

WITHYCOMBE PARISH COUNCIL

Minutes of the Withycombe Parish Council meeting held at the Memorial Hall on Monday 6th November 2023 at 7.00pm

PRESENT

Councillors: Richard Barnham (Chairman), Claire Huish, Paul Wintermantle, Rob Hall

In attendance: S Rawle (Clerk), Marcus Kravis, Somerset Council, Ian Atkinson, CEO West Somerset Advice, Nick Kelly, MHPF, 2 members of the public

Following the resignation of the Chairman, the Vice Chairman Cllr Barnham opened the public forum.

PUBLIC FORUM

A member of the public made a suggestion concerning the unplanted area above the gabions at the entrance to the carpark. It was asked whether the parish council would agree to a budget for some shrubs which residents of Titholes Orchard had volunteered to undertake. Cllr Barnham said that Councillors would need to consider this under item 17 of the agenda.

Flooding – A resident of Rodhuish asked if the Parish Council could pressure the Highway Authority to clear the drains and gullies following the September floods. Furthermore, it was requested the Parish Council write to the estate landowners to see if anything could be done in the higher catchment area to slow the flow of water cascading off the fields. It was also reported that the larger farm vehicles have damaged the road banks which has blocked and silted up the drains. The resident has spoken to the gang clearing the drains and they had said they did not clear the gullies. It was felt that a change in farming practices from pasture to arable had not helped and was inconsiderate to those living in the area and finding themselves at the brunt of heavy rainfall events. Cllr Kravis suggested that the parish council also consider sending a letter to Mike Rigby portfolio holder for Highways/Transport.

There were no further comments or questions from the floor and therefore Cllr Barnham closed the public forum at 7.15pm.

2252 Apologies for absence

Cllrs Steve Crossman, & Christine Lawrence (SC)

2253 Election of Chair

Cllr Hall nominated Cllr Barnham, this was seconded by Cllr Huish and unanimously agreed. Cllr Barnham was duly elected Chairman.

2254 Declarations of interest on any agenda item

Cllr Huish declared a personal interest in Item 5.

2255 To receive the resignation of Cllr Thorne

Cllr Thorne's resignation was duly noted. The Clerk was asked to write a letter of thanks for the hard work that Cllr Thorne had contributed to the parish council and especially her time and work involved in the completion of the play area project,

2256 Co-option of Councillor

The Clerk reported that the period of notice of a casual vacancy had now completed and that the Parish Council could fill the vacancy through the co-option process. There were no applications to consider for co-option.

2257 To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 11th September 2023

Cllr Wintermantle said that he had not received the draft minutes. It was agreed to defer approval to the next meeting so that Cllr Wintermantle had sufficient time to consider them.

2258 Report from Somerset Council

Cllr Kravis gave his report:-

Finances – Projected shortfall for next year is £100M, which exceeds the level of the Councils reserves. £70M increase in adult social care costs for next year. Without action the Council would need to declare itself bankrupt. Many Councils nationally have found themselves in similar situations and others warning of possibility without Government support. Every department has had to find savings, by reducing staffing levels, only providing statutory services. The Council is also considering selling assets and buildings, including offices.

Buses – Campaign to drive up passenger numbers on four key routes across the County. The £2 countywide fare for any single journey is set to continue to December 2024. The Council is subsidising routes 54, 58/58a, 25 and 28 until end of March.

Winter gritters – Daily gritting updates will be posted on Travel Somerset's Twitter and Facebook channels throughout winter.

New contractor for highways – Council has signed new 8 year contract with Kier to deliver core maintenance across road network.

Health & Wellbeing – Leaders from the voluntary sector, NHS and Somerset Council, have gathered to sign an historic document outlining a shared vision and commitment to work more closely together to achieve better health outcomes for the people of Somerset.

South West in Bloom Awards – Towns across Somerset have received numerous awards. See full results at www.southwestinbloom.org.uk

The Somerset Local Pantry Network has won a food resilience award. www.somerset.gov.uk/localpantry.

