

The Annual Parish Meeting for the Parish of Batcombe

was held on Wednesday 6th April 2022 at 7.30pm in the Jubilee Hall.

Janet Jones, Vice Chair of the Parish Council presided. Four members of the Parish Council and the Clerk attended, together with a further twenty-three parishioners. Apologies were received from David Stevens, Justin Witcombe, Peter Sheldon and Michael Gay – District Councillor.

Janet Jones **welcomed** parishioners to the meeting.

Minutes of the 2019 Annual Parish Meeting were read by the Clerk, agreed and signed.

There were no **Matters Arising**.

In the absence of the Chairman, Janet Jones gave the **Chairman's Report**, noting that this was the first Annual Parish Meeting since 2019. Although there was a legal requirement for an Annual Parish Meeting to be held each year, there was no requirement for the Parish Council to organise it and no sanction for not holding them. The Parish Council therefore followed advice from the National Association of Local Councils not to hold an Annual Parish Meeting during the pandemic.

The Parish Council did not meet between March and July 2020 because of the first national lockdown. The Government passed emergency legislation that allowed Parish Councils to meet online for a year from May 2020 and the Parish Council held its first meeting on Zoom in July. While not ideal, Zoom did allow local residents to attend Parish Council meetings from the comfort of their own homes. The Government did not renew the emergency legislation in 2021 but recommended that Parish Councils did not meet in person until the end of June 2021. Following the advice of the National Association of Local Councils the Parish Council therefore delegated its decision-making powers to the Clerk in consultation with an online meeting of Councillors. One such meeting was held at the end of May before the Parish Council resumed in-person meetings with a meeting in the Village Hall car park at the end of June. Since then monthly meetings had been held in the Jubilee Hall which allowed more space and ventilation than the Old School.

Parish Council elections took place in May 2019. Five people were nominated as Councillors and as there are seven places on the Council, these five – Mary Comley, Jayne Cox, Peter Glaisher, Janet Jones and Ian Sage – were elected uncontested. Five people expressed an interest in filling the remaining two places, and after a paper ballot at the May 2019 meeting, David Stevens and Justin Witcombe were co-opted onto the Council.

Parish Council elections are normally held every four years, but had been brought forward a year to to May 2022 to co-incide with elections to the new unitary council for Somerset. (This would save the Parish Council a considerable sum of money in election costs should the election be contested.)

At the May 2019 Annual Parish Council Meeting, Mary Comley was elected Parish Council Chairman in place of John Sommer who had not stood for re-election, and Janet Jones was elected as Vice Chair. The May 2020 Annual Parish Council Meeting could not take place because of the national lockdown and the Government's emergency legislation meant that those elected the previous year continued in office for another year. At the May 2021 meeting Mary stood down as Chairman and David Stevens was elected in her place with Janet continuing as Vice Chair. David Stevens was not standing for re-election to the Parish Council and so a new Chairman would need to be elected at the Annual Parish Council Meeting in May 2022. Mary and David were thanked for their time serving as Parish Council Chairman.

District Council elections took place in May 2019 and Michael Gay from Wanstrow was elected District Councillor for the Postlebury Ward (which includes Batcombe) in place of Dick

Skidmore who had not stood for re-election. Our County Councillor for the last five years had been Nigel Hewitt-Cooper from Baltonsborough (elected to the Mendip South Division which includes Batcombe in May 2017). Michael and Nigel were thanked for their support during the previous three years.

In 2020 the County Council put a proposal to the Secretary of State to replace the county and district councils in Somerset with a single unitary authority based in Taunton. The District Councils put forward a counter proposal for two unitary authorities in East and West Somerset but the Secretary of State decided on the single unitary council. Elections to the new unitary council would take place in May 2022 when two councillors would be elected to the Mendip South Division. These councillors would be responsible for running the County Council and preparing for the new unitary Council which would come into being in April 2023 – when Mendip District Council would cease to exist.

There were 14 planning applications in 2019/20, compared to 15 the year before. Of these six were for tree works in the Conservation Area, three were for Listed Building Consent and the remaining five were for full planning permission or householder planning permission. Of the five full or householder planning applications - four were approved and one was withdrawn.

Despite the pandemic lockdowns, there were 23 planning applications in 2020/21. Of these 11 were for tree works in the Conservation Area, two were for Listed Building Consent, one was to vary the conditions on an existing planning permission and the remaining nine were for full planning permission or householder planning permission. Of the nine full or householder planning applications - seven were approved, one was withdrawn and one (Valley View Farm) had yet to be decided.

