

**Meeting of the Parish Council to be held in the Village Hall, Northiam at 7.00pm, Thursday 1st September 2022**

**Members of the Public and Press are welcome and encouraged to attend.**

**Due to the adoption of new Standing Orders there will be an opportunity for members of the public to give their opinion or view once in relation to an item on the agenda.**

**MINUTES**

**Date: 1st September 2022**

**ATTENDEES: Cllrs Biggs, Wadie, Farmer, Streatfield, Johnson, Dallimore**

**Approx. 30 members of the public**

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Cllr Biggs (TB) welcomed everyone. He explained that the supporting clerk Would be taking the minutes as the current clerk wasn’t available. He then added that the current clerk had resigned on Tuesday, and although she will work her 2 months’ notice period, the parish council is now seeking another new clerk.

1. **RECORDINGS**

TB explained that this item had been added to the agenda as recordings have been taken at recent meetings, both full council and committee, which neither the clerk nor Chair knew were taking place. Having taken advice from ESALC, the meetings are now being recorded in order to have a verifiable version. This will benefit the council, as well as members of the public**.**

1. **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**: Cllr Anthony Wontner-Smith sent his apologies.
2. **ELECTION OF NEW CHAIRMAN**

Cllr Tony Wadie (TW) put himself forward as new Chairman. Cllr Penny Farmer (PF) proposed him, and Cllr Dean Johnson (DJ) seconded him. Members unanimously voted for him and Cllr Wadie was duly elected as Chairman. He will sign his acceptance of office at the next ordinary council meeting on 8th September.

TW then read from a speech.

1. **PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Maximum of 15 minutes)**

Jacky Broad (JB) made a statement to let the Parish Council know that the CIC is now open to membership, also mentioned in the Parish Magazine. There is an online (or paper form) which needs to be filled in and posted through the SFF letterbox. Cllr Maltby (RM) asked who qualifies to become a member and what were the benefits of membership? JB replied that anybody who is a council taxpayer in Northiam can become a member. At committee meetings, there is one vote per household, even if *all* householders were members, but everyone can belong and get involved. The CIC welcome suggestions to develop the site and the community use of it. If interested, please ask any questions by email or ‘phone to any of the CIC directors.

Steve Pratt (SP) then asked if there was any update on the fence around the playground? DJ said he had several imminent quotes, but most contractors were booked several months in advance. SP said that as Kompan took the old fence out, they should replace it, but DJ said that when asked, they denied taking it out. He thought it was the contractor who carried out the surfacing, but the prolonged dry weather had caused the base of the fence posts to deteriorate, and has added to its fragile state. SP said the posts were not correctly fixed in the first place, and PF said that it is getting quite dangerous. Furthermore, one of the stiles needs re-setting in concrete.

**TW asked DJ to bring quotes to the meeting next Thursday for further discussion.**

SP also asked about the Zipwire repair. DJ said that the zipwire kit came from abroad and he is trying to source it - it is a work in progress.

Someone then said that they had been asking for the grass at Beacon’s Field to be cut at previous meetings, and said that finally, thankyou, it had been done.

Cllr Jon Streatfield (JS) added that other areas need to be maintained including the old Workhouse Pond. SP said the big 5 bar gate post needs replacing as the whole gate wobbles and is currently tied up with rope. JS offered to have a look and TB suggested asking DS Chestnut to quote as they had carried out similar work in the village.

Karen Ayling said that she is concerned that John O’Conner’s own vans park on the verges whilst working in the village which is not causing damage whilst it is dry but will cause damage when the weather gets worse. PF said they can ask John O’Conner’s not to park there, but that it’s not possible to speak to every member of the public. Highways are not interested, and it isn’t a police matter. Jempson’s aren’t allowed to install fixed bollards, but temporary ones used previously worked quite well.

**PF & DJ offered to speak to Jempson’s about this matter.**

Brian Banks (BB) then added that the management of Beacon’s Field is awful and doesn’t please anybody. The grass gets long, and paths overgrown, and then when cut, the cuttings weren’t taken away which spoils the biodiversity potential. He suggested a community initiative to rake off some of the vegetation and encourage wildflowers, and he further suggested that the parish council needed a bio-diversity strategy.

TB said that the volunteers at the cemetery have improved the state of it hugely and perhaps the same could be organized for Beacon’s Field and Workhouse Pond. He suggested to BB that he set up a community group to look after both places as a balance needed to be struck between keeping some areas tidy and cut, and allowing for bio-diversity at the same time. BB further added that the parish council had wrecked the greater-crested newt population when the pond was restored, so although well-intentioned, it’s not always the best course of action.

SP believes that Beacon’s Field is meant to be cut **and cleared** by the contractors and asked the parish council to check the schedule.

1. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND INSTANCES OF LOBBYING**

There were no stated declarations of interest nor instances of lobbying.

1. **RIGHT TO REPLY FROM CLLR DALLIMORE**

Cllr Ben Dallimore (BD) then read from a written statement

PLEASE NOTE. This statement contains the personal views and opinions of Cllr Dallimore these and may not be those of the Council as a whole.

Ladies and gentlemen, when the previous chair resigned, she cited my “bullying emails” as a reason. I refute this claim in the strongest possible way. Since the July Parish Council Meeting, the Council has been made aware that the former chair undertook decisions and actions requiring full Council consensus. This is unlawful and has left the Council with a costly legal problem to resolve and/or a costly unbudgeted legal commitment.

