

Whitchurch-on-Thames Parish Council

MINUTES of the Parish Council meeting held in ‘The Old Stables’, Monday 5th December 2016, commencing at 8.00pm.

PRESENT

Chairman	Keith Brooks
Councillors	Dave Bowen Rachel Hatcher Jon Steward
Clerk	Felipa House

Public:

Peter Worsley, Richard Wingfield, Leslie Maynerd, David Maynerd, Denise Huxtable, Geoff Weir, Wendy Blow, David Pearson, Peter Dragonetti & others.

1. Apologies for absence

Cllr. Hart, Cllr. Donahue.

2. Declarations of interest

None.

3. Public forum Opportunity for members of the public to address the Council. With the permission of the Chairman, the public may also speak about specific items of business as they arise.

Wendy Blow asked whether the precept could/would be increased to pay for a continuation to the 143 bus service. The Clerk explained that subsidising public bus companies was subject to section 137 limits, which could not be increased, & that this was currently the only way the Council could continue to fund this service. The precept would therefore not need to be raised for the coming financial year.

Cllr. Bowen said that he was awaiting a quote from TK Travel for the provision of an alternative service, but he was expecting this to be very expensive.

David Pearson asked for extra time in order for a viable solution to be found. 150 households have replied in favour of continuing the service.

Geoff Weir believed that the current equal division of costs between the parishes of Whitchurch & Goring Heath was not a fair split. He felt that Goring Heath, with a larger parish & greater electorate, should contribute more. Peter Dragonetti stated that Goring Heath’s section 137 limits, although higher than those of Whitchurch, would not be enough to cover a substantially different split.

Cllr. Steward has spoken to business in Pangbourne & all would be in favour of keeping the bus & supporting it.

Peter Worsley made a comment about the absence of County and District councillors as he thought their input would have been useful.

4. Agree minutes of Parish Council meeting 1st November 2016

These were approved as a true record.

5. District councillor’s report

Cllr. Simister was not present.

6. County councillor's report

Cllr. Bulmer was not present but had circulated his report before the meeting. This included details of an initiative by pharmacies across Oxfordshire to encourage people over 60 to stay warm during the winter by offering free thermometers to ensure their homes are heated to at least 18°C, plans to develop an 'Expressway' between Oxfordshire & Cambridgeshire (A34 to M40 to M1), transformation of OCC's adoption services by joining forces with neighbouring councils & new transport measures for Oxford, which could include a congestion charge & workplace parking levy scheme.

7. 143 bus subsidy

The Clerk explained that currently the only legal way the Council could continue to subsidise the 143 (a commercial bus service) was to use the money they are allowed to spend within section 137. This is £7.42 per person for 2016/17, which gives a total of £4,630 based on an electorate of 624. (The rate is expected to increase slightly in the next financial year). The Council agreed that the 2016/17 s.137 money would be used to pay for the bus until the end of March.

The s.137 money for 2017/18 is, however, not enough to cover a further full year's subsidy of the bus. Following advice from OALC (Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils) the only route available to the Council at the moment seems to be for an independent bus users' group to be established, but this would be for use of the Comet bus only. This group would have to be completely separate from the Council & deal with tickets, fares etc. for the bus service. The Council would then be able to give a grant to this group to assist with its work. It was felt that such a voluntary group would be difficult & the Comet bus service is not popular.

The other option is that the Council decides to grant itself The General Power of Competence. This would allow it far greater spending powers, which should enable it to continue subsidising the bus. In order to do this, however, 2/3rds of the councillors have to have been elected, which is not the case here. The Clerk would also have to undertake training in order to become qualified. The Clerk will investigate the procedures necessary & report back but this course of action will take some time. Whilst this process is taking place, Cllr. Brooks proposed that the Council was willing to support the continuation of the bus service as long as they could find the money to do so in a legal manner. The other councillors were all in agreement with this proposal. The Council will continue to work closely with Goring Heath Parish Council & SOBAG to look at other possible solutions.

8. Village environment/maintenance

The Clerk has been working with Leslie Maynerd to amend the MOWS charter. Large, one-off purchases will now be approved by the Council in advance & paid for by the Clerk following MOWS guidelines. 2 large planters have already been installed to the right of the church entrance, for which the Council thanked MOWS. Other items will be needed for this area as well & next year's plan is to work on the other side of the church entrance. The Council agreed to donate £100 to MOWS for plants; Leslie will purchase these herself & invoice the Council up to this maximum. Further purchases will have to receive Council approval. Based on these guidelines the Council therefore unanimously approved the MOWS charter.

