

BATCOMBE PARISH COUNCIL

Clerk: Rob Sage

Tel: 01749 850934

e-mail: clerk@batcombe-parish-council-somerset.org.uk

Minutes of the Monthly Meeting of Batcombe Parish Council held on Wednesday 1st November 2023 in the Old School, Batcombe, commencing at 7.30pm.

Present - Councillors: Janet Jones – Chair, Jayne Cox, Peter Glaisher, Bryony Harling, Clare Kingston, Tom Price and Ian Sage.

Also Present: The Clerk – Rob Sage and one member of the public.

5498 – Apologies for Absence and Acceptance of Reasons for Absence: None.

5499 – Declarations of Interest: Jayne Cox declared an interest in the setting of the Parish Council grants as a member of the Village Hall Trust.

5500 – Public Participation: None.

5501 – Minutes of the Meeting held on Wednesday 4th October 2023 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

5502 – Matters Arising: LCN – Peter Glaisher reported on the meeting of the Shepton Local Community Network on October 18th. He felt that the meeting was largely irrelevant to Batcombe, discussing items such as bus links between Wells and Shepton Mallet and was more tailored to Councillors from Shepton. The Clerk reported that the next meeting on December 18th may be in Batcombe, although the organisers were having second thoughts when informed that the village was inaccessible in icy weather. Clare Kingston volunteered to attend the next meeting.

5503 – Parish Council Decision Making: Peter Glaisher requested this item be considered. He was concerned that the Parish Council was getting bogged down and not coming to decisions. He also felt that the Council was going back to things previously discussed. It was noted that the Parish Council needed to obtain quotes before making decisions that involved expenditure and so this meant that items needed to be considered at several meetings.

5504 – Somerset Councillor’s Report: No report had been received from the Somerset Councillor.

5505 – Footpaths and Highways: Hincombe Hill – It was noted that a drainage survey had been undertaken by Somerset Highways and work would be undertaken in due course to remove the blockage in the pipes.

Grit and determination – discussed as part of the Budget, see Minute 5509 below.

Fingerpost Restoration – discussed as part of the Budget, see Minute 5509 below.

Footpaths - It had been reported that, on the footpath along the river to Spargrove below Batcombe Vale, the path was disintegrating and dropping into the river. Jayne Cox reported that the Rights of Way department at the Somerset Council had agreed to cut the hedge on the Honeycliff Bridleway. Jayne also noted that water running down the Honeycliff Bridleway had ruined the surface again, making it very dangerous. It was noted that the unblocking of the Pugh’s Bottom footpath was a project for the Parish Council to consider in the future.

5506 – Playing Field – Maintenance Report: Clare Kingston had purchased paint for the swings. John Wiltshire had cut the Playing Field hedge without charge. It was noted that the willow structure needed attention.

5507 – Planning Applications: There were no planning applications to consider.

Planning Application Updates: The application for the change of use of part of a building at Lower Westcombe Farm from storage to a Brewery Taproom had been approved. And a European Protected Species Mitigation Licence had been granted for the planning permission for the Long Barn at Lodge Farm. The Chair reported an exchange of e-mails with the Somerset Council's enforcement officer regarding the field by the telephone exchange. It was also noted that the barn at Lower Eastcombe Farm had been taken down and was being rebuilt.

5508 – Bank Reconciliation and Update on Budget for Year Ending 31st March 2024: The bank reconciliation for the second quarter prepared by the Clerk was checked by the Chair at the end of the meeting.

A budget update had been distributed with the Agendas. This consisted of four columns of figures showing the accounts for the previous year, the budget for the current year, receipts and payments to 31st October in the current year and a projection for the current year based on expenditure to date.

Receipts were projected to be approximately £1,500 more than the budgeted figure because of the VAT claim that had been made in the current year rather than the previous one and the unbudgeted receipts for the contributions to the Coronation mugs and electricity for the Playing Field.

The projection for the Playing Field expenditure was roughly £100 less than budgeted, as the cost of the electricity supply would be less than expected following a refund from SSE at the start of the year.

