

# **The Annual Parish Meeting for the Parish of Batcombe**

## **was held on Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2024 at 7.30pm in the Jubilee Hall.**

Janet Jones, Chair of the Parish Council presided. Six members of the Parish Council and the Clerk attended, together with a further fifty parishioners and the Somerset, Claire Sulley. Apologies were received from Rosie Prebble.

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

**Minutes of the 2023 Annual Parish Meeting** were read by the Clerk, agreed and signed. The Chair proposed that at future Annual Parish Meetings the Minutes which were published on the Parish Council website be taken as read.

There were no **Matters Arising**.

Janet Jones gave the **Chair's Report**. She noted that the change to a unitary Council replacing the County and District Councils had been a steep learning curve and thanked Claire Sulley for her work as our Somerset Councillor. There would be a by-election on May 2<sup>nd</sup> as Alex Wiltshire had resigned as our other Somerset Councillor. The Somerset Council was in a difficult financial position and this has financial implications for the Parish Council.

Jayne Cox was thanked for attending meetings regarding the Shepton Local Community Network, one of 18 LCNs set up to provide a local voice under the Somerset Council. Peter Glaisher was thanked for attending the Highways and Traffic Subgroup of the Shepton LCN, which was looking at what could be done by parish councils in the way of self-help.

In 2023/24 there were 16 planning applications, compared to 23 the previous year. Of these nine were for full or householder planning permission and seven were approved and two had yet to be decided.

The Parish Council continues to be concerned about the condition of our roads and particularly about their safety in icy weather. The Parish Council considered the possibility of using volunteers from local farmers to grit roads in the parish using equipment purchased by the Parish Council. However, the problem of providing adequate insurance for the farmers doing the gritting, without risking the no-claims bonuses on their own farm insurance meant that the project was not felt to be viable.

The Parish Council also considered a project to repair and refurbish the fingerposts in the parish. However, issues with volunteers working on the highway, the high cost of getting contractors to refurbish each fingerpost; and the fact that the Parish Council might need to pay for highway services previously provided by Somerset Council meant the Parish Council decided not to pursue the project at the current time.

Kevin Gale from Wanstrow was thanked for cutting the Playing Field grass and Gary Butler was thanked for cutting the Playing Field hedge. The volunteers who worked on the willow structures in the Playing Field as part of the Big Help-Out after the King's Coronation were also thanked. Peter Glaisher was thanked for co-ordinating with allotment holders and ensuring that the allotments field was kept tidy.

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 a grant 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 and had over 337,500 visits in 12 years and the Parish Council had also set up its own Facebook page in order to share information on Facebook in addition to the website.

Jayne Cox was thanked for representing the Parish Council on the Village Hall Trust; Tom Price was thanked for organising the Batcombe Community Volunteer Group to undertake voluntary activities in the parish; and Bryony Harling was thanked for representing the Parish Council on the Coronation Committee. The Parish Council had funded the purchase of Coronation mugs to be given to senior citizens in the parish with generous contributions from local residents.

In January 2024 the Parish Council decided to increase its precept for 2024/25 by £150 to £10,075, an increase of 1.5%, although a similar increase in the tax base for Batcombe meant that the component of Council Tax due to the precept was unchanged.

Griff Williams was thanked for undertaking the internal audit of the Parish Council's accounts and the Chair thanked the Clerk and Parish Councillors for all their work.

**Somerset Councillor's Comments.** Claire Sulley noted that it had been an unprecedented year for the Somerset Council due to the financial emergency. Although there were some savings from the unitary process, the pressure from the increasing costs of adult and child services meant that non statutory services had to be cut. The Council was responding by passing services to parish and town councils. Batcombe had been one of the first parish councils to look at doing gritting themselves, although this had not proved successful. There was some good news with investment in Bridgwater, extension of speeding restrictions and environmental initiatives. Claire also noted that the Somerset Council website has areas to report on the roads and elsewhere and if people did not get a response they should contact her.

In response to a question on the Somerset Council's budget, Claire Sulley noted that there was a 10% overspend on social care. Chris Wildridge reported that Frome Town Council had increased its precept that is added to Council Tax bills by 29% as it took on services previously paid for by the Somerset Council. He felt that parish councils would have to budget for increased expenditure in the future as they took on extra responsibilities.

**The Past, Present and Future of Farming.** Bruno Cristofoli introduced his film about cider making in the parish by stating that things had been much simpler when he was Chair of the Parish Council and thanked the Parish Councillors for all they did. He also noted that when he came to Batcombe from Italy in 1957 there had been 15 working farms in the parish and now the working farms could be counted on one hand.

After the film, Richard Calver gave a talk on the issues facing farming today. He stated that he had come to the area in 1967 as a partner to Wilf Clothier at Manor Farm, Milton Clevedon which was a way to get into farming for a first-time farmer. Richard noted that the emphasis had been on production using lots of fertilizer but was now more sustainable. They had changed their herds from Holsteins to Shorthorns, which produced less milk but better milk for making cheese. A healthy soil was now recognised as important so they no longer grew maize which wasn't great for cheese and the harvesting resulted in soil compaction. Instead, they grew whole crops to feed the cows.

Richard noted that the Government had changed the support given to farmers with a focus on the environment instead of production. He argued that there needed to be a balance between the two as it was hard to understand the emphasis on rewilding when we then had to import food with a huge carbon footprint. Climate change was also a serious issue for farmers. Lots of wet weather meant that we needed to adopt sustainable farming practices to look after the soil and the animals. The prices for farm produce were another issue. A 20% drop in the price of milk meant that dairy farming was very hard and it didn't make sense that farmer could make more money from planting wild flowers than from producing food. It didn't help that the Government kept changing what you could and couldn't do.

Asked about herbal lays, Richard noted that these consisted of between 15 or 16 different plants that helped the soil by getting nitrogen into the soil so you don't need fertilizer. And different plants did better in different conditions.

Asked which was the greater problem – the weather or the Government, Richard stated that the weather was the farmer's greatest problem. They had lost 25% of their wheat crop this year because the wet weather meant it was getting too late for drilling. He hoped that the Government would come to its senses about food security for the country.

Janet Jones then closed the meeting, thanking everyone for coming.