

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 6th November 2024 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 six members of the public.

5673 – Apologies for Absence and Acceptance of Reasons for Absence: Somerset Councillor Rob Reed.

5674 – Declarations of Interest: Ian Sage and Jayne Cox declared an interest in the authorisation of the Clerk's salary increase as relatives of the Clerk.

5675 – Planning Applications: Planning Application 2024/1765/PAA – Change of use of 7 agricultural buildings to 9 residential dwelling houses and associated building operations. Beeches Farm, Wanstrow – Prior Approval Agricultural to Residential. (Notification only). The application is for prior approval for the conversion of agricultural buildings to residential use, which the Parish Council is notified of but not consulted on. The agricultural buildings that it was proposed to convert were on land opposite Batcombe Lodge. The applicant stated that he was proposing to convert the farm buildings to residential use as his farm was no longer viable due to TB. The neighbour from Batcombe Lodge expressed concern at the scale of the development, which would change the character of the whole area. The applicant's planning consultant noted that the limit for Class Q conversions had recently been extended to 10 houses to encourage larger numbers of conversions. It was felt to be a positive that there were smaller units included in the proposal rather than just large ones. There was a concern over increased traffic on the narrow lane from Batcombe, although it was noted that there was already significant traffic from events at Penny Square Barn. It was noted that the Somerset Council could only object to the application on very limited grounds. The Clerk to inform the case officer of the Parish Council's concern over increased traffic on the narrow lane.

Planning Application 2024/1952/HSE – Install 10 photovoltaic panels to garage roof. Wisteria Cottage, Westcombe – Householder Application. The Parish Council recommended approval as there were no objections to the proposed installation of photovoltaic panels.

Planning Application 2024/1868/TCA – Larch – Fell. Catalpa – Crown lift to approx. 18ft. Provis, Batcombe – Works/Felling Trees in a CA. The two trees are on land opposite Provis, next to Rockwells House. The Parish Council had no objection to the proposed tree works.

Planning Application Updates: There were no updates to report.

5676 – Public Participation: Tim Chater asked what was being done about the Tourist Tax as he did not feel the Minutes of the last meeting were clear about this. The Chair summarised the discussion at the previous meeting – the Tourist Tax was felt to be a good idea but there was concern at the suggestion that the Parish Council do all the work as Parish Councillors did not feel that they were able to take this on. Tim Chater expressed his concern at the unwillingness to take this on. Bryony Harling noted that there was a lack of clear research into support within the parish, no examples of it being done elsewhere or suggestion of how it might be

administered. Peter Glaisher stated that the Church had approached local B&Bs for support in fundraising but had not had much response. Steve Gilbert stated that he and Tim Chater wanted a small group to look into it but they did not have the time to do it themselves. After further discussion of issues already outlined, it was agreed to set up a Working Party to conduct a feasibility study into the idea. The Working Party to consist of Tim Chater, Steve Gilbert and two representatives from the Parish Council – Tom Price and the Chair. The Working Group to meet the following Wednesday.

5677 – Minutes of the Meeting held on Wednesday 2nd October 2024 were agreed as a correct record - after noting that the name Jane in Minute 5665 third paragraph should be Jayne - and were signed by the Chair.

5678 – Matters Arising: Action Table – The actions listed on the Action Table from the last meeting were checked and the following points noted:

Mill Cottage Letter – The Clerk requested confirmation of what should be included in the letter A letter to be written and left at Mill Cottage by the Clerk.

Speeding – The Clerk to investigate the cost of a new speed survey.

War Memorial Garden – to be removed from the Action Table.

Electricity Supply Quotes – the Clerk had been told that Tomato Energy provided a low standing charge,

Playing Field Plaque – had been posted on Facebook in October with a photo; to be kept on the Action Table.

Kale Street Parties – The Chair had spoken to the PCSO who had stated that the police could only do something if there was evidence of anti-social behaviour.

Grit Bin – Ian Sage to get details of available bins.

Road Closed Signs – A local resident had reported these and they had been picked up – apart from one that had been placed in the War Memorial garden. Peter Glaisher to take this sign to the Hedgestocks crossroads where more signs had been left and the Clerk to report these.

Willow – it had been too wet to attempt to remove the willow with the heavy machinery required.

5679 – Somerset Councillors’ Report and Shepton Local Community Network (LCN): A written report from Councillor Claire Sully had been received and distributed to Parish Councillors.