The projection for the expenditure on Administration was likely to be roughly as budgeted, although the increase in the Clerk's salary for the current year was not yet known. Some items were slightly more than budgeted but this was balanced by there being no bank custody fee.

The projection for the expenditure on Grants was likely to be as budgeted. Other expenditure was likely to be £440 more than budgeted largely because of the cost of the Coronation mugs. The net cost of the Coronation mugs was £200 after contributions.

Overall, there was a projected surplus of £1,070 compared to a budgeted deficit of £75. This was mainly due to VAT claim received in the current year instead of the previous one. The projected funds at the end of the year were £11,710 of which approximately £1,000 would be earmarked for the allotments. This was a reserve well in excess of the recommended two thirds of the precept – although there were a number of potential items this reserve could be spent on. If undertaken, spending on fingerpost restoration and winter gritting was likely to take place in the current year – but was considered under the next item so that all items of expenditure could be considered together.

5509 – Budget and Precept for Year Ending 31st March 2025: A budget for the year ending 31st March 2025 had been distributed with the Agendas, along with a forecast for the years 2024-2027.

The Clerk noted that the budget and the forecast were produced on the basis of taking the projected figures for the current year (apart from one-off expenditures) and adding increases in line with inflation. The budget and forecast only included existing items of expenditure and did not include additional items of expenditure to allow the Council to see the impact of any additional expenditure which would need to be added to the budget and forecast.

Looking at the budget for 2024/25, the Clerk noted that the VAT refund should return to a more usual level of around £175. The allotment rent would be £350 if all the allotments were rented out. There was a small amount of funds being raised for the play equipment from the Mendip Lottery and bank interest should increase but was not a major source of income. The Parish Council could also ask the Fete Committee for a further contribution towards the cost of the electricity supply to the Playing Field.

The cost of the grass cutting might be higher than that projected for the current year depending on any increase in the price per cut. The figure for equipment maintenance was set at £750 as suggested in the previous year's budget discussions, but there should not be any major expenditure as the play equipment is still relatively new. The electricity supply would be higher than the current year because of the refund received in the current year.

The Clerk's salary was based on the salary scales for local government employees and the rates from April 2023 had not yet been agreed. Given the current economic uncertainties, it was difficult to judge what this year's increase might be, let alone future years. Other expenditure on administration was likely to be similar to that projected for this year, although there may be some increases in line with inflation – particularly likely for the insurance premium. There should not be an audit fee and hopefully no election costs (although the Parish Council does need to keep a reserve in case of a by-election).

Allotment expenses and the costs of maintaining the war memorial garden and the strimmer should be similar to those projected for the current year.

Without any additional expenditure the budget showed a deficit of £45 if the precept was unchanged at £9,925. This would leave £11,665 in the Parish Council funds at the end of 2024/25 of which around £1,000 would be earmarked for the allotments.

Looking at the forecast for the years 2023-2027 with the precept unchanged at £9,925 each year and no additional expenditure there would probably be deficits of around £750 and £1,130 in the following years. This would still leave reserves higher than our precept at the end of 2026/27.

The Parish Council then considered a number of possible additional items of expenditure to be included in the budget:

Grants. The level of grants had not changed for some years. After some discussion it was proposed to increase the level of the Burial Grant provided to the PCC for the maintenance of the churchyard by 50% to £300 and to increase the level of the smaller grants to local charities by 10% to £110 each. It was also agreed to review the level of the grant to the Village Hall Trust to ensure it covered the cost of the meetings of the Parish Council and other village organisations.

Playing Field. It was felt that the cost of minor repairs such as replacing the chains on the toddler swing would be covered in the maintenance budget of £750 and the Parish Council should keep sufficient reserves in case unexpected major repairs are needed – for example if a section of fencing needed replacing.

