

# BATCOMBE PARISH COUNCIL

Clerk: Rob Sage

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## **Minutes of the Monthly Meeting of Batcombe Parish Council held on Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> December 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.

**5513 – Apologies for Absence and Acceptance of Reasons for Absence:** None.

**5514 – Declarations of Interest:** Jayne Cox and Ian Sage declared an interest in the setting of the Clerk's salary as relatives of the Clerk.

**5515 – Public Participation:** None.

**5516 – Minutes of the Meeting held on Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> October 2023** were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair after the deletion of the last sentence in the paragraph on fingerposts in Minute 5509.

**5517 – Matters Arising:** LCN – The next meeting of the Shepton Local Community Network would take place on Thursday January 11<sup>th</sup> at Shape Mendip. The organisers had inquired about coming to Batcombe in December but reconsidered on hearing that the village was inaccessible in icy weather. Clare Kingston had volunteered to attend the meeting. There was a discussion of how relevant the items discussed at the LCN meeting were to Batcombe and some disagreement over this with a suggestion that possibly the headings being considered were relevant but that the detail was not. It was suggested that the Parish Council should look at a Community Plan but it was noted that this was a lot of work and was intended for larger communities. It was agreed to have a discussion on the items being considered at the next LCN meeting at the next Parish Council meeting. It was also noted that there would be an online meeting on December 13<sup>th</sup> to prepare for the January LCN meeting and the Clerk would send details of this meeting to Councillors. Jayne Cox volunteered to attend the following LCN meeting.

Playing Field Hedge – it was agreed that a letter of thanks should be sent to John Wiltshire who had cut the outside of the Playing Field hedge free of charge.

**5518 – Allotments:** Six allotments (held by three allotment holders) had been paid for and there was one definite vacancy. The remaining three allotment rents would be chased up once the bank statement had been received (to see if they had paid by bank transfer). There were likely to be two vacancies and little interest had been shown in the vacant allotment that had been advertised. The situation to be reviewed in the Spring.

**5519 – Somerset Councillors' Report:** No report had been received from the Somerset Councillors.

**5520 – Footpaths and Highways:** Grit and Determination (winter gritting) – it had been decided at the last meeting to draw a line under this project due to the issues over insurance and the potential impact on farmers' no claims bonuses. Somerset Highways to be asked for

additional grit and if this was not available to purchase bags of grit (rather than salt). Ian Sage to consult with the Clerk over the number of bags needed. There had been a request for grit towards the bottom of Crows Hill.

Water on Westcombe Hill – this had been reported to Somerset Highways by Peter Glaisher.

Footpath to Spargrove – It was noted that the bridge where the footpath was being eroded crossed the land of three different landowners. Peter Glaisher volunteered to talk to the landowners concerned.

No HGV sign at Brickhouse Farm – Wanstrow Parish Council had considered the possibility of erecting No HGV signs at the junction by Brickhouse Farm which is in Wanstrow and were happy for this to happen. It was agreed to make a request from Somerset Highways, although the financial position of the Somerset Council may prevent this from happening. Ian Sage suggested that the signs should be erected on the Batcombe side of Brickhouse Farm.

Ash Tree Cottages – a Residents Only sign had been erected on the verge outside Ash Tree Cottages. Apparently, it should have been erected inside the hedge and will be moved.

Honeycliff Hedge – the garden hedge at Honeycliff Cottage was overhanging the road and it was agreed to write to the owner.

Honeycliff Bridleway – the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group was considering the provision of funding for a pond to prevent excess water from running down the bridleway. Additional funding was needed for stone to repair the surface of the bridleway.

Churchyard Wall – Peter Glaisher reported that work would be beginning on securing the retaining wall for the churchyard which had cracked in several places.

Baileys Lane Footpath – it was noted that the security fencing around Ravenswood which had been blocking the footpath from Baileys Lane when open had now been removed.

**5521 – Playing Field – Maintenance Report:** The water supply to the Playing Field had been turned off at the stop taps below the standpipe and beside the bus shelter. Ian Sage was thanked for draining the water pipes in the bus shelter.

The contract for the supply of electricity to the Playing Field was due to expire on January 31<sup>st</sup> and SSE were offering a new contract with a reduction in the unit price from 43.875 p/kWh to 28.622 p/kWh, but an increase in the quarterly charge from £41.99 to £57.58. Given that all energy companies were transferring costs to the standing charge it was agreed to accept the new contract.

The willow structure was thought to need pruning and it was suggested that a group of volunteers could tackle it in January.

