

**Minutes of Withersfield Parish Council meeting held at
7:30pm on Tuesday, 17th January 2023 at the Epicentre, Withersfield.**

Present: Cllrs Terry Rich (Chairman), Sheila Horton, Gill Jarvis, Julia Korona, Philip Stiles,
Indunil Wijenayaka; Clerk: Laura Crump; County Cllr: Bobby Bennett; District Cllr: Peter Stevens,
and County Cllr (Haverhill): David Roach.

1. Apologies for absence

Received from Cllr Eve.

2. District Councillor's report

Cllr Stevens said the Council are focusing on support for the cost-of-living crisis. Coffee mornings have been successful in local areas such as Haverhill and Thurlow, to bring communities together.

West Suffolk Council have had their preliminary budget meeting and are able to set a two-year budget. Calculations are being made and the final decision is still to come. This includes a low percentage increase.

Cllr Stevens informed the PC that the Council have been lucky with investments in green energy by previous partners in Forest Heath Council promoted and bought a solar farm which is now producing profits. Also, by acting more commercially through trade waste and rents, money is being put aside to keep the budget balanced and council tax as low as possible.

3. County Councillor's report

The PC had received Cllr Bennett's December 2022 report.

Cllr Bennett highlighted the following points:

- Winter matters campaign - which is promoting safety, health, and wellbeing.
- The government wanted a mayor to be elected but the terminology of this was not favourable and they have opted for an elected leader of the County Council. At the end of last year, the leader signed devolution deal with Suffolk - a public consultation of this will follow.
- Support being given for the cost-of-living crisis.
- SCC are moving to the final stages of setting the budget. There has been pressure from the government to take a 5% increase – but SCC will be taking 4%, as long as it is voted through, which includes 2% adult social care precept and 2% council tax.

Cllr Bennett said there was approximately £2,000 left over from the 40mph buffer zones project in the village and suggested this be put towards the implementation of the 20mph zone. The PC agreed with this suggestion.

Cllr Bennett asked whether members of the PC would like to meet for a walkabout and chat within the parish sometime soon. It was agreed a date for this should be arranged.

The Chair asked Cllr Bennett to chase Highways about the feasibility of extending the double yellow lines just after Melbourne Bridge.

The Chair also requested Cllr Bennett contact Highways regarding concerns over the entrance to the Arboretum and how the additional housing and traffic will impact this already busy junction.

It was suggested by the Chair that the SCC cost of living information could be included in the parish magazine, which Cllr Bennett said she would arrange.

4. Public Forum for parishioners

None. The Chairman closed the public section of the meeting.

5. Declaration of members' interests for any agenda item at this meeting

None.

6. To approve the minutes of the Parish Council meeting held on 15th November 2022

These were approved – proposed by Cllr Horton and seconded by Cllr Stiles.

7. Matters arising - updates from previous Parish Council meetings

None.

8. Update on the Neighbourhood Plan and discussion of the responses received from the section 14 consultation – Cllr Korona

Cllr Korona had shared the responses received to the consultation with the PC and Oneill Homer, the Neighbourhood Plan consultant. Neil prepared a report following an analysis of the responses, which was circulated to the Councillors.

The points and comments were discussed in turn. There were a few comments which have not been incorporated in the report and it was agreed for Cllr Korona to clarify these modifications with Neil at their next meet. With the discussed and agreed alterations, the PC were comfortable with the analysis report.

The response received by Pigeon was noted. It was decided that there would be no changes as a consequence of their comments and potential planning application, as it appears to be contrary to the Local Plan.

The Chair requested Cllr Stevens to ask planning officers if they had received any communications from Pigeon. Cllr Stevens explained that they may not be able to give him an answer due to confidentiality but would pose the question.

It was agreed for Cllr Korona to contact Thurlow Estate querying the possible planning application from Pigeon as they had not been in contact with the PC about it

Cllr Korona confirmed that she was working her way through the draft consultation statement. She stated that they are on track for the time frame and within budget.

Thanks was given to Cllr Korona for all her ongoing work on the Neighbourhood Plan.

9. Update and feedback from the Muck-Off campaign

The Chair had circulated some information and the LGA guidance on predetermination which clarifies that the PC are not restricted from commenting on a proposal in advance of a planning application - as long as when an application is submitted, the PC look at this with open minds. With this, the Chair drafted the below statement which expresses the view of the PC with the information they have been given about the proposed AD plant.