Peter Glaisher reported back on the LCN Highways Working Group meeting under the Footpaths and Highways item (*see below*).

5680 – Parish Council Environmental Working Party: It had been agreed at the last meeting to consider the setting up of a Parish Council Working Party to consider the environmental concerns facing the parish and actions that might be taken. Steve Gilbert felt that environmental concerns would have a big impact on the parish in the future and the Parish Council should be involved in lobbying the Somerset Council and government as an official body would have more weight. Councillors did not see how this would add to what the environmental group had already done, noting that they had limited time available as volunteers and little influence on Somerset Council and government decisions. It was agreed not to set up a Working Party.

5681 – Allotments: The Clerk stated that all allotment holders will have been sent a reminder that allotment rents were due on November 1st – and were unchanged at £35 per allotment. It was likely that there would be a number of vacant allotments, although there was one new

allotment holder who lives in Frome. A former allotment holder had left a metal chest on his allotment. He would be asked to move it and if not gone by Christmas would be removed.

5682 – Footpaths and Highways: LCN Highways Working Group – Peter Glaisher had attended a meeting of this group on October 30th and reported that this was a roundtable discuss of the issues to be discussed at the next meeting. Peter noted that the issues affecting Batcombe – lorries, speeding, condition of the roads and drains – resonated with the other parishes present and he felt the parishes could work together as a pressure group. A concern was raised that parishes were not being told what work was being done on their roads so that they could exercise some quality control and prioritise the work that needed doing. Those parishes considering doing their own verge cutting had discovered that insurance was an issue – as Batcombe had already discovered when looking at gritting the roads. The Chair to attend the next meeting of the Highways Working Group on November 21st.

The Clerk reported receiving an e-mail from a concerned resident who had spoken to contractors undertaking the flushing of gulleys on the Cranmore road. The resident had pointed out a number of blocked gulleys but was told by the contractors that they could only do the gulleys on their chart. The resident was under the impression that the Parish Council was paying for the gully flushing and felt that therefore the Council should have more input into which gulleys were being flushed. The same resident later reported another conversation with the contractors who stated that they were flushing drains and a different team was needed to deal with blocked drains. The Clerk to respond to the resident.

Jayne Cox reported that the Honeycliff bridleway was in a good condition after the recent work filling the void with stone, although this was likely to be washed out again. Peter Glaisher reported that the wall near the war memorial in Westcombe had been repaired.

5683 – Playing Field – Maintenance Report: It was noted that the moles were active in the Playing Field again. It was agreed to wait until the willow structures had been removed before bringing in a molecatcher. The Clerk reported that he had placed a warning sign on the electricity meter box on the bus shelter.

The Clerk also reported that he had received £120 from the Fete Committee as a contribution to the cost of providing the electricity for the Fete. The Clerk was looking into alternative electricity suppliers to reduce the cost of the electricity.

5684 – Clerk’s Salary for 2024/25: The Clerk reported that the National Joint Council for Local Government Services had reached agreement on new pay scales for 2024/25. The agreement consisted of a flat rate increase of £1,290 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 £13.73 an hour to £14.36 an hour (an increase of 4.59%) backdated to April 2024. The Parish Council agreed the increase in the Clerk’s salary, which was in line with the Clerk’s Contract of Employment.

5685 – Bank Reconciliation and Budget Update for Year Ending 31st March 2025: The bank reconciliation for the second quarter had been checked by the Chair and was reported to 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 30th October and a projection for the current year based on expenditure to date.

Receipts were projected to be approximately £185 more than the budgeted figure. This was due to the precept being £150 more than the original figure proposed, plus the unbudgeted income of £100 for the Playing Field wood and gate and less the reduction in the allotments rent due to the likely vacancies in November.

The projection for the Playing Field expenditure was about £140 less than budgeted, as the projected cost of the grass cutting for the year was less than was budgeted.

The projection for the expenditure on Administration was about £830 more than budgeted. This was mainly due to the unbudgeted cost of the new laptop and software of £705.68 (although the VAT of £117.61 would be reclaimed). In addition, the Clerk's salary would be £70 more than budgeted and the hire of the Old School for meetings £50 more than budgeted.

