

MINUTES OF ST CUTHBERT (OUT) PARISH COUNCIL HELD AT EASTON VILLAGE HALL, EASTON BA5 1EP ON MONDAY 08th JANUARY 2024, 7PM.

PRESENT: Cllrs P Blatchford; M Cooke; T Hathway; M Hayden; I Humphreys; S Johns; J Joseph; M Lunnon; S McCoy; M Mitchell; J Reeves; J Zorab.

IN ATTENDANCE: Mrs L Pool (Parish Clerk); Mr S Davies (RFO); Somerset Council Cllr H Shearer

01. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TO CONSIDER THE REASONS GIVEN

Apologies were received from Cllrs J Baker; Cllr E Danson; Cllr K Hoogesteger; Cllr G Pettit; Cllr F Bird.

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

02. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

02.01. There were no requests for disclosures of personal interest.

02.02. There were no requests for dispensations for disclosable pecuniary interests.

02.03. There were no requests for dispensation.

Cllr Blatchford informed the Council of recent interaction involving the Enforcement and Monitoring Officers, following his family move on Christmas Eve. The Council however, having received no communication whatsoever on the matter, felt there was no case to answer regarding Cllr Blatchford's attendance at the meeting and that there was no justification for Cllr Blatchford's exclusion. The Council agreed this unanimously and that a formal record be written.

03. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

No items were excluded from the Press & public.

04. CHAIRPERSON'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairperson drew attention to a communication from Cllr Bill Revans, received on 8th January, regarding likely Somerset Council services facing cuts, emphasised how serious they could potentially be and urged Councillors to give the letter some consideration. Cllr Zorab requested the list be sent to Cllrs as soon as possible and for the details to be scrutinised by the Devolution Working Group. Cllr Zorab also reiterated that details (costings, frequency etc) of existing Somerset Council contracts were still absent, and made it harder for the Council to move forward with definition.

05. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

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

06. LOCAL AUTHORITY REPORTS

Somerset Councillor Heather Shearer gave further context regarding Cllr Bill Revan's communication. The funding gap facing Somerset Council, and therefore the imminent Full Council meeting of 20th February, was forcing extremely unpalatable possibilities on the Unitary Authority. Cllr Shearer explained that the funding gap would be alleviated by a) using reserves and b) making savings and that their case to the Government was aided by their willingness to consider worst-case scenarios, and transparently. Cllr Shearer also noted that Somerset Council were keen to communicate as soon as possible: the county's council are exploring every possibility, no decisions have been made yet and the predicament is not one Somerset Council ever hoped to be in.

Cllr Zorab asked about costings to help Council deliberations regarding Devolution. Cllr Shearer responded to remind the Council that there were no obligations and Somerset Council was doing everything possible to facilitate. Cllr Hayden enquired about the rise in Council Tax, and Cllr Shearer agreed that raising Council Tax as capitalisation to 9.9% was likely. Cllr Blatchford noted that sale of assets and cutting of services was likely to be a one-off remedy and the following year's budget would not have these options to raise income. He asked what happens then. Cllr Shearer admitted Council Tax – as a constant revenue stream – may become the focus. Cllr Reeves asked whether pensions had featured in the cost-savings at County Hall; Cllr Shearer pointed out that it was extremely complex, rightly protected and very slow and hadn't been included in calculations/ Cllr Humphreys asked whether there was any leeway from central government, given that Unitary Status was actively encouraged by them. Cllr Shearer said there was a little leeway, but Somerset Council still had to prove they were prepared to pull all levers necessary.

07. MINUTES OF ST CUTHBERT (OUT) PARISH COUNCIL ON MONDAY 4TH DECEMBER 2023

RESOLVED: : To confirm and sign as a correct record the minutes of the Council held on Monday 4th December 2023.

08. BUDGET AND PRECEPT 2024-25

Cllr Hayden explained that feedback had been taken on board and prudent management of the reserves was in place, allowing the Council to keep the level of precept the same per household for 2024-25. Cllr McCoy enquired whether, in the current climate and with Devolution approaching, the Council was confident that there weren't areas where budget projections could be reduced and allow for further savings. Cllr Hayden explained that all eventualities had been explored and, further, revenue would increase as more newly built homes contribute to the precept. Cllr Zorab also noted that if this council was to increase their precept when simultaneously Somerset Council were likely to raise Council Tax, residents would face a double hit.

RESOLVED: To accept the Budget for 2024-25 of £168,425 as presented.

RESOLVED: To accept the Precept setting for 2024-25 as presented.

09. REPORTS OF WARD ACTIVITIES

North Ward: Cllr Lunnon raised the issue of a missing fingerpost at the corner of Ebbor Lane and Deerleap, and requested the Council pursue this. No future agenda item but Clerk to investigate.

South Ward: Cllr McCoy noted that Worminster Lane and properties near the Redlake River at the far south of the ward had been hit badly by flooding. No future agenda item.