Work on the village sign is still ongoing; the Clerk will chase.

The Clerk has received an amended contract from SODC regarding the site of the old Polish church. This now includes points raised by Peter Hawley & clarifies the situation. The Clerk recommended that the contract be agreed; the Council approved this.

The Clerk raised the question of the restoration of the war memorial on Whitchurch Hill. Peter Dragonetti has managed to source funds for the entire cost of the renovation through grants & donations, so there will therefore be nothing for the Council to pay.

9. Planning

P16/S3799/FUL. Eastfield House, Eastfield Lane. This concerns an amendment to the style of bat box to be installed. The Council unanimously agreed to submit 'No strong views'.

10. Finance Approve payments/note receipts

Monthly salary for the Clerk

Expenses for the Clerk for postage stamps (£7.68)

Invoice from SODC for dog-bin emptying July – September (£50.23).

The Clerk recommended that the usual internal auditor, Arrow Accounting, be appointed again. The Council approved this recommendation.

The Clerk has received details of the 2017/18 precept. This would amount to £25,773 based on no increase from this year.

The Clerk had circulated details of this year's budget & spending to date before the meeting & asked that all councillors advise her of any potential plans/spending for the next financial year. This will be done in January, when the precept will be agreed.

The cost of the planters recently installed by MOWS rose slightly to £352.75.

11. Village green

The Clerk received advice that there is already a bin on the village green which is regularly emptied & not used very much. The Council therefore agreed to maintain the status quo.

It has been reported that there are some large overhanging boughs near the entrance to the school.

Cllr. Brooks is obtaining quotes to have these removed.

OCC have drafted an agreement regarding the school's use of the village green. This appears very straightforward but does seem to require a solicitor. The Council approved the Clerk's request to find one to check & sign the document.

12. TAPAG

Cllr. Hatcher has reviewed the Bridge Company's report on the toll bridge approach. She favoured option C2 (locally widening carriageway & footway, no chicane). There is also option D, a raised walkway across the garden, potentially made from timber. The surgery would welcome any improvements if they make the path safer but they would have to be cost-neutral for them. Cllr. Hatcher recommended option C2 & option D. Geoff Weir stated that he would love to see the walkway idea happen, despite any extra cost this might incur the Bridge Company. The PC all voted in favour of option D, a separate walkway from the road.

Cllr. Hatcher will be holding an inaugural working group meeting on Tuesday 13th December. This will be a traffic & parking working group based on open day respondents. It will look at Cllr.

Donahue's residents' list of issues & any other issues. Cllr. Bowen asked that they look at the problem of lorries for Castrol coming down the hill & getting stuck at the bridge.

13. Village hall replacement project

As it looks likely that SODC would exercise their right-to-buy option should the PC decide to sell the village hall, Cllrs. Bowen & Brooks recently looked around the village hall & felt that much could be done to improve it, including new windows, doors, floors, guttering etc. The village hall needs to be used more regularly & the committee needs more members. Cllr. Hatcher will draft something for the website asking for help.

If the village hall was renovated then a new pavilion could be built using grant money.

A plumber is needed for the village hall for various items. An electrical inspection is also required as it's overdue. The boiler also needs servicing.

14. Village /Neighbourhood Plans

Cllr. Donahue was absent so this item will move to January’s meeting. Richard Wingfield will ask him whether he wants the Minutes from his inaugural meeting to be put on the website.

15. Council policies

The councillors all voted to adopt the policies drafted by the Clerk (Media, Council Information & Social Media policies). The underlying theme was that councillors communicate with each other & keep each other informed of Council business at all times.

16. Appointment of new Parish Councillor

Cllrs. Brooks & Donahue interviewed Denise Huxtable, who was the only applicant. Cllr. Brooks proposed to co-opt her as a new councillor & Cllr Bowen seconded this. She was therefore co-opted to the Council & welcomed by the other councillors.

17. Parish Council meeting dates for 2017

The Council agreed that these were to be held on the second Monday of every month at 8pm in The Old Stables. The Clerk will publicise the dates.

18. Whitchurch United Charities

The Council approved Whitchurch United Charities’ request for a new trustee, Mrs Sarah Dixon. The Clerk will inform them.

19. Other matters for Chairman & PC to consider Items that arise that are not on this agenda but need discussion & to be proposed for a future agenda

None were raised. The Council wished everyone a very merry Christmas.

20. Date of next meeting

Monday 9th January 2017 at 8pm.

Meeting closed at 10.00pm.

Signed.....
Chairman

Date.....