

MINUTES OF ST CUTHBERT (OUT) PARISH COUNCIL HELD AT DINDER VILLAGE HALL ON MONDAY 12TH FEBRUARY 2024, 7PM.

PRESENT: Cllrs P Blatchford; M Cooke; E Danson; T Hathway; M Hayden; I Humphreys; S Johns; J Joseph; M Mitchell; G Pettitt; J Reeves; J Zorab.

IN ATTENDANCE: Mrs L Pool (Parish Clerk); Mr S Davies (RFO); Somerset Council Cllrs H Shearer & T Robbins; Mr A Vallis (Wells Voice); 1 member of the public.

01. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TO CONSIDER THE REASONS GIVEN

Apologies were received from Cllr K Hoogesteger; Cllr S McCoy; Cllr I Humphreys.

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.

03. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

No items were excluded from the Press & public.

04. CHAIRPERSON'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairperson asked Councillors to explicitly inform the Clerks of their intent to attend meetings.

05. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

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

06. LOCAL AUTHORITY REPORTS

Somerset Councillor Heather Shearer updated the Council on the financial situation at Somerset Council. Following HM Government's refusal to permit a higher Council Tax limit, the increase would remain at 4.99%. There had been some progress made on reducing the threat to some services, specifically potential cuts to Highways maintenance and waste recycling centres: these cuts were not to happen for the next financial year. Cllr Danson asked about libraries. Libraries also were not in immediate danger for this coming year due to their being a statutory service and involving complex permissions and consultations. Cllr Johns asked about public toilets: these were being addressed through collaboration with larger town councils. LCN budgets were already very small and in answer to Cllr Pettitt's question, Cllr Shearer informed the meeting that a more holistic approach was aspired to for Early Help work, to include the NHS, schools, Integrated Care Hubs and that LCNs could also be a part of that coordination. Cllr Blatchford raised a point about the inefficiencies of the Council Tax process, registration and accessibility. Cllr Shearer agreed that the systems inherited from the former District Councils were complex and were still being unified and regularised.

Somerset Councillor Tony Robbins had submitted a report in advance and the Clerk was to forward to Councillors as soon as possible. A report was also included of the December 2023 crime statistics and locations for the Wells & Rural area of Avon & Somerset Police.

07. MINUTES OF ST CUTHBERT (OUT) PARISH COUNCIL ON MONDAY 08TH JANUARY 2024

RESOLVED: : To confirm and sign as a correct record the minutes of the Council held on Monday 08th January 2024, with a typing error amended and signed.

08. 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

09. UPDATE: ENVIRONMENTAL WORKING GROUP

Cllr Pettitt summarised the many on-going schemes that the Environmental Working Group were progressing. The Strawberry Line pond is a large project with many facets and background work to do but a spec is being drawn up following a recent scoping site visit. The Parish Plan is currently on hold until the Community Council for Somerset have further funding opportunities and the project at Kingfisher Common have applied for a Council grant. Opportunities are being explored for a recycling shop and bee-keepers were encouraged to apply for pollinator grants. The Avalon Farming and Food Forum is making good progress and is working with the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group and Sustainable Food Somerset. The Council's Biodiversity responsibilities are being addresses and Cllr Pettitt reiterated that it was an intensely complicated and multi-faceted work in progress. The Somerset Wildlife Trust would be contacted for support and liaison. Greener Village Grants were now available and the Assistant Clerk was making excellent work of promoting these grants across the parish. Cllr Blatchford referred to the Mendip Hills Farm Cluster as a possible source of information regarding wildlife corridors and would forward contacts.

10. UPDATE: WELLS & RURAL LCN

Cllr Hathway summarised the last meeting held on 1st February in Coxley: the Minutes would be available shortly but it was a positive meeting overall. New focuses raised by attendees were crime and disorder, flooding and collaboration with Highways. Active Travel continues to be a sub-group with much interest but has difficulties in coordinating members of the public across the LCN. Efforts will continue to coalesce this group. The next meeting is to be held in Godney on Monday 25th March 2024.