Since I started looking into how this set of events took place and the Council’s options, several barriers have been put up including, but certainly not limited to, this allegation and not being allowed to see the minutes of a particular meeting. As promised during my election, I said I would inform you all of the rules so that you could hold to account the people responsible for spending your tax money appropriately. It is in law, specifically section 228 of the 1972 Local Government Act, that any elector can view and take copies of the full, signed minutes of any meeting (including any decisions taken in a session closed to the public). Obstruction of seeing these documents is an offence carrying a fine of up to £200. These documents must be available at any reasonable time of the day. Due to the Parish Office not regularly being open, they should be on our website for any of you to inspect. There is no disputing these facts; they are YOUR rights as well as mine.

Since making a third attempt to see this document, further allegations have been made about my conduct. Fortunately, I can easily dispel them having taken an audio recording of the event.

In light of what’s happened, I would like to request that the Council fully investigate all these claims levied against me, consider all the evidence, and put in place policies and procedures that not only protect staff and councillors when claims are rightly made, but also protect staff and councillors where these claims are wrongly made against them. I will fully comply with such an investigation, and I would request that is done as openly and as publicly as possible. I’m human and just as prone to making mistakes as anyone else. If any mistakes have been made, they should be open to public scrutiny as should any and all of our actions.

Until such time, I will only visit the Parish Office with a chaperone and with a recording device to protect myself from further allegations while I continue to look into the original matter, the outcome of which will be recommendations for the Council to consider, preventing such reckless behaviour occurring again.

1. **COST ESTIMATE FOR LEGAL ADVICE**

TB reported that after questions had been raised about the legality of the lease for the stables, the Clerk had been asked to contact Gaby Hardwicke (GH). Having consulted, GH replied that a specialist solicitor was required. TB then asked Trevor Leggo (TL) for advice and sent the list of questions to him. TL knew of a specialist solicitor and offered to forward the questions to obtain an estimate for legal advice. He warned that it would not be cheap and estimated a minimum of £1000.

BD said that he had been asking for legal advice for 7 weeks, so why was it taking so long? TB explained that lawyers at GH had been on holiday, and then the ESALC solicitor, Kate Jackson was also away on holiday, but probably wasn’t the right person for the job anyway. TL had researched another appropriate law firm. BD said that some of his questions were no longer relevant as other information has come to light in the intervening weeks, but the main issue remains that the agreement that was signed was not the one that was presented to council. TW said that the matter was urgent and needed to be resolved as soon as possible, and as the new chairman, he wanted to sort out issues that prevented the council working together.

JS said that he supports the action, but that the questions should be reviewed if they are no longer relevant. Cllr Robert Maltby (RM) wanted to know what questions were being asked. TW said that the main one was if the lease was lawfully signed? BD said that the lease should have had the official seal and been witnessed by 2 councillors, so he was concerned that the parish council may be legally exposed.

BD was annoyed that the council had agreed to get legal advice 3 weeks ago, and it still hadn’t happened. PF said that the questions should be brief bullet points and kept to a minimum. RM concerned that costs will spiral.

The clerk advised that the questions be reviewed, and a pertinent quote obtained and then voted on. TW asked who would review the questions? BD offered to do this and share them with all councillors. TB was asked to ‘pause’ the request to TL for a cost estimate until a reduced set of questions could be submitted.

JB then asked from the audience what on earth was being discussed? BD began to explain, but the Chairman said that the council should now discuss the matter privately. He suggested the matter be brought back to the meeting on 8th September to allow the council time to work out the detail amongst themselves sorted out. JB thanked him.

1. **VENTILATION QUOTES FOR BUNGALOW No. 2**

TB explained that SFF bungalow No 2 was experiencing high levels of condensation, and after investigation it wasn’t a damp issue but a problem of ventilation. Three contractors had quoted and provided remedial advice, and this information had been shared with members. They now needed to decide which contractor to use. PF said that she hadn’t seen all the quotes and asked if the issue could be remedied more simply with the installation of extractor fans in the kitchen and bathroom - a cheaper option and surely one to try first to see if it made a difference. TB said that it was a serious case of condensation, and it was affecting the tenant’s health - it needed to be dealt with urgently and certainly before the winter. He further added that there are vents in the bedroom which are not working as the air needs to be forced to circulate.

TW suggested that as some councillors hadn’t seen the advice from the contractors, to postpone the matter to the next meeting on 8th September. TB said that this must be voted on then and urged all members to read the advice. He later added that he had circulated the quotes and advice to all members by email on 19th August at 12.03pm, so please could they check their inboxes.

A member of the audience suggested that if expert advice had been sought, and recommendations made, it would be wise to take notice.

1. **COUNCILLOR VACANCY**

The audience was reminded that the closing date for electors to request an election was Thursday 9th September. TW said that 4 residents have so far put their names forward, and as 3 of them were present, they could briefly speak to introduce themselves and say why they’d like to become a councillor.

Carolyn Pierce said that she was born and raised in the village and had a good understanding of the SFF site as she spent 23 years working there. She has been a parish councillor before and wanted to help the village.

Michelle Fairbrass then spoke to say that generations of her family had lived in the village, and she had moved back to raise her family as it is very close to her heart. She knows lots of people of all ages in the village and hears differing views which she would like to get a grasp of and work together to rekindle the community spirit.

Bob Russell said that he had only lived in the village for 5 years, but he had a background as a borough councillor serving on planning and highways. He had also been a governor of a couple of schools. He had a corporate management background and broad experience of finance and business. He also had the time to make himself available to do things around the village.

**Meeting closed 8pm**

Chairman’s Signature…………………………………………………………..