



MINUTES OF MEETING OF WHITCHURCH-ON-THAMES PARISH COUNCIL
At the Village Hall at 20:00 Thursday, January 9, 2025

DRAFT

Councillors Present:

Jim Donahue (Chairman), Katherine Higley, Debbie Leach, Paul O’Grady and Frances Parkes.

Officers Present:

Clerk, RFO – Brian Inglis

Public and Press: Alex Carter (Henley Standard)

In Attendance: District Cllr Peter Dragonetti

- 1 **Apologies for absence & Parish Council Declaration** 20:00
Cllr Diana Smith sent apologies.
Cllr Parkes read the Parish Council Declaration.
- 2 **Declarations of Interest** – There were none.
- 3 **Public Forum** – a time for members of the public to speak on any item on the agenda. 20:05
No members of the public were present.
- 4 **To approve minutes of the meeting of December 12, 2024.** 20:05
Resolution: The Council voted to approve the minutes.
- 5 **Resignation of Councillor** – 20:05
The Council noted the resignation of Nicholas Brazil, acknowledging his contribution to the Parish Council.
A statutory notice of a Casual Vacancy has been posted on the village notice board.
- 6 **Chairman’s Announcements - See Appendix 1** 20:10
- 7 **To receive reports from the representatives of OCC and SODC** 20:20
- 7.1 SODC District Councillor Report – Cllr Dragonetti. See **Appendix 2**
- 7.2 OCC County Councillor Report - Cllr Bulmer. No report received
- 8 **Planning Applications** – to discuss and agree Council’s response to the following: 20:30
- 8.1 **P24/S3881/HH**
Refurbishment of garden shed.
Oakfield, Eastfield Lane, Whitchurch-on-Thames RG8 7EJ
Resolution: Councillors voted to support this application.
- 9 The Clerk reported that no planning decisions had been made since the last meeting. 20:35
Following a short discussion on the ongoing project at Walled Garden House, it was agreed to contact SODC Planning for an update on matters including the demolition, the bat protection survey and the importance of the pond as a village water course.
Action: Cllr O’Grady to contact SODC Planning Enforcement, requesting an update.
Cllr Donahue noted that a quarterly Planning Update is due to be submitted to the Whitchurch Bulletin
Action: The Clerk to update and submit the report before the deadline.

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10.1 To approve the payment schedule for December:

Payment	Sub-total	VAT	Total (£)
Staff Expenditure (January)			639.10
Oxfordshire CC – High Street Traffic Survey	190.00	38.00	228.00
Amazon – Christmas Eve Wax Torches (paid)	36.45	7.29	43.74
Stewart Lewins, Bugler (not on agenda)		NIL	60.00
Whitchurch Village Hall (not on agenda)		NIL	25.00

Resolution: The Council voted to approve the payments.

10.2 To note receipts as detailed:

Receipts: None	Amount

10.3 **Bank Statements and Reconciliations for December 2024:**

The RFO gave a concise report on documents which had been previously circulated and scrutinised by councillors, answering questions to the satisfaction of councillors.

10.4 **To approve the DRAFT 2025/26 Parish Council Budget**

Cllr Donahue gave a presentation on the DRAFT Parish Council budget for FY2025/26, and following input from councillors asked for approval. An increase of 4% on the 2025/26 Precept Calculation was included. Cllr Donahue noted the need to retain approximately 50% of the Precept as General Reserves.

Resolution: Councillors voted to approve the DRAFT 2025/25 Parish Council Budget

10.5 **To agree the 2025/26 PRECEPT calculation.**

Resolution: Councillors voted to approve a Precept Calculation for 2025/26 of £29,291

Action: The Clerk to submit the Precept Calculation to SODC

11 **Motion:** Proposer Cllr Parkes, Seconder Cllr Smith

20.50

To conduct a trial of placing 2 solar powered, motion-sensored lights in the Upper Narrows at ground level for 1 month to see if this solves the lighting question there.

Resolution: Councillors voted to proceed with the trial

Action: Cllr Parkes to make the necessary arrangements for positioning of the lights.

12 **Motion:** Proposer Cllr Parkes, Seconder Cllr Donahue

20:55

To continue to share costs of running the defibrillator at the village green with the Cricket Club which will be £150 + VAT for a twelve-month period, fixed for 24 months.

Resolution: Councillors voted to continue the arrangement.

13 **To review progress on any open actions from previous Parish Council meetings and agree any revision of actions on the action log.** 21.00

The Clerk gave an update on the progress of the Hardwick Road Verges project as follows –

- A new offer letter has been received from Mend the Gap, has been duly signed and returned.
- Butler and Proctor are confirmed as contractors and have given timescale assurances.

Action: The Clerk to make this project a recurring agenda item until the completion of the project.

Action: Cllr Donahue to include a report on this project in the next edition of the Whitchurch Bulletin

14 The deadline for submission of items to The Clerk for inclusion on the next Agenda is close of business on Thursday, February 6, 2025.

15 The date and time of the next meetings was set as Thursday, February 13, 2025 at 20:00.

The meeting closed at 21:05

APPENDIX 1 – CHAIRMAN’S ANNOUNCEMENTS – Cllr Jim Donahue

Christmas Celebrations - the second annual Christmas Eve Torch Procession around the village starting at the Greyhound and ending at St Mary’s in time for the Christmas Eve service. The procession leader and bagpiper Alastair Dunstan was joined this year by the village’s second bagpiper Louis Van Der Merwe from Manor Road. I also heard that the Greyhound’s Christmas event with the Never Nevers and the Four Square Saxes was very festive indeed!