11. ALLOTMENT MANGEMENT SOFTWARE

The RFO explained that the addition of the Scribe Allotment package was an extension of the current subscription and would make allotment management more efficient. Cllr Reeves pointed out the cost against the revenue from the allotments but it was also noted that the manpower hours saved were measurable and significant. Parish Online offered some of the services but lacked the capacity to deal with allotment finances. Cllr Joseph noted that Parish Online can in some areas be outdated and not always a reliable source and the Clerk was to investigate. Costs for this upgrade are: a) Initial set-up: £189 (one time charge), b) Annual subscription: £348 (in addition to our Scribe software)

RESOLVED: to accept the quote from Scribe for the Allotments Management Software.

12. ANNUAL PARISH MEETING

The Chair requested that as many Councillors as possible attend the Annual Parish Meeting on 9th April 2024, to support the speakers and to meet residents. The event was becoming a good forum for raising resident's awareness of what the Parish Council does. It was also noted that the 2025 meeting had been booked for Easton Village Hall.

13. MEETING SCHEDULE 2024-2025

There was a discussion about the most popular days for meetings and there was a split between Councillors that prefer Mondays or Wednesdays. It was noted that having all Council meetings on one day of the week was useful and it was also requested that in future, Full Council meetings revert back to alternating between all 4 parish wards, rather than just 2 currently. The Clerk is to embed this in the next years' meeting schedule and the Council will revisit the question of the best days for meetings. Cllr Blatchford announced that a new suitably-sized venue will be available at Emborough Farm soon.
RESOLVED: to accept the proposed meeting schedule for May 2024 – April 2025.

14. UPDATE ON POLSHAM SPEEDING RESTRICTIONS

There was no action required but Councillors received responses from Somerset Council Highways, Somerset Council Traffic Development and Planning, regarding the resident's queries about traffic hazards between Polsham Lane and Southwood and flooding on Polsham Lane corner.

15. NOTICE BOARDS

The Clerk asked, where possible, that a section of each notice board remained unlocked for public use. It was also requested that all wards' notice boards were kept up to date, particularly for Full Council and Planning Agendas; Councillor efforts in posting notices was much appreciated. The Chair pointed out that East Horrington notice board had lots of condensation and needed some maintenance. The Clerk is to improve the use of South Horrington notice board and aim to recover keys held by a resident and Cllr Humphreys.

16. CUTTLEFISH WEBSITE PROVIDER

The RFO explained the circumstances that have led to the need to transfer website and email provision to Cuttlefish Multimedia Ltd. It was noted that 2Commune had been positive providers and that the time taken developing the website in 2020 was onerous. An immediate transfer to Cuttlefish was therefore both practical, unforeseen and beyond the Council's control. Cllr Pettitt requested that Cuttlefish provision is reviewed after one year. Fees were to be matched to those of 2Commune: email accounts at £35 per year per account, annual licensing, hosting and support at £400 per year and domain management at £150 for 2 years.

RESOLVED: to approve the costs in transferring website and email provision to Cuttlefish

17. WELLS COMMUNITY DAY

The Council are to revisit participation in this event when arrangements for 2025 are known. It was noted that the many organizations present for the 2024 event were those used by parish residents and a Parish Council presence at the Community Day would be beneficial.

18. TRAFFIC-RELATED ISSUES

The Clerk explained that the next Full Council meeting would be largely devoted to the various traffic issues around the parish and Cllr Hathway urged any Councillors to raise new matters for this meeting.

19. REPORTS OF WARD ACTIVITIES

East Ward: Cllr Blatchford reported the presence of large, rehabilitated foxes and the damage being caused to poultry. He requested that there was some communication with Dinder Village email circulation to highlight the fate of these released foxes: some 10 had been shot recently. The Police Wildlife Crime Unit should also be contacted.

