

BATCOMBE PARISH COUNCIL

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Minutes of the Monthly Meeting of Batcombe Parish Council held on Wednesday 4th December 2024 in the Old School, Batcombe, commencing at 7.30pm.

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

Also Present: The Clerk.

5690 – Apologies for Absence and Acceptance of Reasons for Absence: Clare Kingston and Ian Sage – both unwell.

5691 – Declarations of Interest: None.

5692 – Public Participation: None.

5693 – Minutes of the Meeting held on Wednesday 6th November 2024 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

5694 – Matters Arising: Action Table – The actions listed on the Action Table from the last meeting were checked and the following points noted:

Somerset Rivers Authority – The Clerk had responded to the Somerset Rivers Authority for details of recent and historic flooding events in the parish.

Mill Cottage Letter – The Clerk had sent the letter to the owners of Mill Cottage but no response had been received.

Allotments – a former allotment holder to be asked to remove the metal chest from his former allotments.

Grit Bin – Ian Sage to get details of available bins. Clare Kingston had suggested that the bin be placed by the Westcombe Dairy entrance. It was agreed that a green bin should be purchased and placed by the telephone box in Westcombe.

Road Drains – The Clerk had passed on a resident's concerns about the maintenance of the road drains to Somerset Highways who had responded with details of the schedule of works for maintaining the gulleys and how to report a problem. Somerset Highways had also provided a map of all the gulleys in the parish but the scale of the map meant it would be difficult to locate particular gulleys from the map.

Electricity Supply Quotes – considered below.

Road Closed Signs – the sign at Hedgestocks had been moved to the top of Holly Hill when that road had been blocked by a tree. A police sign had been left at Crows Hill. The sign at the Batcombe War Memorial was still there and would remain there until another sign appeared or it was needed.

5695 – Somerset Councillors' Report and Shepton Local Community Network (LCN): A written report from Councillor Claire Sully had been received and distributed to Parish Councillors.

The meeting of the LCN Highways Working Group due to take place on November 21st had been cancelled at short notice without explanation. The Chair had been due to attend.

5696 – Tourist Tax Working Party: The Chair read a prepared text reporting on the Working Party: *At the November meeting of the Parish Council it was agreed to set up a Working Party to conduct a feasibility study into the idea of introducing a Tourist Tax. The Working Party would consist of Tim Chater, Steve Gilbert and two representatives from the Parish Council – Tom Price and the Chair, Janet Jones. The Working Group have met twice since the November Parish Council meeting. The scope of the Group has moved on from the Tourist Tax per se to focus on a group to look at community activities (“Batcombe Action Group” possibly) that would benefit the whole parish with funds raised from both visitors and residents. Community activities would be grouped into broad areas such as information, transport and social and could include activities such as litter picking, signage of roads and paths, a parish directory and existing parish activities such as care of the war memorial garden and the Church border. The Tourist tax principle would be the method used to raise funds from visitors. It was felt that there would need to be a committee to organise this and a Chair to run it. None of the Working Group felt that they were able to be Chair of such a group.*

The Working Party would meet again in January. The Chair felt that the first meeting had been encouraging but there had been a change of direction at the second meeting. It was clear that there was no one prepared to lead the proposed group and there was no urgent need for the things it was proposed the Group should do as many of the proposed activities had been undertaken by the Parish Council or by volunteers on a casual basis. Tom Price was concerned that the Parish Council should avoid being involved in making what might be controversial decisions over how the money raised should be spent. A decision would be made on the future of the Working Party after its next meeting.

5697 – Allotments: The Clerk reported that two allotment holders were known to have paid their rent for a total of four allotments. The other allotment holders had not said whether they had paid or wished to give up their allotment. The position would become clearer when the November bank statement was received and the Clerk would chase up those who had not paid. Peter Glaisher would speak to the allotment holder who had three allotments to confirm if he wished to continue to rent these allotments in the longer term as he was undertaking most of the work on the communal areas of the field and without him the allotments were not viable. The future of the allotments to be discussed in April. If it was decided not to continue with the allotments the remaining allotment holders would need to be given 12 months’ notice from November 2025. The Parish Council would then have from November 2026 to March 2027 to put the field back to its original condition.

5698 – Footpaths and Highways: LCN Highways Working Group – as noted previously the meeting on November 21st had been cancelled at short notice.

Speeding - The Traffic Engineer had supplied speed data for Batcombe, collected from vehicle trackers and SatNavs. Data was provided for the same points as the 2008 survey: Millards Hill and outside the Playing Field. At Millards Hill average speed was 19.6mph and the 85th percentile was 24.7mph (85th percentile meaning that 85% of speeds are at or lower than this figure). On Kale Street the average speed was 18.6mph and the 85th percentile 25mph. Outside the Playing Field, the average speed was 12.6mph and the 85th percentile 21.9mph. These speeds were lower than those collected in 2008 for both locations. In 2008 data was collected over nine days and average speeds varied between 22 and 24mph and the 85th percentile between 28 and 30mph at Millards Hill; and there were average speeds of 17-20mph and 22-25mph for the 85th percentile outside the Playing Field.

Traffic Management were able to do a similar survey to what they did in 2008 at cost. The cost used to be £250 but they would need to check this and it may be higher. They could also do a video survey of vulnerable road users such as pedestrians, cyclists etc, but the cost would likely be higher and would involve cameras watching Kale Street.

