

The Annual Parish Meeting for the Parish of Batcombe

was held on Wednesday 5th April 2017 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 Woollcombe-Adams - the County Councillor and David Warburton MP and a further 22 parishioners. There were no apologies.

Chris Wildridge **welcomed** parishioners to the meeting. He also welcomed the District and County Councillors.

Minutes of the 2016 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 displayed pictures of the Parish Councillors taken from the Parish Council website, noting that they were all volunteers. He reported the resignation of Lucinda Edgell, thanking her for serving on the Council for the last two years, and noted that as no by-election had been claimed the vacancy would be filled by co-option at the next Parish Council meeting. He then displayed a picture of the Clerk, noting that he was the only employee of the Council.

He noted that the Parish Council's four-year plan, adopted two 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.

The Community Council for Somerset had undertaken a Housing Needs Survey in the parish, which cost £2,418 and was paid for by a grant from Awards for All. This revealed a housing need for seven households, five of which were seeking rented accommodation. The results of the survey were presented at a Parish Meeting in November and the Parish Council invited local landowners to come forward with offers of suitable land for the needed housing.

The retaining wall for the War Memorial garden had been repaired by Kicko Cox at a cost of £1,675 and the Council were grateful for contributions of £1,081 towards this cost from the proceeds of the street party to celebrate the Queen's 90th Birthday, the breakfast commemorating the Battle of the Somme and other donations. The War Memorial was now a Grade II listed building.

The Parish Council had joined a pilot project to subsidise a market day bus to Frome organised by a member of Wanstrow Parish Council, but had decided not to extend the pilot. The parish notice boards would be replaced shortly.

There had been 20 planning applications in the last year, compared to 12 the year before. Of these nine were for full or householder planning permission, of which seven were approved, one refused and one withdrawn. The Parish Council had recommended refusal of an application to convert and extend the stables at Crows Hill for use as holiday accommodation and this was refused permission at the District Council's Planning Board. The Parish Council also recommended refusal of an application to vary the condition on the planning permission for the barn conversion at Batcombe Lodge to allow the barn conversion to be sold separately from the main house, but this was allowed by the Planning Board.

The Parish Council were informed of a music festival at Gilcombe Farm – the Shindig Weekender in May 2017. The Parish Council had asked that this festival have the same conditions relating to noise levels and management, as those imposed on previous festivals at Gilcombe Farm and this was agreed. Subsequently, the Council were informed of another music festival at Gilcombe Farm on the August Bank Holiday.

The Parish Council continued to be very concerned about the state of some of the roads in and around the parish, and followed up complaints with Somerset Highways. Particular concerns were raised about the number of HGVs getting stuck in the village and plans for direction signs to the Wild Beer brewery at Westcombe Dairy had not yet materialised.

Despite the best efforts of our County Councillor, Somerset Highways had not re-instated the precautionary salting of the road through Batcombe. Following the County Council elections the new portfolio holder would be lobbied and the problems of passing parked cars in Kale Street would need to be addressed.

Jayne Cox was thanked for her work as the Parish Path Liaison Officer, and John Sommer and Justin Witcombe were thanked for their voluntary efforts in strimming the footpaths.

Moles continued to cause problems in the Playing Field throughout the year, but the Parish Council had plans to deal with them. Geoff Sparkes of Gardens of Avalon was thanked for cutting the Playing Field grass. The legs of the multiplay unit were found to be rotten where covered by the playbark and Mainstay Projects, who installed the equipment, had offered to undertake remedial work. The zip wire had been disabled for safety reasons due to movement in the uprights and Mainstay Projects had offered to address this issue. The nest swing had been dismantled when it was found that the frame could not cope with the forces resulting from large numbers of people using the swing at the same time. The toddler swing had been returned to this frame and two junior swings were placed in the large frame. It was hoped to purchase a purpose-built frame for the nest swing when the Council had sufficient funds.

Four allotments had become vacant during the year and three were rented to new allotment holders in the village, leaving one allotment vacant and available for rent at £35 a year.