Recycling Week – Nearly half the content of the average Somerset bin could have been recycled, Somerset Council can reveal. The 48% figure found this year is an 11% decrease on 2018. The Council are asking residents to think twice before throwing something in the bin.

2259 Report from West Somerset Advice Bureau

Ian Atkinson Chief Officer for the West Somerset Advice Bureau provided the parish council with an interesting and informative report. He said that he had recently been touring all the parish councils to remind people the role of the advice bureau in West Somerset.

There were currently 8 paid members of staff, 2 of whom were full-time. There were also 12 volunteers and a board of 7 trustees. The office was based in Minehead at Market House Lane. The office is open 4 days a week 10am to 4pm. The opening hours had proved to be good given there were a large percentage of the local community who were digitally excluded together with the sparsity of the area. There were also 6 outreach surgeries operating at Stogumber, Porlock, Dulverton, Williton, Somerwest World and Minehead. Customers could also access through phone, webchat and video link.

Contact number for West Somerset Advice Bureau is 0800 802 1808

The office received 113 customers in the office last month and staff were finding the enquiries were becoming ever more complex; often customers presented with multiple

issues. A common misconception was that the service was centrally funded by citizens advice and central government. Unfortunately, this was not the case. Current funders were Somerset Council, Somerset Community Foundation, parish and town councils and other partner agencies. Daily operating costs are £761.00.

In the last financial year the 2 debt advisors had freed 1.7M in debt for customers and the benefit advisor had helped secure over 1.6M in unclaimed benefits for customers. The bureau had also saved the NHS £70,000 through their work and support. Also, for every housing eviction prevented this saved the Council £8,000.

2260 Flooding/Emergency Planning

Cllr Wintermantle wished to commend the villagers for helping the vulnerable and less able during the September flooding event. It had happened so quickly and taken people by surprise. Cllr Barnham said that he had looked at the watercourses and most of the water had come off of Rodhuish Common. He said that the parish council needed to request the landowners to ensure they undertook the maintenance of the culverts, ditches and watercourses on their land and to review their farming practices to ensure that events such had happened could be mitigated as much as possible. The high banks at the bottom of Stoates Lane had also collapsed with the amount of water, which had added further to blocking the drains and gullies.

There was discussion regarding the culvert that runs under the road from Squirrels to Withycombe Farm. Information was received from a member of the public that ownership had not been determined.

Nick Kelly, Estate Manager for the Dunster Estate declared an interest and spoke. Dunster Estate were the landowners on Black Hill and Rodhuish Common. He firstly said that he wished to convey his sincere sympathy to those who had been badly effected by the flooding. The rainfall had been of biblical proportions and the sheer volume had resulted in the water running to the lowest point. Rodhuish Common was categorised as low land heath and some of that pasture had been converted to arable. The economics of farming dictated that production of arable land was of greater value than pasture land. In the future there would be changes to the funding from the sustainable farming initiative and there would be an opportunity to look at expanding the headland margins to try and slow the flow of water. He said that he would be very happy to open up discussions with the parish council on the estate management. Cllr Wintermantle said that he would like to see a form of code of conduct that obligated traffic that damaged the banks to put this right. Mr Kelly confirmed that all the leases to tenants are full repair and maintenance by the occupier. The estate had found itself in the position of having inherited a backlog of maintenance issues when the land holdings were transferred from The Crown.

The Clerk said that she had received notice of the next meeting of the West Somerset Flood Group on 24th January 2024 and that it would be advisable for the Parish Council to be represented on the group. She also said that the Parish Council Flood Plan needed to be revised as contacts on the original plan were no longer relevant.

It was agreed to:

- Write to the estate owners to start a dialogue concerning current farming practices and improvement to land management in an effort to mitigate future flooding;
- Write to Somerset Council requesting improvement in drain and gully maintenance;
- Review the Parish Council Flood Plan

2261 Housing Allocation

Cllr Barnham said that he had emailed both Magna and Rupert Warren, the Home Finder co-ordinator concerning the non-occupation of 8 Meadow Cottages. He had heard nothing further. It was agreed to be kept in the loop of the work of the West Somerset Community Land Trust but not to become active members at this stage.