In 2021/22 there were a further 20 planning applications. Of these seven were for tree works in the Conservation Area, two were for Listed Building Consent, one was to vary the conditions on existing planning permission and the remaining ten were for full planning permission or householder planning permission. Of the ten full or householder planning applications - eight were approved, one was withdrawn and one (The Three Horseshoes) had yet to be decided.

The planning application that had attracted most attention was for a Paragraph 79 House at Valley View Farm. Paragraph 79 of the National Planning Policy Framework allows a house of “exceptional quality” to be built in open countryside. Representatives of the applicant’s planning consultants attended a Zoom meeting of the Parish Council in February 2021 to talk about the proposed house, which was then considered by the Parish Council at the following meeting in March 2021 also on Zoom – a meeting which 40 members of the public joined. After a number of representations were made and considerable discussion, the Parish Council decided to recommend refusal on the grounds that the proposed house did not meet the requirements of Paragraph 79. The District Council had yet to make a decision on the application. A subsequent application for prior approval of the conversion of a barn at Valley View Farm into a dwelling house had been approved. It should be noted that the Parish Council is not consulted on applications for prior approval and the District Council has limited grounds on which it can refuse permission.

Another planning application that proved quite controversial was that for a tennis court at Rockwells House. This application was withdrawn twice to make amendments, once before the Parish Council had considered it and once after the Parish Council had recommended refusal. In May 2021 a revised application with the tennis court re-orientated to keep the most of it within the existing garden was considered by a consultative meeting of Parish Councillors on Zoom, who advised the Clerk to recommend approval.

In September 2021 the Parish Council recommended approval of an application for a first storey extension to The Three Horseshoes, but the District Council had not yet made a decision on this application. In April 2021 the Parish Council had written in support of the nomination of The Three Horseshoes as an Asset of Community Value – which meant that, if The Three Horseshoes

was put up sale, the sale could be delayed for six months to allow the community time to raise funds to purchase it.

In the past music festivals at Gilcombe Farm, outside Bruton but overlooking Batcombe, have caused serious disturbance (depending on the wind direction) - particularly the 2017 Shindig Weekender. The Parish Council had made representations about these festivals, and the 2020 Shindig Weekender was planning to move elsewhere before the pandemic brought a halt to all music festivals. In 2021 Farmfest did go ahead at Gilcombe Farm, but without any reported disturbances.

The Parish Council continues to be very concerned about the state of some of the roads in and around the parish, and follows up complaints with Somerset Highways. Particular concerns in the last three years included the state of the road to Bruton at Snakelake, with reports appearing in local papers; and the subsidence on Hincombe Hill.

New provisions in the Highway Code for the safe passing of pedestrians and horse riders meant that it was more important than ever that landowners kept their roadside hedges cut back and the Parish Council was planning to contact those who need reminding of their responsibility.

Six years previously Somerset Highways had suspended its precautionary salting in Batcombe because of difficulties in passing parked cars. The road through Batcombe had been one of the few non-A roads in the county to be salted in recognition of the difficulty of getting in or out of the village when all the roads are untreated. In 2018 the financial difficulties of the County Council meant that the pre-salting network was significantly reduced. In 2019 most of these cuts were reversed, but despite the efforts of the Parish Council the road through Batcombe remained unsalted.

Thanks were paid to Dominic Conway for all his work in the cutting of the Playing Field grass before his sudden and untimely death in 2021. Thanks were also given to Kevin Gale from Wanstrow who had taken on the cutting of the grass.

Gary Butler was thanked for cutting of the Playing Field hedge and the willow structures on a regular basis. And Tom Price and his volunteers were thanked for tackling the willow structure in the Playing Field.

The Parish Council faced an ongoing battle with moles in the Playing Field and had to employ the services of a mole catcher on several occasions over the previous three years.

In October 2019 the Parish Council had to remove the wooden multiplay equipment in the Playing Field after damage by vandals revealed that rot in the supporting posts meant that the structure was no longer safe. A Parish Council Working Party recommended replacing the multiplay unit with a new metal multi-play unit and a wheel-chair accessible roundabout and adding some additional equipment including a new nest swing, new goalposts and a basketball hoop. After obtaining three comparable quotes for this equipment, in the summer of 2020 the Parish Council successfully applied for a grant of £59,000 from the Viridor Credits Environmental Company.

The Parish Council launched an appeal to raise funds for the new play equipment (as the grant required 10% of the cost to be raised locally) and was very grateful to all those who generously contributed to this appeal. Particular thanks were given to Clare Kingston whose Bingo Evenings have raised £2,195 over three years and to our County Councillor, Nigel Hewitt-Cooper who provided a grant of £1,250 from the County Council's Improving Lives grant scheme. Thanks were also paid to those who supported the bonfire party in November 2019, which raised £617 despite the wet weather. In total just over £10,000 was raised or donated towards the new play equipment.

