that gives any further information. The Photo gallery therefore appears to be just a folder of photos rather like a personal photo album containing a collection of photos with captions only.</p> <p><u>Question</u> Can the owner of a mini-site insert additional text to the photos s/he uploads? What is the maximum number of photos a mini-site can contain? Can the photos in the Photo gallery folder be linked to the Home page so they can be opened from the Home page? Paul has commented that this will certainly be possible, though it's not clear whether or not there is a simple 'non-technical' way to do so. It does seem to be possible to embed a picture (rather than a link) within the Home page of a mini-site as Wye Community Farm site has done so.</p> <p>Downloads - appears to be just a folder of documents that are simply listed by title, together with the size of the document and the date (and time?) it was uploaded. The user has to click on the document to open it and find out what it is about.</p> <p><u>Question</u> Is there any capacity to add explanatory text on this page to introduce each document and put it into some sort of context, or would such text have to go on the Home page? At the moment it seems possible to add only a short description/title as per the example document on the wyeweb.org mini-site. Can the documents in the Download folder be linked to the Home page so they can be integrated into the Home text and opened from the Home page?</p> <p>Home – the Home page of each mini-site appears to be the one page where the owner can actually write free text. Originally the text was limited to 500k per page which amounted to 4,000 characters of text. This has now been upped to 1mb (1000k) per page and presumably allows for 8,000 characters of text. It seems likely that the 8,000 characters <i>include</i> spaces between words. Two sides of Parish Notes in the Parish Magazine usually amount to about 7,000-8,000 characters with spaces. The amount of text that can be put on a mini-site therefore appears to be very limiting for an organisation like the Parish Council that has always thought in terms of a content-heavy site.</p> |

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| | <p><u>Questions</u></p> <p>Could a mini-site be extended (at least for some organisations) to serve as a full-blown website with more or less unlimited potential for adding new pages and additional content?</p> |
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COMMENT

My immediate impression is that www.wyeweb is a community blog which anyone can read but to which only registered members can subscribe information and opinions. This is very different from a community site such as www.faversham.org which is not a blog but a site that is content-heavy and contains carefully written information according to agreed categories (which are nevertheless self-administered by password holders). I don't understand whether a blog like wyeweb could incorporate full-blown individual sites with unlimited potential as expanded mini-sites, (eg one for the Parish Council, one for the WBA, another for the Historical Society, another for Footpaths and the Countryside, etc etc). It is certainly possible to put a link from the contact page of a mini-site to any independent website. (See the Huntingdons' mini-site).

At the moment it seems to me that as a community blog, wyeweb would act as a sort of electronic newspaper written by registered members but open to anyone to read on-line and with mini-sites (which would act rather like electronic notice boards) to allow businesses and organisations to put up limited information about themselves.

I have no idea how search engine friendly this site is likely to be and how easy it will be for people to find it if they go into Google. Search engine optimisation is something I believe IT specialists can enhance. Certainly www.wye.org performs extremely well when you enter 'Wye' into Google. Somewhat to my horror, if you enter 'Wye Parish Clerk' into Google a list of sites comes up and my name and telephone number appear immediately with a link to www.wye.org. With regard to www.wyeweb.org it isn't particularly important once villagers know the address of the site for it to be easily found by a search engine because they can just put it in their Favourites, but it's important if outsiders, searching for Wye, are to find it.

Logically I would assume the running of the site should be the responsibility of the registered members who will need to sort out who *moderates* it to ensure nothing offensive or legally compromising goes up on it. It will be the members alone who will be able to contribute articles and not just any member of the public. Perhaps members will have to set up an organisation with elected officers to draw up rules and ethical guidelines to govern the running of the site to which all members will have to agree. One concern of Paul's was that originally members were able to use a nickname or other nom de plume when posting messages on the site – a practice that would almost certainly lead to all manner of problems. However, David Hewson has now commented that 'I do think we should aim for real names in the end.'

WIDER ISSUES

It seems that if the PC were to join wyeweb then a mini-site would serve purely as an electronic notice board for the PC (enabling the display of information equivalent in length to little more than the Parish Notes). In addition of course, the PC could upload documents into the Download section and photos into its Photo gallery, but only with captions or a brief description, not with any explanatory text.

If this is so, then wyeweb would not be able to cater for the needs of a comprehensive parish website which I would expect to contain the following on easily accessible pages (not in a series of documents in a Download folder)

- Information about the PC generally and Clerk's details
- List of councillors, addresses, photos integrated together
- List of committees and committee functions
- Dates of meetings
- Agendas
- Minutes
- Planning in the village
- Policy issues
- Current activities
- Long term projects
- How to get involved
- Up-to-date news
- Contact page

This does not mean that the PC could not have a mini-site on wyeweb too and use it as an electronic information point to which its own (or its section of a comprehensive database driven community) website could be linked.

For the moment I suggest the PLC Committee needs to consider what it wants to recommend to the full council in June and there are all sorts of issues to be considered: for example

1. What sort of website does the PC ultimately want? What are its long-term aims?
2. If the PC wants a comprehensive, content-heavy site, would it like it to be part of a community site along the lines of www.faversham.org (or even an updated, self-administered www.wye.org if that were possible)?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of a community website of the Faversham type? How would it be managed? (Faversham has set up an independent trust that owns and manages their site.)
4. How best can the PC investigate the options that need to be considered? eg set up a task group and invite other key organisations in the village to be represented on it?

Meanwhile, the WBA has been considering website issues and after its last meeting Ann Sutherland emailed me the following:

The WBA discussed the website last night. Led by Chris Pound with the help of Zoe Rushford [of Luminate Designs – a website design company based in the village], and Peter Begley [Wye Farmers Market] we are inviting other website minded members in the WBA to join a sub committee. This will of course link up with various conversations Don Thake has had with both John Claydon and Chris Pound. It was then discussed that other village groups be approached. Members were firm in their belief that The Wye Business Association should not be expected to pay for this and that there are various pockets of funding which could be looked into.

At our meeting [on 25 April] we were unanimous in the fact that we feel that a village website although run by volunteers should come under the 'Guardianship' of The Parish Council and that I write to you to request their agreement and support.

We appreciate that it is election time and that this would be something that would have to come up when the Parish Council has been reformed.

Since Ann sent this email, wyeweb.org has been sprung upon us. I have emailed Ann and explained that the new PLC Committee will start to consider website issues on 24 May.

Because wyeweb has suddenly appeared, the PC is faced with additional decisions that no one anticipated. Most importantly –

1. Does the PC support the venture in principle or is too little known about it to make such a decision?
2. If the PC supports the venture in principle, does it want to become a member of the site?
3. Can such a decision be made without knowing more about the site's technical capacity and potential and about the way it will be run? How can such information best be obtained?
4. If the PC decides to join the site, should it have a mini-site on wyeweb? If so,
5. What sort of information would it want to upload, remembering that there may be a very strict limit to the amount of text a mini-site can currently accept?
6. How and by whom would the PC's mini-site be administered?

For the benefit of new councillors, all communication issued by the Parish Council as a body must be approved by the PC and go through the Clerk. No individual councillor can act on behalf of the PC without proper, minuted authorisation. Where a councillor is authorised to act for the PC, he must report back regularly to the Council and always keep the Clerk informed. It is the PC's legal duty to keep proper records, and the Clerk's responsibility to look after them so she must always have a copy of any letter or document issued by the PC. This will apply to any information issued in writing or electronically. Where verbal communication is concerned, again only the Clerk or Chairman or a duly authorised councillor can issue official information on behalf of the Council (eg on TV or the radio). Individual councillors can obviously comment on information issued by the PC and seek to explain it to people.