

# **MINUTES OF ST CUTHBERT (OUT) PARISH COUNCIL HELD AT EASTON VILLAGE HALL, EASTON BA5 1EP ON MONDAY 04<sup>th</sup> DECEMBER 2023, 7PM.**

**PRESENT:** Cllrs P Blatchford; M Cooke; K Hoogesteger; T Hathway; I Humphreys; S Johns; J Joseph; S McCoy; M Mitchell; G Pettitt; J Reeves; J Zorab.

**IN ATTENDANCE:** Mrs L Pool (Parish Clerk); Mr S Davies (RFO); Mr R Coulson (Assistant Clerk); Somerset Council Cllrs H Shearer & Mike Best; Mr Graham Seers & 1 Member of the Public.

## **01. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TO CONSIDER THE REASONS GIVEN**

Apologies were received from Cllrs J Baker; Cllr E Danson; Cllr M Hayden; Cllr M Lunnon; Cllr F Bird.

**RESOLVED:** To approve the reasons given for Members' absence.

## **02. CO-OPTION OF UP TO 1 MEMBER TO REPRESENT THE NORTH WARD**

**RESOLVED:** Mr Sebastian Johns was successfully elected as a West Ward Cllr.

## **03. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

**03.01.** There were no requests for disclosures of personal interest.

**03.02.** There were no requests for dispensations for disclosable pecuniary interests.

**03.03.** There were no requests for dispensation.

## **04. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC**

No items were excluded from the Press & public.

## **05. CHAIRPERSON'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Chairperson introduced Simon Davies & Reece Coulson to the Full Council. Cllr Zorab also stressed that timings for the meeting were very tight and that there was much to get through. Cllr Zorab expanded on the impact of the LCN meeting input from Scott Macmillan (Volunteers Network) regarding real and immediate needs being experienced by some residents and how the basics such as food and warmth were not universally available. Cllr Zorab also highlighted that, due to the significance of some of the meeting topics, it would be important to establish early whether a discussion was required at this meeting, or whether the starting point would be to establish working groups who could take up the issue in a smaller, flexible forum.

## **06. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

There were no items to be excluded from the Press & Public.

## **07. LOCAL AUTHORITY REPORTS**

Somerset Councillor Heather Shearer gave a summary of the situation facing Somerset Council, recognised that it was a shared experience for many councils and that Somerset Council was working extremely hard to address the financial position. The predicament of rising costs and demands against a fixed income was emphasised and the options available to Somerset Council were referred to. Cllr Shearer also underlined that central government support was dependent on Somerset Council exploring these options to the maximum, including selling assets. The likelihood of service cuts to non-statutory provisions is high, but Cllr Shearer also noted that the level of service provision, and cuts, was variable.

Cllr Shearer also emphasised that the timing for parish & town councils, and Somerset Council itself, was far from ideal but urged the Council to seize the opportunity for dialogue and a formulated plan as soon as possible. Cllr Shearer acknowledged that there were lots of details to finalise. She identified that a list of statutory services was in itself a complicated issue. Cllr Shearer offered to contribute to other agenda items as required.

## **08. MINUTES OF ST CUTHBERT (OUT) PARISH COUNCIL ON MONDAY 23<sup>RD</sup> OCTOBER 2023**

**RESOLVED:** : To confirm and sign as a correct record the minutes of the Council held on Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2023.

## **09. DRAFT BUDGET 2024-25**

There was discussion about the unknowns in finalising the budget, given the uncertainty of Somerset Council's issuing of Band D payments: the calculations are not known and so the impact is also unknown. A decision is likely in mid-January. The RFO explained how the reserves, not earmarked for projects or committee budgets, were substantial and available to pick up slack if required. It was noted that £15,000 – a proposed sum for winter hardship & asset & service devolution – could be allocated from general reserves, but a decision will be needed on how, and in what time frame, to replenish the general reserves. There was further discussion regarding the maintenance of the 'Band D' tariff for 2024-25. Whether reserves should be used or protected was raised by Cllr McCoy. It was emphasised that the precept could only be raised in response to direct needs, rather than speculative ones. The RFO suggested anyone with an interest should attend the Finance & Scrutiny meeting on 13<sup>th</sup> December. Cllr McCoy asked whether it was possible for the Finance & Scrutiny Committee to present a couple of scenarios that illustrate a) a budget using general reserves and b) a budget based on the precept remaining as last year

**RESOLVED:** To authorise the Finance & Scrutiny Meeting to deal with the Draft Budget, with the caveat of returning the final draft to Full Council on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2024

## **10. REPORTS OF WARD ACTIVITIES**

Cllr Reeves reported on the site visit by Cain Bio-Engineering regarding the erosion at Coxley Recreation Ground, that a specific tree on the riverbank is exacerbating the situation and that an online meeting for full feedback was scheduled for Monday 11<sup>th</sup> December.