East Ward: Cllr Humphreys relayed a resident's concern about dog walkers and their lack of consideration to other multi-path & footpath users. No future agenda item but Clerk & Council to consider ways to promote better consideration.

West Ward: Cllr Reeves informed the Council about the extent of flooding in Coxley and that the portaloo had been for a wander but remained upright.

General: Cllr Hayden expressed concern that the Annual Parish Meeting had been held in Coxley repeatedly of late, and that it should move around the wards. The Clerk agreed and was asked to ensure that 2025's meeting was in a different venue.

10. UPDATE: ENVIRONMENTAL WORKING GROUP

Cllr Pettitt's summary of the last EWG Meeting was read out and included the following: The EWG has begun work on a biodiversity conservation action plan and policy. Greener signs, Strawberry Line pool, Monarch's Way marker signs, Horrington Dark Skies survey, and Avalon Food and Farming initiative are all progressing. There has been good response to the call for members of the Community Survey Steering Group. Once the Agreement and Terms of Reference have been received from CSS, the Steering Group will become autonomous of the EWG. The group is interested in working with Wookey Parish Council to support the Kingfisher Common project to return the area to a natural environment. Cllr Humphreys & Cllr Cooke are interested in the Wookey Hole Resident's Forum initiative to make the bus stop a heritage / nature info point - this may be for Asset Management Committee to consider. Tom Blatchford is working with Somerset Council's officer, Barbra Lakin, to establish some wildflower verges as pilots. Cllr Cooke is interested in pursuing reclaiming waste for repair / reuse from Dulcote Recycling Centre working with Sustainable Wells.

11. UPDATE: WELLS & RURAL LCN

Cllr Hathway drew attention to the upcoming LCN meeting to be held in Coxley on 1st February 2024 and asked Councillors for support to help with car park stewarding, loaning of traffic cones if possible and refreshments. He noted the limitations of parking at the hall and informed the Council of the provision of overflow car parks.

12. UPDATE: DEVOLUTION WORKING GROUP

Members of the Devolution Working Group agreed to a date for an online meeting to explore and analyse the communication from Cllr Bill Revans. The meeting was agreed to be held on Thursday 18th January 2024, online at 6pm; the Clerk would send Zoom details as soon as possible to relevant councillors and the Cllr Revans communication to all Councillors.

13. UPDATE: PARISH SIGNPOSTING WORKING GROUP

The clerk summarised the recent meeting and next steps for the working group in offering support to residents in need. The Working Group hope to offer opportunities to support that don't duplicate what other agencies do and that are manageable and sustainable. Posters will be shared and promoted that highlight a) existing support within villages, b) the work of Village Agents, c) the reach of Wells Community Network and d) an invitation to contact the Council if residents feel they would benefit from a warm space, company or are struggling to know where to seek support. If any interest is shown the Working Group must be able to follow up and action a hall hire, hot drink facility etc. The Working Group felt that if just one resident benefitted, the Council had been proactive.

14. ACCOUNTS FOR PAYMENT

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

RESOLVED: To accept the payments and receipts as presented.

15. AMENDMENT TO GRANT APPLICATION FORM

The RFO, Simon Davies, outlined why the change was being proposed and the mechanics of how it would work, to accommodate emergency requests for funding whilst maintaining correct due diligence and scrutiny. On receipt of a grant requesting *emergency* funding, rather than urgent funding, the Finance & Scrutiny Committee would determine whether to fast-track the grant and determine whether it qualified as an emergency. Either Full Council or Finance & Scrutiny would then be asked to approve, depending on timings & meeting schedule.

RESOLVED: to accept the amendment to the Grant Application Policy which in turn refers to the amendment to the Grant Application Form.

16. D-DAY80

It was agreed that the Council would pursue the beacon-lighting as part of the nationwide commemorations on 6th June 2024. Cllr Reeves noted that ideally a beacon within the parish should be visible as part of the national beacon chain. Various venues were mooted and the Clerk is to make further enquiries in liaison with Cllr Reeves.

17. DOCUMENT REVIEW: CODE OF CONDUCT

The document was presented and the small amendment explained.

RESOLVED: to approve the revised Code of Conduct.

RESOLVED: to amend the review date for the Code of Conduct to every two years.

18. DOCUMENT REVIEW: PRESS & MEDIA POLICY

The document was presented and the Clerk informed Councillors there was no change.

The clerk also informed the Council that the existing press and media strategy for dealing with news stories was not effective and should be reconsidered.

RESOLVED: to approve the Press & Media Policy

RESOLVED: to amend the review date for the Press & Media Policy to every two years.

19. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Monday 12th February 2024 at **7pm (DINDER)**

20. DATE OF NEXT PARISH MEETING

Tuesday 9th April 2024 (Coxley Memorial Hall)