West Ward: Cllr Reeves informed the Council about recent fly-tipping in Haymoor Lane. Cllr Shearer noted that there was considerable criminal intent with many fly-tippers and that waste licence notices and licences should always be checked. Cllr Joseph referred to the Environment Agency's 'Fly Trap' database, which the Clerk would investigate.

South Ward: it was noted that litter-pickers had made a huge difference along the East Somerset Way and cleared a huge amount of rubbish. The Clerk was to send Wells City Council and any volunteers involved a Thank You note.

All Wards: Cllr Pettitt updated the Council on recruitment progress. There are 2 candidates for the Permanent RFO position, interviews were taking place on Tuesday 20th February and the staffing arrangements be finalised and settled by Easter.

20. BOWRING CLOSE, COXLEY

The Chair outlined the correspondence of the past week between the Parish Council and Somerset Council's Property Governance, regarding the auction of two plots at Bowring Close, Coxley. The crux of issues related to a) the lack of response to meeting requests, b) the contravention of Somerset Council's Policy for the Disposal of Assets, c) the refuting of the statement that the plots were surplus to requirement and d) the Land Registry maps of the plots.

Cllr Shearer was invited to contribute. She commended the Council on their invitation of a formal meeting and open dialogue and explained that, county-wide, selling of assets was a key principle for Somerset Council finances, as well as the obligation to provide sites for building houses. Additionally, the principle of supporting communities was an equally important principle and agreed that this was sometimes at odds with the other two. Cllr Robbins informed the Council that several plots of land in the City of Wells had been sold under the Asset Disposal policy but were less contentious than Bowring Close. He agreed to attend the meeting with Somerset Council if possible.

A representation was read out from resident Jenny Henderson and Cllrs invited to speak. Cllr Reeves pointed out that Somerset Council documentation was very difficult to navigate and made the process harder. Cllr Reeves also questioned why Somerset Council were implying that the decision to sell, at auction, at market value was finalised and challenged this. Cllr Cooke thanked Andy Vallis of the Wells Voice for attending.

The scope for significant legal costs in redefining the plot boundaries was raised and there was consternation that Somerset Council expected developers to research the register, rather than transparently declaring the site as is. Cllr Danson noted an error in the Land registry map which did not show a pathway around the southern plot.

Cllr Hathway emphasised the scale of the selling of amenity land and the accompanying loss of local green spaces. These local green spaces have an inherent value for the young, older, the environment and sense of community and pointed out that Somerset Council's actions were driven by finance and not humanity. It was a Parish Council responsibility to try and protect these spaces.

James Heapey MP has been included on recent correspondence since the auction was announced but has not been contacted directly. It was felt that, should Somerset Council proceed with the auction following the meeting on 19th February, James Heapey should be contacted directly and immediately and his support enlisted.

It was noted that there was another Full Council meeting before the auction date of 17th April 2024.

The Chair then considered what should happen next, with the following results:

An in-person meeting in Coxley Memorial Hall with Somerset Council has been proposed for Monday 19th February 2024 at 10.30am, with an alternative of Wednesday 21st February at 3pm.

Cllr Ros Wyke should be invited to attend.

The Council should proceed immediately with an application to register the 2 plots as a Village Green.

The auction house should be notified of this application and the Council request that they declare this Village Green application in their legal pack.

The auction house should also be informed that the Parish Council are in dispute with Somerset Council over the sale of this land.

Somerset Council's legal team should also be aware of the Village Green application.

RESOLVED: to proceed immediately with village green registration, to agree that the Council notifies the auction house that they declare the Parish Council's application for Village Green registration in their legal pack and to notify them that the Parish Council are in dispute with Somerset Council over the sale of this land.

20. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Monday 18th March 2024 at **7pm (Easton)**.

21. DATE OF NEXT PARISH MEETING

Tuesday 9th April 2024, Coxley Memorial Hall.