Cllr Joseph thanked the Council and Asset Management Committee for their support for the Polsham Bus Shelter renovation and acknowledged that it was a tremendous parish feature.

Cllr Pettitt explained that the Parish Survey was progressing in the South Ward and residents were engaging.

## **11. UPDATE: ENVIRONMENTAL WORKING GROUP**

Cllr Pettitt noted that the Biodiversity Net Gain policy was being explored and contributing to the working group. Greener Villages grants were to be re-launched in December and Facebook advice posts were to resume in the Spring. Information boards on the Monarch's Way were deemed extraneous in the current climate, and the project would be postponed. The Strawberry Line pool would progress further after a meeting with Richard Jones. Cllr Pettitt also explained a Carbon Literacy pledge, which asked Councillors and Staff to consider their carbon footprint in Council activities.

Cllr Joseph explained the follow-on project from the 5 Mile Food Programme, which ended in March, and that FWAG SW were involved in the new phase. The next meeting for this project was on 12<sup>th</sup> December.

## **12. UPDATE: WELLS & RURAL LCN**

Cllr Hathway summarized the 3 key themes of November 16<sup>th</sup>'s LCN meeting: a) asset and service devolution, b) winter hardships being experienced by residents (as highlighted by Scott Macmillan) and c) the footpath network, inter-parish access connectivity and available maps. Cllr Hathway also lobbied for anyone interested in the footpath network to get in touch. He also noted that Wells & Rural LCN were having difficulty finding suitable venues with effective parking. The next meeting is to be held on 01<sup>st</sup> February 2024.

## **13. ACCOUNTS FOR PAYMENT**

Cllrs Reeves and Hoogesteger had reconciled the payments and receipts with the RFO before the meeting.

**RESOLVED:** To accept the payments and receipts as presented.

## **14. COMMUNITY AWARD**

Cllr Mike Best spoke that he was delighted to be able to celebrate and recognize community-minded residents such as Mr Seers. Cllr Best read out some of the significant community events that Mr Seers had been instrumental in progressing and which highlighted his huge involvement in the West Ward, and Coxley specifically. The Somerset Council's Chairman's Award was presented to Mr Seers and photos were taken.

## **15. A39 SOUTHWAY / POLSHAM SPEED RESTRICTIONS**

A resident highlighted the need for action regarding the A39 stretch between Hartlake Bridge & Polsham junction. The volume and speed of traffic on this section, combined with the absence of pedestrian footpaths or cycleways on the Polsham – Long Drove section, made it an exceptionally dangerous route. Somerset Highways had urged the resident to seek Parish Council support and there was wide acceptance of the dangers of the route. The resident sought this support to a) improve the safety of the road, and b) to help with the bureaucracy. Some councillors felt that speed limits would not address the problem as well as a dedicated path/cycleway off the main road: the Bristol Water pipeline along the old railway was mentioned as suitable, and viable because land ownership already being established. Also mentioned was the prevalence of cyclists on the A39 adding to the dangers, the very long-term prospects of staggered speed reduction signs, the need for signage approaching Polsham junction and the difficulties of police enforcement of speed limits when visibility is poor.

**RESOLVED:** to approach Somerset Council to investigate the Southway-Polsham section of the A39 for a speed reduction scheme.

**RESOLVED:** to explore the opportunity and/or existing Strawberry Line plans for a safe pedestrian & cycle route between Polsham and Hartlake.

## **16. ASSET DEVOLUTION**

Cllr Zorab introduced the item by explaining that the topic was complex and asked whether lengthy discussion in Full Council would be efficient, or whether a working group should take up the discussion in more detail. Cllr Humphreys noted that St Cuthbert (Out) Parish Council were already responsible for a considerable number of services and assets on the Somerset Council list, where the parish had assets. Cllr Cooke acknowledged there was a good working relationship with Council contractors. Cllr Pettitt noted that cuts made by Somerset Council will mean lost services in the parish but also lost services in Wells, which parish residents will also be impacted by and notice. The level of lost services is uncertain and raised many questions.

