

The Annual Parish Meeting for the Parish of Batcombe

was held on Wednesday 4th April 2018 at 7.30pm in the Jubilee Hall.

Chris Wildridge, Chairman of the Parish Council presided. Six members of the Parish Council and the Clerk attended, together with Dick Skidmore - the District Councillor, Nigel Hewitt-Cooper - the County Councillor and a further 12 parishioners. Apologies were received from Nick Sommer and Peter Sheldon.

Chris Wildridge **welcomed** parishioners to the meeting and announced that Justin Robinson from the Somerset Association of Local Councils was unable to attend due to illness, but that he would show the presentation provided by Justin.

Minutes of the 2017 Annual Parish Meeting were read by the Clerk, agreed and signed.

There were no **Matters Arising**.

Chris Wildridge gave the **Chairman's Report** with the aid of a PowerPoint presentation.

He reported a number of changes to the Parish Council over the year. Mary Comley had been co-opted in May to fill the space left by the resignation of Lucinda Edgell the previous year. Iona FitzGerald had resigned in September and was thanked for serving on the Council for six years. Kav Javvi was co-opted in November but resigned in January and then Wiff Cox was co-opted in March. The Chairman noted that there would be Parish and District Council elections in May 2019.

The Parish Council's four-year plan, adopted three years previously, aimed to tackle the issues of the Emergency Plan for the parish, the Playing Field equipment, affordable housing and broadband for the parish.

Rob Jones was thanked for organising the addition of the name of William Newman (who had lived in Westcombe as a child and been killed at the Battle of Le Cateau in August 1914) to the Batcombe War Memorial - and some minor repairs to the Memorial at the same time - at no cost to the Parish Council. John Cheshire was thanked for looking after the War Memorial garden.

There had been 17 planning applications in the last year, compared to 20 the year before. Of these 12 were for full or householder planning permission, of which nine were approved, one withdrawn and two were awaiting a decision. The refusal of permission to convert and extend the stables at Crows Hill for use as holiday accommodation had been overturned by appeal to the Planning Inspectorate. A second application for a replacement dwelling at Batcombe Park had been withdrawn before it could be considered by the Parish Council at an extraordinary meeting. An application for first floor and single storey extensions and a new pool house at Ravenswood in Westcombe had been approved before the Parish Council had had the opportunity to consider it, despite the Parish Council having been given an extension to the consultation deadline. The Chairman made a formal complaint to the District Council and had received an apology and a commitment to change the District Council's procedures. The Parish Council had recommended refusal of an application for a two-storey building incorporating a garage at Holly Cottage, Westcombe but this was allowed.

The Shindig Weekender music festival in May caused serious disturbance, particularly to the residents of Kale Street. As a result, when the application for the Shindig Weekender in 2018 was made the Parish Council made a representation to the licensing authority South Somerset District Council. The District Council reduced the hours that music could be played until from 4.00am to 2.00am, but the organisers of Shindig appealed this decision to the Magistrates Court. Shindig was one of four music festivals planned to be held at Gilcombe Farm in 2018.

Batcombe was again not included on the pre-salting network during the winter, although the road from Evercreech to the edge of Westcombe was. The Chairman had attended a meeting with the Cabinet Member for Highways at County Hall in November but did not feel this had been productive. The Parish Council had invited our MP to a meeting in April to hear resident's concerns about the lack of pre-salting.

Jayne Cox had resigned as the Parish Path Liaison Officer and was thanked for her work in this role. All those who had helped their neighbours during the recent snow and those who had helped clear roads and paths were thanked, with particular thanks to Justin Witcombe, Ian Sage, Bruno Cristofoli and Stuart Clothier. Concerns had been raised over the use of the Honeycliff bridleway by motorised vehicles. The Mendip Bridleways and Byways Association and the County Council had spent £9,000 repairing the bridleway and it was important that vehicles did not damage it.

Moles continued to cause problems in the Playing Field throughout the year. Geoff Sparkes of Gardens of Avalon was thanked for cutting the Playing Field grass. Jane Batchelor and Jo Addison were thanked for their work tidying up the willow structure and Gary Butler for cutting back the high growth. The legs of the multiplay unit were found to be rotten where covered by the playbark and the Parish Council was planning to repair these before they became a safety issue. The zip wire had been repaired by Mainstay Projects and could be used again.

There were four vacant allotments and it appeared that people were losing interest in keeping an allotment.

The Parish Council made grants of £300 to the Village Hall Trust; of which roughly £100 paid for the cost of the Council's own meetings; £200 to the Parochial Church Council for maintenance of the churchyard; and £100 each to Mendip Community Transport and the Mendip Citizens Advice Bureau.