It was felt that the issue was poor driving rather than actual speeding. The Clerk to put the speed data in the parish magazine along with a request for people to drive to the conditions of the road not the speed limit. It was also suggested that notes about keeping dogs under control and wearing light clothing when walking in the dark be included in the magazine.

HGVs – Three instances of HGVs getting stuck in the village had been reported in November. On November 7th a HGV got stuck at Westcombe Hill, Portway Hill and various other places taking three hours to get through the village. On November 11th a lorry got stuck on Holly Hill while attempting a delivery to Brickells Ice Cream. And on November 20th a HGV got stuck by Boords Farm. It was noted that there were issues with parked cars on the junction at the top of Holly Hill and on the corner by Boords Farm. There was nothing further the Parish Council could do apart from remind people about the No HGV signs. It was noted that the sign on the A359 junction had been damaged when a car had crashed and would need repairing. A note about parked cars to be placed in the parish magazine.

5699 – Playing Field – Maintenance Report: Ian Sage was thanked for turning off the water in the Playing Field now that the weather was getting colder.

The Clerk had contacted a comparison website to obtain a quote with the lowest standing charge for the electricity supply to the Playing Field. The quotes had been sent to Parish Councillors before the meeting. The lowest standing charge was for 42p a day or £153.20 a year for a three year contract. In comparison the current supplier SSE was charging 63.1p per day or £230.10 a year. The current contract expired at the end of January and SSE were willing to renew the contract with a standing charge of 64.01p per day for two year contract. The Clerk noted that energy prices were changing by the day and it was expected that standing charges would continue to increase each year.

Peter Glaisher stated that the Fete Committee were considering supplying the electricity for the Fete by a cable running across the road from the Church. It was agreed to defer accepting a new contract until the Fete Committee had found out if it was possible to do this. If this was the case the Parish Council could ask for the electricity to be disconnected as electricity was only needed for the Fete.

5700 – Planning Applications: There were no planning applications to consider.

Planning Application Updates: There were no updates to report.

5701 - 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 cost £127 in 2024 but the fee was likely to increase significantly in 2025 as demand on SALC's advice increase as parish and town councils took on more responsibilities from the Somerset Council. The Clerk's membership of the SLCC cost £112 in 2024 and was likely to be a similar amount in 2025. Councillors agreed to fund the continued membership of the two bodies.

5702 – Budget and Precept for Year Ending 31st March 2026: An updated budget for the year ending 31st March 2026 had been distributed with the Agendas, along with an updated forecast for the years 2025-2028.

The budget had been updated to include the fact that the Parish Council would be liable for an Employers National Insurance contribution of around £50 as the Lower Earnings Limit would be reduced to £5,000 from April 2025 and the Clerk's salary was estimated to be around £5,350 in 2025/26. (The Employers' NI contribution rate would also increase to 15% in April 2025).

As noted in the previous item, SALC had indicated that their affiliation fees would increase significantly in 2025/26 due to greater demands on their support services. Although it was not clear what significantly would mean, the budget for SALC membership had been increased to £150.

In line with the decision made at the previous meeting the proposed precept in the budget has been increased to £10,500. This was an increase of 4.22%. This gave a projected deficit next year of £170 instead of the £675 suggested at the previous meeting and projected reserves of £11,150 at the end of 2025/26. SALC recommended unallocated reserves should be between a third and two thirds of the precept, and for a precept of £10,500 this means between £3,500 and £7,000. £1,000 of the Council's reserves were earmarked for the allotments, so if £4,000 was earmarked for future highways expenditure, that would leave unallocated reserves of £6,150. The Parish Council had decided to earmark reserves for highways expenditure at the previous meeting but had not set a figure.

The forecast showed deficits of £930 and £2,225 in the following two years if there was no change in precept and no additional expenditure, leaving reserves of £8,000 at the end of 2027/28, of which only £3,000 would be unallocated. This indicated that the precept in 2027/28 would need to increase by a minimum of £500.

A decision on the level of the precept for 2025/26 was deferred until the January meeting when the tax base for 2025/26 should have been determined so that the Council can gauge the impact of any changes in the precept on Council Tax.

5703 - Authorisation of Payments: Councillors authorised the following payment:

£180.00 Kevin Gale – Grass cutting in the Playing Field (two cuts in November).

5704 – Other Business – matters of information only. The Clerk reported that the Council's insurance brokers, Clear Council Insurance, have a new insurer partner, Ecclesiastical. They believed that this new partnership would enhance the service they provided to parish councils. The change in insurers would happen when the Council's insurance is renewed in June and the terms of the Council's current long term agreement would not change.

The Clerk had been approached by a software company quoting over £1,000 for accounting software for the Parish Council. This was considered too much for a small parish council and the Clerk felt that the software was too complex for the Council's needs. However, the Clerk felt that it would be worth considering simpler, cheaper accounting software designed specifically for small parish councils and he was aware of two versions that would cost £75 and £78 a year. It was agreed that the Clerk should research the software and report back at a future meeting.

Jayne Cox asked the Council to consider revising its Emergency Plan to take into account the possibility of a nuclear or cyber attack.

5705 - Date of Next Meeting: Wednesday 8th January 2025 at 7.30pm in the Old School.