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 five years previously with over 89,000 visits in that time. Government legislation – *The Transparency Code for Smaller Authorities* – required the Parish Council to publish a range of financial information on its website including financial statements, budgets, audit reports and any items of expenditure over £100. The Parish Council had used a grant of £250 from the Government to purchase a laptop so that it was no longer reliant on the Clerk's personal computer and it was planned to adopt a dedicated e-mail address for the Parish Council in place of the Clerk's personal one.

The Parish Council had increased its precept by £500 to £8,950 to cover increased maintenance costs in the Playing Field. This was an increase of 5.9% but because of an increase in Batcombe's tax base it would only result in a 2.5% increase in the component of Council Tax resulting from the precept.

Griff Williams was thanked for undertaking the role of the Council's internal auditor and examining the Parish Council's accounts.

Questions from the Floor. Asked how many affordable houses were needed, the Chairman noted that there were seven households with a housing need but the plan would be to build four houses. He added that some interest had been shown and one potential site was possibly available.

District and County Councillors' Comments. Nigel Woollcombe-Adams noted that adult social care was a drain on the County Council's resources and that finances were tight. Dick Skidmore noted that some parishes had windfarms and solar farms boosting their finances. He added that the District Council's budget was shrinking and being a District Councillor was a difficult task.

Neighbourhood Watch Reports. Nick Sommer reported that he had taken over as the Neighbourhood Watch co-ordinator for Westcombe. He didn't receive a great deal from the police – not much seemed to be happening.

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 consist of a murder mystery evening.

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. Dick Skidmore commented that the Heritage Room was well worth a visit.

Question Time. The Chairman introduced the panel consisting of the District Councillor, County Councillor and MP. Mary La Trobe Bateman asked each of the panel how much they were paid and what they had achieved over the last year. The MP (£74,000) noted that because of the Government's small majority backbench MPs had considerable influence over legislation and were able to get bills amended. The County Councillor (£10,200 basic allowance) noted that the County Council had been rated inadequate for children's care but was making progress. The District Councillor (£3,400 including expenses) sat on the planning board which was very time consuming.

Richard Mitchell asked what the panel could suggest to deal with the severe problems caused by HGVs in the tiny lanes of the village and whether the development of the Bath & West showground would make this worse. The MP noted that he had 300 villages in his constituency with similar problems. He had met with the Transport Secretary and it was hoped that villages would be removed from HGV satnavs. It was noted that East European drivers tended to use car satnavs.

Nick Sommer noted that the Government had passed a series of Localism Acts with the purpose of devolving power to local communities but this seemed to have had little impact on the management of highways. He noted that a village in Devon had undertaken pothole repairs themselves and wondered if a similar scheme was being planned for Somerset. The County Councillor noted that insurance was a problem for volunteers working on the highways. The MP noted that Somerset had the second biggest budget for potholes outside London and Somerset was doing well on the league table for potholes – roads in Somerset were considerably better than those in Wiltshire and Hampshire.

Steve Gilbert asked about the provision of high speed broadband for the village and the confusion over what is happening. It was noted that Gigaclear had replaced BT as the provider of high speed broadband under Connecting Devon and Somerset. There was a rolling programme connecting high speed broadband which should result in 100% coverage by 2020. Janet Jones noted that Gigaclear provided fibre to premises and should be much quicker than BT. From June you would be able to put your postcode into the Connecting Devon and Somerset website to see when your property could be connected. Janet urged residents to register their interest with Gigaclear.

Tamara Stubbs asked a question about the dangers of electric cars in villages without pavements and whether they should be required to make a sound. The MP was willing to ask a minister.

The Chairman noted that all properties in Somerset were paying a precept to fund the Somerset Rivers Authority and asked if the Government had applied for EU funding to help pay for the floods in 2016. The MP stated that the Government had applied for funding, he didn't know how much but it wasn't enough to fund the Rivers Authority.

Anne Page thanked the panel for all that they did, noting that Dick Skidmore had served as a Councillor for 24 years and Nigel Woollcombe-Adams for 21 years. The Chairman thanked everyone for coming and for their contributions; and then closed the meeting.

Chris Wildridge
4th April 2018