The expenditure on Grants was £530 more than budgeted. This was due to the unbudgeted grant of £500 for the Church clock and the increase in the grant to the Village Hall Trust from £150 to £200 (Other grants were £20 less than budgeted). Other expenses including those of the allotments were likely to be around £450 less than budgeted. This was due to the fact that no money was spent on either the refurbishment of the Westcombe notice board or the maintenance of the strimmer.

Overall, there was a projected deficit of £1,340 compared to a budgeted deficit of £760, largely due to the unbudgeted cost of the new laptop and software. As a result, the projected funds at the end of the year were £11,318 – around £590 more than expected when the budget was made due to the surplus on the previous year's accounts. It should be noted that approximately £1,000 of this figure would be earmarked for the allotments.

5686 – Budget and Precept for Year Ending 31st March 2026: A budget for the year ending 31st March 2026 had been distributed with the Agendas, along with a forecast for the years 2025-2028.

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

Looking at the budget for 2025/26 the VAT refund would be around £120 more than the current year because of the VAT on the new laptop and software. The allotment rent would be £280 if there are two vacant allotments. The money being raised from the Mendip Lottery was tailing off and there was a small amount of bank interest. The budget assumed a further contribution from the Fete Committee towards the cost of the electricity supply for the Fete again.

The cost of the grass cutting might be higher if the price per cut increased and the figure for equipment maintenance was set at £750, although there shouldn't be any major expenditure as the play equipment was still relatively new. The electricity and water supplies were expected to be around the same level as the current year.

The increase in the Clerk's salary was assumed to be slightly less than in previous years as inflation was reducing, although the increase in the Minimum Wage could have an impact on this. Other expenditure on administration was likely to be similar than projected for the current year, apart from the expenditure on the laptop and software.

The budget was an opportunity for the Council to review the level of its grants. 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 payments the budget showed a deficit of £675 if the precept reverted to £9,925. This would leave £10,643 in the Parish Council's funds at the end of 2025/26 of which around £1,000 would be earmarked for the allotments.

Looking at the forecast for the years 2026/28 with a precept of around £10,000 each year and no additional expenditure there would probably be deficits of around £1,330 in 2026/27 and

£2,600 in 2027/28 when there would be another Parish Council election. This would leave reserves of £6,713 at the end of 2027/28, which would be in line with our reserves policy.

The Parish Council agreed to set aside an earmarked reserve for future highways expenditure and to increase the precept by 4-5% to cover the likely increased expenditure as the Somerset Council asked parish councils to cover more expenditure. A final decision on the level of the precept did not have to be made until the December or January meeting and the Parish Council would normally wait until the tax base for 2025/26 had been determined in January so that the impact of the precept on Council Tax would be known.

5687 - Authorisation of Payments: Councillors authorised the following payments:

£270.00 Kevin Gale – Grass cutting in the Playing Field (three cuts in October).

£705.68 The Clerk – New laptop and Office software (£588.07 + VAT).

5688 – Other Business – matters of information only. There was no interest in attending the Somerset Parishes Conference which would take place on 13th November in Bridgwater and would include the AGM of the Somerset Association of Local Councils.

The Clerk noted that the Somerset Council was preparing a new Local Plan and as a first stage was consulting on a Settlement Assessment Overview and an Open Spaces, Built Sports and Playing Pitch Overview. A copy of the questionnaire had been distributed to Councillors. It was agreed that the Clerk should complete the factual questions and circulate the remaining questions to obtain the views of Councillors before submitting the questionnaire. The deadline had been extended to November 30th. It was noted that some of the questions were only relevant to larger settlements.

The Clerk also noted that the Local Government Boundary Commission for England were conducting a review of division boundaries in Somerset. They were minded to reduce the number of Somerset Councillors by 14 to 96 and were consulting on the pattern of divisions to accommodate this number of Councillors. More information on the consultation was available on the LGBCE website: www.lgbce.org.uk/all-reviews/somerset

Jayne Cox noted that Bruton Town Council had written a piece for their parish magazine explaining how the Town Council operated and the financial constraints it was facing. It was suggested that Jayne adapt the article for the Batcombe parish magazine, taking into account the differences between Bruton and Batcombe, such as the fact that their churchyard is closed and the responsibility of the Town Council.

It was left to individual councillors as to whether they attended the Act of Remembrance on Remembrance Sunday.

5689 - Date of Next Meeting: Wednesday 4th December 2024 at 7.30pm in the Old School.