Cllr Pettitt provided a summary of options: a) do nothing; b) outsource and contribute to Somerset Council; c) establish contracts run and managed by the Parish Council. The

Highway Stewardship scheme was cited as an example of collaborative contracting and Cllr Zorab clarified whether the parish council would be able to negotiate with contractors separately from Somerset Council. Cllr McCoy asked what the process was for filling the gaps in services. Cllr Shearer responded that parishes can contribute in different ways.

It was clear that the parish council needed to know precisely what Somerset Council does now, in order to be able to calculate what it could take on. Cllr Joseph identified key principles that the Council should request from Somerset Council: activities undertaken; frequency; current contracts (including expiry dates and any penalties for early termination); liabilities and insurance implications (including insurance renewal dates and any penalties for early termination); officer load (and who would be involved (e.g. clerk, RFO etc.); remaining links with other SC provided services (e.g. defining boundaries between parish and SC on who is responsible for what); public priorities (i.e. what do our parishioners consider the most important services to be rescued). Other issues of Somerset Council's legal responsibilities, safety implications and compulsory works were raised. Cllr Shearer agreed that the Devolution Team should have these details and added that some services may require cutting regardless of whether they are picked up by parish councils.

Cllrs Pettitt and Mitchell raised the thoughts that residents need to be consulted and/or updated and may also perceive that they are paying twice for services.

**RESOLVED:** The Council is to set up a working group comprising of Cllrs Mitchell, Reeves, Hathway, Zorab, Cooke, Johns, Humphreys when available and Cllr Hayden as Chair of Finance & Scrutiny, should he wish.

**RESOLVED:** to open dialogue with neighbours, especially Wells City Council.

**RESOLVED:** to take into account potential increased staff costs for whatever the Council decide to take on.

## **17. LCN WINTER HARDSHIP SUPPORT**

Cllr Zorab highlighted the work of the Volunteer Network and its' scope for addressing the serious needs of some residents in the parish and stressed that Council support in some form this winter should be evident and available. Ideas were discussed that included community fridges but it was accepted that these were difficult to monitor and open to abuse or damage. Cllr Mitchell pointed out that there were lots of groups and agencies already working to support residents and that the Council would be best placed to support these existing groups, eg the food bank and warm spaces, although it was noted that Warm Spaces provision was not as positive as hoped last winter.

Cllr Hoogesteger also pointed out that there was an opportunity to encourage volunteering in the community and that there was perhaps an untapped source of people able to take small actions to help.

A poster should be created that informs residents of the support already available and these should be printed professionally. The Clerk is to action this and determine the fund source.

**RESOLVED:** to set up a working group as soon as possible with Cllrs Mitchell, Zorab, Hoogesteger & Hathway and for it to meet as soon as practical.

## **18. BOWRING CLOSE, COXLEY**

Cllr reeves recapped the situation regarding the sale of Bowring Close land and its contradiction to Somerset Council's Disposal of Assets Policy, given that the land is evidenced as being used for leisure and recreation for 50 years. Cllr Reeves also requested that the Council have a face-to-face meeting with Cllr Wyke & officers involved;

following this, the Parish Council would be able to offer options to Somerset Council. The application for registration as a village green was prepared, but not to be submitted yet.

**RESOLVED:** To send the first letter to Somerset Council and await their response.

#### **19. D-DAY 80**

The Council heard from Cllr Reeves that he had contacted Arqiva as the landowner of Pen Hill for permission to hold a beacon ceremony and also requested a budget. Cllr Joseph suggested that villages could be encouraged to explore historic links with the period. Cllr Cooke suggested contacting Simon Tudway Quilter.

It was agreed to bring more ideas, and progression regarding the beacon, to the next Full Council meeting.

#### **20. .GOV.UK EMAIL ACCOUNTS**

The Clerk clarified that the domain name, and email suffixes, could not be changed without losing the Council's identity. The transfer to gov.uk email addresses would proceed as resolved in Full Council on 07 August 2023.

#### **21. UPDATE: DINDER 20MPH LIMIT –NEXT MEETING?**

Councillors had received an update of the progress of the speed restrictions, location & signage for Dinder in advance, Cllr Hathway summarized the next steps for the scheme and emphasized the enormous contribution of Mr B Caddick.

**RESOLVED:** To request that Somerset Council proceed with their agreed actions.

**RESOLVED:** To confirm that a budget allocation of £5000 was provided for the scheme

**RESOLVED:** That the Clerk would write a letter of thanks to Mr B Caddick.

#### **22. DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

Monday 08<sup>TH</sup> January 2024 at **7pm (Easton)**

#### **23. DATE OF NEXT PARISH MEETING**

9<sup>th</sup> April 2024.