

Minutes of the 129th MEOPHAM Annual Parish Meeting held on Friday May 17th 2024, at 7.30 pm held at St Johns Centre

In the Chair:

Cllr S. Buchanan, Vice Chairman, Meopham Parish Council standing in for Cllr C. Price, Chairman of Meopham Parish Council until she arrived at about 8.15 p.m., having been unavoidably delayed, and took the chair.

Also Present

From Meopham Parish Council: Cllrs D. Bramer, P. Crow, D. Fisher, P. Haslam, A. Evans, G. Smith, B. Wade, P. Watson.

Community Warden Mandy Casson plus 28 Meopham residents and representatives of local groups

Welcome

Cllr S Buchanan welcomed all those present, apologised for the short notice of the meeting and stated the meeting would be recorded solely for the purposes of writing the minutes. She emphasised that this was not a Parish Council meeting but a meeting for parishioners to hear about what is going on in the parish and express their views on local matters. Refreshments would be available at the end of the meeting.

Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from Cllrs M. Adam and D. Simms and Mr D. Fairweather

The minutes of the 128th Annual Parish Meeting held on Wednesday 8th March 2023 were approved on the proposal of Cllr B. Wade, seconded by Ms R. Blake.

Reports from Representatives from Local Groups

Cllr S. Buchanan then invited representatives of local groups to give oral reports.

Dave Denman-Meopham Windmill Trust

The newly formed Trust had spent much time initially preparing a response to KCC's consultation on the future of Kent Windmills. The Trust would ideally like KCC to retain the mill as they had looked after it well, including recent repairs to the drains and repainting. The sweeps, cap and tail are currently in Suffolk and their return is imminent. When they are returned the top will rotate and ultimately the ambition is to get the mechanism working to produce flour. The Trust have gathered an enthusiastic team of volunteers who have cleaned the inside of the mill and can carry out general maintenance tasks going forward. It is hoped the mill will be open for visitors very soon, initially at weekends and the group have a stall at the Parish Fete where windmill related merchandise will be available. Other activities have included being registered as an Asset of Community Value, tidying up documentation, applying to be a Charitable Incorporated Organisation to reduce the liability of trustees, seeking a grant and working with neighbours to increase parking, grass cutting and considering income generating opportunities by subletting the engine shed.

Tamzin Sharrod-Meopham Leisure Centre

It was reported that the new lease would soon be signed. The Centre's Social Impact Value focus has led to new types of membership and activities that improve fitness and reduce NHS costs, Special membership rates for over 55s, for parents of children participating in activities and for short "taster" periods have been introduced along with new activities like the sporting memories club, short mat bowls and chair fitness.

Questions were asked about the size of gym membership, opening hours (6.30am-9pm weekdays and 8am-4pm weekends) and whether anything could be done about transport for the less able.

Nigel Tate-Meopham Village Hall

It was reported that the hall hosts about 30 different groups for all ages from babies to retired and for activities from art to yoga. The hall's website is due to be updated but has information about all the activities. There is to be a joint open day with the Tennis Club and the Country Club on Sunday 7th July. Questions related to parking issues and what might be done such as encouraging car sharing and installing a mirror.

Rob Slater-Meopham Tennis Club

The club was described as having three hard courts and 2 artificial clay floodlit courts with a membership of around 150 adult and 170 junior members-a membership that puts it on a par with much bigger clubs. It was Kent Club of the Year in 2022 and North Kent Club of the Year in 2023. Annual fees are modest at £160 for adults and £30 for children-free under 6. The club is not for profit and very inclusive with pay and play sessions for non-members, social tennis sessions and walking tennis along with competitive teams and comprehensive coaching opportunities. The club's outreach programme offers free initial sessions to local schools including Helen Allison.

John Ogden-Meopham Players

It was stated that the group were very much in need of more actor, director and playwright members, particularly young people. The group have a Quiz night on 31st May at Meopham Village Hall.

Cllr Anna Evans-Meopham Parish Council

As one of the liaison councillors for youth and community Anna advertised the village fete on the 20th June 2-6pm in conjunction with Meopham School and the Rotary club. She announced lots of activities, food and stalls and invited people who would like to help or had ideas for what could be hosted to contact the Parish Office.

Mandy Casson -KCC Community Warden

Mandy summarised the activities she has been involved in recently including the Loan Sharks and Mental Health initiative which has involved talking about the mental health benefits of outdoor space and raising awareness of loan shark lending. She has also been a champion for Trading Standards and Adult Social Care, responding to requests for assistance on a range of issues. In addition, she had attended a course on Summer Hazards: raising awareness of the effects of UV radiation from the sun and the need for hydration in hot weather.

Cllr Sheila Buchanan-Meopham Parish Council

Sheila praised the capabilities of our staff and welcomed councillors who had joined us in the past year who brought new skills that enhanced the council team. The council's plan for the parish is soon to be finalised which sets out our values, aims and plan of action for the next three years. During the year we have increased our communication links with Borough and County councillors and started to work collaboratively on a number of fronts-one topic discussed was parish involvement in the future of the community warden service. Links with local groups, societies and organisations have also been strengthened, in particular the local secondary school which is hosting the village fete and may be involved in reintroducing a parish magazine. Once the Gravesham Local Plan is issued MPC will need to provide a strong lead to parishioners on building proposals.