After a consultation with residents and users of the Playing Field that was made more complicated by the coronavirus restrictions in place, a revised quote of £62,334 from Sutcliffe Play South West was accepted as this was considered to offer the best quality equipment. Thanks

were paid to Ian Sage and other volunteers whose work in preparing for the new equipment by removing the play bark and supports for the old zip wire helped reduce the quote from Sutcliffe Play. The new equipment was installed in April 2021. The formal opening of the new equipment took place in August 2021 with speeches, poetry and the unveiling on plaques, although the wet weather meant that the live music and picnic had to take place in the Jubilee Hall.

With the money left over from the fundraising the Parish Council had purchased a new self-closing pedestrian gate that would be installed in the Playing Field and a new mat, nets and cricket stumps for the cricket net. The Parish Council was also planning to lay the Playing Field hedge in the near future.

Three years ago the future of the allotments had been uncertain as several were vacant and there was little interest shown in taking these on. However, thanks to our District Councillor, who made the allotment vacancies known in Wanstrow, all ten allotments were then taken, and during the pandemic, we had a waiting list of people wanting an allotment. Over the previous couple of years there had been a turnover of allotment holders and there was now one vacant allotment. Thanks were given to Peter Glaisher for taking on responsibility for co-ordinating the allotment holders and ensuring that the allotments field is kept tidy.

Each year the Parish Council made a grant of £300 to the Village Hall Trust; of which roughly £150 paid for the cost of the Council's own meetings and the remaining £150 met the cost of village organisations using the Old School for committee meetings free of charge.

The Parish Council also made grants of £200 to the Parochial Church Council for the maintenance of the churchyard; and grants of £100 each to Mendip Community Transport and the Mendip Citizens Advice Bureau.

The Parish Council website continued to develop since being established ten years previously and in that time had had over 257,500 visits. Minutes of past Parish Council meetings could be downloaded from the site in addition to the Agenda of the next or most recent meeting and various other documents the Council was required to publish. There was a list of planning applications and their status with a link to the District Council's planning portal where more information about applications could be obtained. Local news and events in the parish were updated weekly and there were pages on the allotments, the Playing Field and the history of the parish as well as useful links to local organisations and pages describing the many and various enterprises related to Batcombe. Government legislation – The Transparency Code for Smaller Authorities – required the Parish Council to publish a range on financial information on its website including financial statements, budgets, audit reports and any items of expenditure over £100. The Parish Council also had to ensure that the website complied with new accessibility standards and had published a website accessibility statement.

The Emergency Plan had been updated with a new Community Emergency Management Team appointed following the Parish Council elections in 2019. The members of this Team were the Parish Council Chairman and Vice Chair, the Clerk and Justin Witcombe. The Emergency Plan would need to be updated again after the elections in May 2022.

The Sewage Treatment Plant at Ash Tree Cottages had been out of action for over two years before a new treatment plant was installed much to the inconvenience of the residents and their neighbours. Thanks were paid to our District Councillor who ensured that the Hastoe Housing Association eventually dealt with the issue after much prompting.

Thanks were paid to Justin Witcombe and to Jayne Cox for representing the Parish Council on the Village Hall Trust. And to Tom Price for organising a band of volunteers to tackle the Himalyan Balsam in the parish in 2020. Tom hoped to organise more such environment projects in the parish in the future.

In January 2020 the Parish Council decided to increase its precept for 2020/21 by £200 to £9,950 to help with increasing administration costs. In January 2021 the precept for 2021/22 was

reduced by £25 to avoid any increase in the component of Council Tax due to the precept; and in January 2022 the precept for 2022/23 was left unchanged at £9,925.

Griff Williams was thanked for undertaking the internal audit of the Parish Council's accounts over the previous three years. The Council's accounts were no longer subject to external audit - with the Parish Council being required to publish its accounts on its website instead under the Government's Transparency Code for Smaller Authorities.

District and County Councillors' Comments. The Clerk read a written report from District Councillor, which reflected on the Covid pandemic, the fundraising for the new play equipment, the closure of The Three Horseshoes, the new unitary Somerset Council and the hard work undertaken by Parish Councillors for their community.

Questions or Comments from Parishioners. There was a question as to whether the new play equipment in the Playing Field was being used and the answer was an emphatic 'yes'. There were also questions on what the Parish Council had done to encourage people to drive according to the road conditions; and to stop HGVs getting into the village.

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

DRAFT