"In the light of the public presentation of a proposal to develop a biodigester plant on a site in Withersfield, and the continued delay by the developer to submit a planning application, the Parish Council wishes to clarify its position.

Having sought further information about the proposal from both the landowner and the developer and carefully reviewed the status of the proposed site, the Parish Council resolves that:

- 1. It fully supports the statutory Local Plan for West Suffolk which designates Spring Grove Farm as agricultural land outside of all approved development areas. We also note that the draft local plan continues to exclude this site from development of any form.*
- 2. It fully supports the principle that restricts developments in areas prone to flooding.*
- 3. It fully supports the ambitions within the West Suffolk Environment Strategy which designates the Stour Brook as a green corridor.*

Whilst it will give appropriate consideration to any planning application properly submitted at the appropriate time, we consider that a development of the scale and nature of that publicly presented by Acorn does not conform in any way with the statutory planning framework.

We call upon Acorn and the landowners - The Thurlow Estate - to reconsider this proposal and if they wish to pursue it, that they seek an alternative and more appropriate site."

Cllrs Bennett, Stevens and Roach, all agreed it was a well written piece and a good idea.

Cllr Wijenayaka confirmed that the steering group is separate from the PC. He explained that the steering group has had several meetings and are in a position of understanding the information they been given. The group await the planning application submission. Cllr Wijenayaka wanted to make clear that all Councillors attending the steering group meetings must be respectful to all attendees as many members of the public at the meetings do not know the details of how the planning process works and are still entitled will give their opinions, ask questions, and be involved in discussions.

Cllr Korona agreed to follow up about the tree preservation and risk to trees due to development. There is a woodland with a range of native species which lies in the South Cambridgeshire planning authority region.

Cllr Roach offered his support to the PC and believes it is not the right location for the anaerobic digestion plant. He believes it could potentially impact his ward and residents therefore, when an application is submitted, they will give their support to the PC.

Cllr Stevens said that the proposal appears to be against the Local Plan and the green buffer between Haverhill and Withersfield. He said that Acorn would have to declare that they had done a sequential site selection and that other sites had been looked into and be able to prove there are no exceptions.

Cllr Bennett has visited similar sites and is in the process of arranging a visit of the proposed site. She said that she has received a large number of emails from residents expressing their views and understands the feeling towards the proposed AD plant. At this time, she will not be declaring a personal stance, as when submitted, the planning application is being determined by Suffolk County Council and she does not wish to predetermine herself as she wants to be able to make representations at the planning committee.

Cllr Stiles has been in contact with Horseheath PC who offer their full support to Withersfield PC on the matter. They share similar concerns about increased traffic and potential smell. Cllr Stevens said that Thurlow PC were also concerned about the traffic movements which will increase due to the AD plant.

The Chair explained he had written to the Thurlow Estate asking whether they were intending to draw up a traffic management plan as they will be responsible for the management of farm-track access and movements. The Thurlow Estate declined they would be creating a plan as it is their view that it is unfeasible to produce one.

The Thurlow Estate did confirm they are not intending to supply maize to the plant.

The PC agreed to adopt the drafted statement by Chair to clarify the PC doesn't feel comfortable sitting on the fence about the proposal and to share this with the local press, Vestey, and our local MP.

10. Update from the Traffic Working Group – Cllr Eve

In advance of his absence, Cllr Eve sent the following update:

Current Activity

I Chaired a meeting of the Villages Road Group on the 10th January. The Villages Road Group is a Forum for local village Parish Council representatives to discuss their local issues with the speed and increasing volumes of traffic and to present solutions for discussion and implementation to our Borough. I also invited Chris Oakes and Sian Gilligan who make up our own Traffic Working Group to take part. Representatives from Little Thurlow, Great Thurlow, Great Wratting and Great Bradley were present.

We discussed our various issues and I presented the projects and issues that Withersfield has:-

- 20 MPH Zone implementation and funding
- Yellow lines on Melbourne Bridge

- Traffic congestion from proposed Anaerobic Digester
- Increase in traffic from new proposed housing estate north of Hales Barn Estate
- Traffic congestion from dispersal of traffic from the new housing estate on the Arboretum

There was unanimous support for all our issues from the other village councillors and they all wanted to be kept up to date on the activities of the Acorn Protest Group. A number of action points were agreed that the group would work together to press the County Council and Suffolk Highways to consider the following for all villages

- 40 MPH buffers
- 20 MPH Zones
- APRN Cameras

Withersfield 20MPH Zone.