There would be a HomeFinder presentation on the local lettings policy and housing allocations on 14th November at 4pm. A link to the meeting had been circulated. Cllrs Huish and Hall would try to attend, dependant on work commitments.

Nothing more to report.

2262 Somerset Bus Partnership

Cllr Barnham and Hall had attended the online meeting of the Somerset Bus Partnership. The no 28 service was under threat of a reduced service from the end March 2024. It was current level of service sustainable. There was currently a shortage of bus drivers which was resulting in cancelled buses. It was said that the service needed to be more reliable and that extra buses should be put on at peak times, e.g. Butlins changeover. This in itself would encourage people to use the buses more. Cllr Huish said that there was a bus app available to download which showed people in real time how many spaces were on a bus and whether the service had been cancelled. Cllr Barnham said that an email had recently been received from the bus partnership asking for funding to support the campaign. The parish council did not feel this was something they could commit funding to at this time.

2263 Minehead and Watchet LCN Meeting

Cllr Hall and Barnham had attended the meeting on the 19th October and Cllr Hall had attended the previous one in August. He explained that it was not a decision making group but more designed for providing a steer for the higher authority. It was felt it remained to be seen whether communities would see any real benefits but it was early days. Minutes of the meeting had been circulated.

2264 Planning

Applications received:- 3/26/23/013 – Land at Bilbrook – Erection of 1 No agricultural barn (grain store) with associated apron and extension to the access track. The application was discussed – there were no observations.

2265 Finances

2265.1 **Bank Reconciliation Statement** – The Clerk presented the bank reconciliation up to 31st October 2023.. The bank reconciliation agreed with bank statements and was signed by the Chairman, as an accurate record. Bank balances were:-

• Account 95304622	£1,247.97
• Account 44356501	£23,901.98
Total	£25,176.95

2265.2 **Budget Monitoring** – The budget monitoring report was noted. Cllr Barnham said that parish council needed to be minded that they were not sitting on too high a reserve and that thought needed to be given on how the reserves could be used within the parish. A parish newsletter was discussed. A question was raised about the Clerks payment of tax on her salary. The Clerk confirmed that as an employee of the Council she was on the payroll and income tax and NI were deducted at source.

2266 TO APPROVE ACCOUNTS FOR PAYMENT

2266.1 **The following payments were approved:-**

1. SALC Annual Membership Fee	£83.52
2. SALC Play Inspection Seminar	£50.00

Proposed by Cllr Barnham, seconded by Cllr Wintermantle and unanimously agreed that the accounts for payment be approved.

2266.2 **To ratify the following urgent payments already made:-**

1. PKF Littlejohn (External Audit work) £252.00

The urgent payment was agreed.

2266.3 **Income received:**

It was noted that the following income had been received:-

CAF Donation - £100.00

The Clerk was asked to make enquiries to what this was for.

2267 Completion of 2022-23 Audit

The audit of the Parish Councils accounts was now completed, including the external audit.

2268 Play Area/Community Area Updates

The risk assessment for the play area/community area was approved by Councillors. Cllr Wintermantle will keep the document under review going forward. He also agreed to undertake the weekly visual and monthly operational checks of the play area.

The matter from the earlier public forum regarding the planting above the gabions was discussed. It was felt that the budget suggested was rather too much for what was required. Cllr Wintermantle said that he had some surplus verbena plantings that he was intending to plant in the area. Cllr Wintermantle was asked to take this forward and discuss with the residents who had offered their assistance.

2269 Highways Updates

Apart from the on-going situation in Coombe Lane there were no further updates.

2270 Actions from last meeting

Still no response from Highways regarding the additional signage for HGVs at Felons Oak. Withycombe Hill – Need to check if Cllr Crossman has the posts for the trees. Cllr Barnham will make enquiries on other contractors.

2271 To agree meeting dates for 2024

These were agreed. Clerk to update MH booking administrator.

The meeting closed at 9.50 pm.

Next meeting 8th January 2024

Signed _____
CHAIRMAN

Date _____