Public Question Time

Comment/question 1

The Council were praised for their work but needed to be more responsive when issues were raised and provide feedback. The Council needs to encourage more people to be involved in local issues and work with them to take things forward. Specific issues taken to the Council in the past have been the safety of zebra crossings at Hook Green and Culverstone and parking at Camer Parade.

Response

Sometimes there is a misunderstanding of what the Council can achieve but it always passes on concerns to responsible bodies but accepted the need to acknowledge concerns and inform of progress.

Comment/question 2 from former councillor (1)

The parking issues at Camer Parade will go on forever but a Trixie mirror might help.

Councillor Price joined the meeting at this point and outlined the actions the Council has taken over recent years, including independent highway surveys which have resulted in proposals that were of little benefit or would need large funding. The Council produces an annual Highways Improvement Plan which is a wish list of needs that is put to KCC in the hope of gaining funding. The three top priorities on our list were Camer Parade parking, the Green Lane rat-run and speeding and parking in Longfield Rd.

Comment/question 3 Perhaps the public should be more active in collecting data on parking violations and report them. Also concern was raised about the personal abuse received by enforcement staff.

Comment/question 4 The new car park at Meopham School is not being well used.

Response

The Council will take this up with the school.

Comment/question 5 from former Councillor (2)

*Has any further progress been made on affordable housing?

*Is there progress on the defibrillator at Southfield Shaw?

*Can anything be done about the potholes at the entrance to the allotments and the central track?

*Why has the grass not been cut at the allotments?

Response

There was a call for small local sites that was passed on to rural housing providers but they were not pursued as they were larger scale than requested. The issue of the Local Plan is awaited before re-establishing the rural housing working group.

It is planned to repurpose the defibrillator at the phone box on railway approach to Southfield Shaw as there is an outside defibrillator at the station now.

Grass cutting was delayed due to ground dwelling bees and quotes have been sought for the entry pothole.

Comment/question 6

The Parish Council were thanked for getting the BT box at Meadfield Rd removed but concern was raised about the trees there as one had been cut down-was it possible to get a tree preservation order on the remaining trees?

Response The Council will pursue.

Comment/question 7

What is happening about the public toilets and why has there been a lack of information coming from the council about this and meetings.

Response

The budget was set without funding for the toilets and the toilets were closed. Going forward there are 2 options-to demolish or repurpose. It has been decided to pursue the latter option. Many factors will need to be considered when looking at options including planning, parking, better opening hours etc. Three venues-The Cricketers, Minels and Costa have signed up to the community toilet scheme. We are always considering ways to communicate with the public and it is hoped to relaunch a Newsletter.

Comment/Question 8 from former councillor (3)

Why has the precept been increased by 29.2% with salaries up from £76,000 to £101,000?

Response

Staffing was increased as a result of an independent staffing review which deemed 25 extra hours were necessary. We are lucky to have such qualified staff and our costs are not out of step with other councils.

Comment/Question 9 from former councillor (1)

But the review was rejected by the personnel committee (at the time when he and Sheila Buchanan were members) as the review was carried out by a retired clerk and no councillors were consulted.

Response

This will be looked into.

Comment/Question 10

But I see from agendas and advertising that you also plan to appoint a locum and an events co-ordinator.

Response

The former is unlikely to be needed and the latter has not yet been agreed.

Comment/Question 11 from former councillor (3)

Why are councillor and other volunteer helpers not involved in organisation of events etc as in the past?

Response

Will send out requests for volunteers and helpers to come forward but the staff are our permanent presence.

Comment/Question 12 from former councillor (4)

*Why are the Council website and noticeboards not up to date, with notices without approval numbers, and no indication of upcoming meetings and there was no signage about closure of the toilets and where to go now?

*Parking on the pavement outside Ruxton Mews causes problems for pedestrians and the disabled.

Response

We are planning to improve the website and reinstating the policy of approving notices on Parish noticeboards will be pursued. Notices at the toilets were obstructed but will be put up again. We are aware of and pursue parking issues at Ruxton Mews.

Comment/Question 13 from former councillor (5)

I am concerned about the 31% increase in the precept this year with a large proportion on admin costs with only £650 allocated to festivities and the loss of toilets without public consultation and the cancelling of the picnic on the green. I would like to ask what extra the parishioners can expect for the increase in the precept.

Response

We are aware of pressures on income and wanted to keep the increase in precept as low as possible. This was made difficult by the previous year's budget being supplemented from reserves. The 2023-4 the precept increase was held down to 9% by a subsidy of up to £19K from the council's reserves, of which only about half turned out to be needed. In 2024-5 no subsidy was allocated which partly accounts for the large increase in the precept from the previous year.

The aim is to get grants and call on reserves to supplement the festivities budget.

When the toilets were taken over from GBC in 2017 a survey was carried out and only 149 responses were received (136 in favour) the more recent survey by a parishioner with support from 410 was not valid as responders were not aware of the cost of each usage of the toilets which did not justify the annual maintenance costs of around £10,000.

Comment/Question (14) from former councillor (5)

The Councillor asked those present to raise their hands if they would join in a call for a parish poll on the proposal 'Meopham Parish Council should reopen the public toilets on Pitfield Green'. He advised that it needed 10 parishioners on the electoral roll for Meopham to call for a poll in order to bring one about organised by GBC. Many hands were raised and he declared that the poll had therefore been called. The Chairman concurred with this. The ex-councillor subsequently collected the names and addresses of ten of those who had called for the poll so that their presence on the electoral roll could be verified by GBC if required.

The meeting closed at 9.33 p.m. and refreshments were taken.