Notice Boards. The notice board in Westcombe was in a poor state and in need of either refurbishing again or replacing. Peter Glaisher volunteered to approach a local person to obtain a price for refurbishing the notice board. The Clerk noted that a good quality exterior notice board would cost around £500 - £600.

Elections. The next Parish Council election would take place in May 2027 and so the cost did not appear in the forecast. However, the Parish Council needed to maintain sufficient reserves to fund a contested election in 2027 and the last election in 2022 had cost £976. The Parish Council needed to maintain sufficient reserves to cover the cost of a by-election which would

potentially be double that of a contested normal election as the costs would not be shared with the Somerset Council.

War Memorials. The cost of cutting the war memorial grass had been included in the existing Budget. The Horticultural Society had donated money for shrubs in the war memorial garden and there should be no unexpected expenses as the walls around the Batcombe war memorial had been repaired within the last ten years and the Parish Council's insurance now covered damage to the war memorials.

Allotments. There were possible vacancies but the rent should cover expenses and the Parish Council held earmarked money in reserve to restore the field to its original state when required. The current lease would come to an end in April 2025 and the rent may increase if a new lease was agreed with the owners. The current rent is £220 a year, so any increase should be affordable. The Parish Council also had reserves to cover any unexpected expense.

Grit and Determination. Ian Sage had spoken to a representative of the NFU Mutual insurance company. It would cost an additional £38 to add cover for spreading grit to his insurance and this would only cover spreading using a tractor. There was also an issue with his no claims bonus which was worth several thousand pounds and could be affected by any accidents that were likely to take place if spreading grit on icy roads in poor driving conditions. Ian had asked if it would be possible to have separate insurance for a single vehicle to do the spreading but the insurers had not got back to him. He also noted that the price of spreading machines had doubled from the £2,750 previously quoted. In the light of these issues, it was decided to draw a line under the project and inform parishioners that the Parish Council had looked into volunteers doing the gritting but it was not feasible due to the issues over insurance. The purchase of additional grit bins costing £180 or £200 each depending on size was also considered but difficulties of locating the bins on the hills around Batcombe and of anyone spreading salt from them on icy roads meant this was not considered a feasible option. The issue of the school bus was discussed and it was felt that the bus should not be running in icy weather.

Fingerposts. Quotes had been received from Somerset Forge Ltd to refurbish two fingerposts in the current year - £915 for the fingerpost by the Playing Field and £1,035 for the fingerpost by the Old Post Office. The Parish Council also had the offer of a £250 grant per fingerpost from CPRE Somerset. This meant that the total cost of refurbishing seven fingerposts over several years would be around £5,250. It was agreed that the refurbishment of the fingerposts should be left. If volunteers were to undertake the refurbishment without any involvement of the Parish Council, they could do so at their own risk without the need for traffic lights or external contractors.

Footpaths. The possibility of a footpath project, for example at Pugh's Bottom, was considered. It was hoped the landowner would contribute to any such project but the Parish Council might contribute the cost of a couple of stiles, possibly costing £1,000 in all. The bridge below Batcombe Vale might be another project. To be considered at the next meeting.

A decision on the level of the precept was deferred to the December or January meeting. The Parish Council usually waited until the tax base for the coming year had been determined so that the impact of the precept on Council Tax would be known.

5510 - Authorisation of Payments: Councillors authorised the following payments:

£180.00 Kevin Gale – Grass cutting in October.

£26.16 Clare Kingston – Paint for swings (from Read Agriservices).

The Clerk noted that a payment meant for the Parochial Church Council had been accidentally paid into the Parish Council's bank account by bank transfer and had been passed onto the PCC.

5511 – Other Business – matters of information only: The Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service was undertaking a consultation about the level of their precept (Council Tax contribution) for the next year, which consisted of an online survey.

A neighbour dispute on Mill Lane was reported, where one neighbour had cut down trees on another's land. There was also a report of the bridge over the river at the bottom of Mill Lane being blocked.

5512 – Date and Time of Next Meeting: Wednesday 6th December 2023 at 7.30pm in The Old School.

Janet Jones
6/12/23