The Parish Council website continued to develop since being established six years previously with over 118,000 visits in that time. The Parish Council now had its own dedicated e-mail addresses for the Clerk and the Chairman.

The Parish Council had increased its precept by £250 to £9,200 to cover the cost of repairing the multi-play equipment in the Playing Field. This was an increase of 2.8% in the precept, but because of a reduction in Batcombe's tax base this resulted in a 6% increase in the component of Council Tax due to the precept.

Questions from the Floor. Hazel Davidge asked why the school bus route was not gritted. The District Councillor noted that there were other school bus routes in the county that were not gritted. The Chairman stated that the County Council could vary their policy but chose not to. Justin Witcombe reported that Upton Noble School was frustrated that the road to the school in Upton Noble was not gritted. Sheena Pool failed to see the logic of gritting from Stoney Stratton to Westcombe. Mary Comley noted that it would cost less to carry on through the village than to grit to Westcombe and then turn around.

The District Councillor felt that South Somerset District Council were not willing to listen to concerns about the impact of the number of music festivals being held at Gilcombe Farm. Ginnie Jones noted that the MBBA had spent a great deal of money repairing the damaged caused to the Honeycliff bridleway by motorised vehicles – and was concerned that further damage would leave the bridleway unusable.

District and County Councillors' Comments. Dick Skidmore noted that the District Council was one of a group of five District Councils who combined services to save on costs. The District Council budget was also looking at other sources of income. He noted that he had eight parishes in his ward and would be 80 in the coming year. The role had been a lot of fun but for the last few years involved a lot of paperwork. It was becoming difficult finding people who would do the job.

Nigel Hewitt-Cooper noted that he had only been elected to the County Council for a year but had been a District Councillor for 11 years and on the planning board for 3 years. The County Council had even less money than the District Council and by 2020 the Government grant would be down to zero and there would be a £20 million shortfall in the Council's budget over the next two years. He noted that a consultation was taking place on Library Services. Children's Services had been unsatisfactory in 2015 and as a result had been "buddied" with Essex County Council. 70% of the Council's budget was spent on social services. 24 new schools would open over the next 5 years. Superfast broadband would reach 96% of the County by 2020. And Somerset Highways had filled 18,350 potholes.

He had been pleased to get gritting re-instated to the middle of the village, avoiding the problems in Kale Street – but this did not work out as on five out of six attempts to salt the road the route was found to be blocked by a parked car. The Chairman noted that the Parish Council interpreted the facts differently and added that a letter from the residents of Kale Street to the County Council stating that the problems there had been resolved had not been responded to.

Neighbourhood Watch Reports. Nick Sommer had sent a written report noting that it had been a quiet year in Westcombe with no crime or anti-social behaviour apart from one dog on dog attack. He received monthly crime reports from the local police which he passed onto the residents on his list.

Reports from the Village Hall and Heritage Room Representatives. Justin Witcombe the Parish Council representative on the Village Hall Trust reported that the Big Draw evening for the Village Hall 100 Club would be a pig racing evening and that there would be other fundraising events during the year.

Rob Sage, the Parish Council's trustee for the Heritage Room noted that the Heritage Room was open on Saturday afternoons from 2.00pm for anyone interested in looking into the history of the village.

Snow – What has Taunton done for us? The Chairman decided not to show Justin Robinson's presentation and instead began a discussion on the impact of the recent snow on the parish and the lack of response from the County Council. He noted that Somerset had an ageing population and that by 2020 over 50% of its budget would be spent on adult social care and this meant cuts in other services. The County Council had suggested that volunteers could salt the roads using salt provided by the Council, but the Chairman felt that the population of the village was aging and people over 70 could not be expected to spread salt on the roads. He asked how the parish was going to cope with no road out of the village being salted.

Suggestions were made to improve the process by which farmers were paid to clear snow; to withhold Council Tax; and to organise self-help. The Chairman noted that more people needed social care and if no one could get into the village wondered how that would happen. He added that paying a contractor to salt the roads could cost £400 a trip or £5,000 for the winter. He felt that you could not salt a three mile stretch of road on the basis of good will. It was noted that Crows Hill had no hope of being gritted and signs were needed telling people not to use it.

The County Councillor stated that only 21% of the road network was salted on a precautionary basis but that if freezing conditions persisted for more than a couple of days, Somerset Highways should salt the entire network. Mary Comley noted in that situation Somerset Highways would concentrate their resources on the primary network. The discussion concluded with the thought that people needed to be able to get out of the village and go places – and the suggestion of a milk vending machine at Lower Farm so people could buy milk.

The Chairman thanked everyone for coming; and then closed the meeting.

John Sommer

03/04/19