**5522 – Planning Applications:** Planning Application Nos: 2023/2186/HSE & 2023/2187/LBC Proposed extension to existing residential property. Donegal Cottage, Kale Street, Batcombe Householder Application & Listed Building Consent. The applications were to renew the planning permission and Listed Building Consent for the rear extension to Donegal Cottage that had been granted three years previously. The Parish Council recommended approval as there were no changes to the previous applications.

**Planning Application Updates:** Land at Hincombe Hill – the Enforcement Officer has recommended serving an enforcement notice on those residing on the field next to the telephone exchange requiring them to cease residing on the land; remove their caravan and camper van; remove all structures, chattels and possessions associated with their unauthorised residential use of the land; and return the land to the condition prior to the unauthorised change of use.

**5523 - Review of the Parish Council's Connection with External Bodies:** specifically, the Council's membership of the Somerset Association of Local Councils and the Clerk's membership of the Society of Local Council Clerks.

Membership of both of these bodies was very helpful in providing information and advice on matters relating to the work of the Parish Council and would make the Clerk's job more difficult if they were not available. Membership of SALC would cost around £125 in 2024 and paying for the Clerk's membership of the SLCC will cost a similar amount. Councillors agreed to fund the continued membership of these two bodies.

**5524 – Employment Matters – the Clerk's Salary:** The National Joint Council for Local Government Services had finally reached agreement on new pay scales for 2023/24. The agreement consisted of a flat rate increase of £1,925 across all pay scales up SCP 43 (pro rata for part time employees). This would mean the Clerk's salary (on SCP 12) increasing from £12.73 an hour to £13.73 an hour (an increase of 7.86%) backdated to April 2023. The National Association of Local Councils recommended that these salary scales are paid to all Clerks with the standard contract of employment and the Parish Council agreed the increase in the Clerk's salary, which was in line with the Clerk's Contract of Employment.

**5525 – Budget and Precept for Year Ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 2025:** A letter from Cllr Bill Revans, the Leader of Somerset Council, regarding the dire financial position of the Somerset Council and the possibility of devolving assets and services to town and parish councils in an effort to save money, had been distributed to Parish Councillors before the meeting. It was noted that there were no Somerset Council assets in Batcombe to be devolved and as a small parish council it would be impractical to consider running services. However, there were a number of services relevant to Batcombe on the list of those that might potentially be devolved and these included the cutting of verges, drain jetting, new road signage, footpath repairs, fly tipping and emptying of litter bins. Although it would not be practical for a small parish council to manage any of these services on its own – there was the possibility of the Somerset Council charging parish councils for services provided to their parish in the future and it was felt prudent to retain sufficient reserves in case this should happen.

An updated budget for the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 2025 and an updated forecast for the years 2024-2027 had been distributed to Councillors with the Agendas. The projected figures for the current year (included on the budget for the 2024/25 for comparison) had been updated to take into account the proposed increase in the Clerk's salary backdated to April. This reduced the projected surplus from £1,074 to £912, leaving £11,143 in Parish Council funds at the end of the current year.

The budget had been updated to include the impact of an allotment vacancy, a revised estimate of the electricity costs, the Clerk's increased salary, the proposed increases in the grants, and a guestimate for the cost of refurbishing the Westcombe notice board. This gave a projected deficit of £760 instead of the £45 suggested at the previous meeting. The forecast showed deficits of £1,175 and £1,550 in the following two years if there was no change in precept and no additional expenditure, but this still left reserves of over £8,000 at the end of 2026/27.

The possibility of a footpath project, at either Pugh's Bottom or the Batcombe Vale bridge, was considered but there was no idea of costs and the landowners may contribute to these. It was felt that any costs in 2024/25 could come from reserves.

After some debate, it was agreed to pay the annual grant to Mendip Community Transport as it was agreed that they were providing services in the area, even if stretched budgets meant that these were not always easy to access.

A decision on the level of the precept was deferred until the January meeting when the tax base for 2024/25 should have been determined, but in principle it was agreed to keep the precept at its current level of £9,925.

**5526 - Authorisation of Payments: Councillors authorised the following payment:**

£100.00 Mendip Community Transport – Parish Council grant.

SSE had sent an electricity invoice for £78.32 based on an estimated reading of 165 units of electricity. The Clerk had provided a correct reading of 23. No invoice had been received from Kevin Gale although there was thought to have been one cut in November.

**5527 – Other Business** – matters of information only: the Somerset Association of Local Councils had informed the Parish Council that their Chief Executive Justin Robinson had resigned and would be leaving SALC in January after 10 years with the Association.

**5528 – Date and Time of Next Meeting:** Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> January 2024 at 7.30pm in The Old School.

*Janet Jones*

*10/1/24*