Eastfield Lane construction and road safety: We had a nice respite over the Christmas period as Zephyr X tidied up the verges and cleaned the street before the Christmas break, but things are likely to continue to be muddy until work is complete.

Sink hole on Manor Road and ping pong with OCC Highways – A growing sinkhole appeared on Manor Road by the playground just before Christmas. The situation is now stabilised and secure, but the work to get this urgent situation addressed highlights a ping pong back and forth between OCC Highways and Thames Water on whose responsibility it was to repair.

- As a FixMyStreet superuser, I am able to action repairs of qualifying potholes within 28 days. In this case OCC agreed that it was a safety issue so actioned the team for a 24 hr response, however they also assigned it to Thames Water as the suspected cause was a water leak.
- OCC Highways then agreed to fix it after all as Thames Water determined to be a ‘void’ and not caused by a water leak.
- As of Wednesday 8th January, OCC has had filled and covered the sinkhole to make it more stable and safe but are still investigating it.
- On Thursday 9th January, Cllr Parkes happened to see a Thames Water engineer on site who said that they suspected the previous sewage works on this part of the road by Thames Water was the cause and raised a ticket to investigate further.
- It’s not clear who will ultimately win this match of ping pong but at least the safety of the road and playground is secured while we watch from a distance.

Emergency Power Cut Scenario Demonstration at the Village Hall – Wednesday 26th February, 8pm: John Bradon and Jean Marc Grosfort will be demonstrating of a power cut scenario at the Village Hall. The goal will be to cut the power and use the generator to power lights, wifi and other emergency provisions at the Village Hall to prepare for an emergency power cut scenarios. A short annual meeting to review any required changes to the Village Emergency Plan will follow. All are welcome!

Thames Water Sewage Pumping Station Improvements – Thanks to Cllr Smith for working with Thames Water to get a number of improvements to the Eastfield Lane Sewage pumping station that will put us in a much better situation in the event of flooding.

- There are now two fully operational pumps at the station, a primary and back-up.
- In the event of flooding, both pumps can be used to ensure sewage is kept off the road.
- Further planned improvements include a new sump pump to keep the sump basin of the pumping station clear and an infiltration survey to check that the sewage is not escaping into the surrounding area.

Residents Issues:

- **Parking on double yellow lines** – We have received some complaints from residents concerned about parking on the newly installed double yellow lines impeding traffic. As of early January, OCC Parking Enforcement contractors have been patrolling the High Street issuing tickets to those in violation of the new restrictions. This seems to have already resulted in more orderly parking.
- **SSE pavement work unsatisfactory** - OCC have examined the footpath the first week in January after me chasing them again. They sent a team to review it and confirmed it was unsafe as it was crowning significantly in addition to the incorrect materials being used. They have raised this as an issue to SSE although no date for repairing it has been identified.
- **Dangerous manhole cover in playground** – Thanks to Cllr Frances Parkes for identifying this and reporting it.

Local Government Reform coming this way!

Just before Christmas, the Labour Government published its proposals for reforming the structure and financing of local government, with a White Paper entitled “English Devolution”. There are lots of reasons to welcome reform of local government; our current multi-tier structure can be very confusing and any changes which improve local decision-making and accountability can only be a good thing. However, we have major concerns that the proposed changes could make local authorities *less* accountable to their residents and electorate and could take decision-making further away from the communities they serve.

District Councils to be Abolished (and possibly also County Councils)

One key proposal is to abolish District Councils completely and to create new Unitary Authorities covering much larger areas of population. (A Unitary Authority would replace the current two-tier structure we have now, where the County Council and the District Council sit at different levels and have responsibility for different matters).

At the time of writing, the Government is proposing that each Unitary Authority should cover an area with a population of around 500k people; as a comparison, the population of South Oxfordshire District Council is around 153k. Each new Unitary Authority would be a member of a new “Strategic Authority” covering approximately 1.5m people, possibly with an elected Mayor at its head (that would be known as a Mayoral Strategic Authority).

For us here in South Oxfordshire, that new Strategic Authority could cover, say, West Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire, matching the structure of the Integrated Care Board, or it could mirror the area covered by Thames Valley Police, which includes all of Berkshire and Milton Keynes as well.

Although the White Paper is called “English Devolution” there are no proposals to devolve powers or funding to regions in the same way that they have been devolved to the Welsh or Scottish Governments; much of the detail is still to be determined, but the Government is hoping to press ahead with the first tranche of reorganisations quickly. This may result in the postponement of County Council elections, due in May. We do not yet know what structure will be proposed for Oxfordshire, so we will aim to keep you informed as plans evolve!

Local Government reform doesn’t usually generate a lot of interest among the general public, whose main concern is that services are delivered effectively and in line with local need and priorities. At SODC we work hard to make sure that our funds are used wisely and in a way that reflects local concerns around housing affordability, waste and environmental management, nature protection and recovery, community well-being and planning policy. But if SODC ceases to exist and, as the Government is also proposing, local communities and elected Councillors lose their ability to object to major planning applications, the implications for our area could be significant. Watch this space!