We still await a meeting with Bobby Bennett and Suffolk Highways to agree the most appropriate traffic calming measures for village 20MPH zone so that these can be costed as laid out in the original approval documentation.

Once the project has been costed, we can then look at what resources we have to fund the project.

The PC accepted Cllr Eve's report.

Cllr Bennett made it clear that she had not been made aware of meetings, and would like to be informed so she could try to attend them. She confirmed with the PC that the 20mph zone was now the key priority. Money which will be received from the section 106 from the Arboretum phase 2 development and the £2,000 left over from the 40mph buffer zones project, would go towards the funding of the 20mph zone and she may be able to make a contribution from her locality budget also.

It was reiterated by the Chair that the extending of the double yellow lines at Melbourne Bridge was an urgent safety issue and Cllr Bennett agreed to challenge the price the PC were quoted for this to be implemented.

The Chair clarified that Highways needed to be challenged about their lack of action to mitigate future issues which will arise once the new development at the Arboretum has completed, on the Three Counties Way junction. The number of vehicles using the already busy junction, will double. Cllr Bennett said she would approach Highways about this but would welcome supporting comments from parishioners in order to aid her argument.

11. Update from the Village Hall Committee – Cllr Horton

Cllr Horton has arranged for Wi-Fi in the village hall to be fitted tomorrow which she will be overseeing.

It was confirmed by Cllr Horton, that she had put in a bid for the Platinum Jubilee Village Halls Fund which supports the modernisation and improvement of village halls.

The Chairman of the VHMC is soon to be leaving and the committee are seeking new members to join. The committee room is currently being used for the storage of items the Chairman had previously stored and therefore is not available for bookings for the time being. Cllr Horton told the PC that they were expecting three quotes soon for the extension works at the village hall which would provide extra storage and an improved disabled access.

Cllr Jarvis recommended considering the Flying Shuttle when events are being organised as they may like to be involved in some way.

12. Consideration of quotations received for environmental works/village greens maintenance contract

The Clerk had invited five companies to tender for the environmental works in Withersfield and two quotations were received. These were discussed and considered. One quote received did not meet the requirements of the PC. The quote received from the other company, which the PC had used previously and have been happy with their work, was much higher than the Parish Council had budgeted for. It was suggested for the PC to go back to the contractor to ask for explanations on the increased quote. If the environmental suggestions in the contract were a reason for the rise in price, the PC would be able to re-visit and adapt these terms in the specifications. To cover the extra costs quoted for the environmental works, the PC would need to use money from reserves or request a rise in the council tax – it was unanimous that the PC did not want to suggest a rise in council tax. It was therefore agreed for the PC to ask the contractor whether there was a way to make savings and request a revised price. If an agreement in a reduced price can be made, it was agreed for the PC to accept with this contractor. Proposed by Cllr Wijenayaka and seconded by Cllr Korona.

13. Arrangements for Parish Council elections

It was explained that the Clerk's election briefing from West Suffolk and SALC is taking place next week and therefore, the Clerk would be able to give the information to the PC at the next meeting.

Cllr Stevens told the PC that photo ID will be required at the elections.

The Chair clarified that the Parish Councillors will cease to be Councillors on a certain date (to be confirmed). The current Cllrs are all able to stand for the election and need to be nominated to do so. There will be one extra Cllr position available, making 8 in total. If more than 8 are nominated, the election will be contested.

It was agreed to advertise that residents can put themselves forward for the upcoming election in May, in the parish magazine and on social media.

14. Agree date for Annual Spring Clean

It was agreed for this to take place 10am-12pm on Saturday 1st April, meeting at the war memorial. The Clerk will organise the equipment and rubbish collection. This will be advertised in the parish magazine.

15. Finance

- a) Presentation of monthly accounts – Income and Expenditure and Bank Reconciliation
- b) To note payments made since last meeting
- c) Quarterly report of expenditure and comparison to budget

These were all noted and agreed. Proposed by Cllr Horton and seconded by Cllr Wijenayaka.

- d) Approval of budget and precept submission/To note submitted precept form

The precept submission of £9,440 with a 0% increase in the council tax, was noted.

It was agreed that the budget would need to be revised to make allowances for the increased quoted costing for the environmental works, which would mean adjusting the amount in the reserves to allow for the increment. The PC approved the budget with this change – the figures for these two would be confirmed once the environmental works contract had been agreed with the contractor.

16. Correspondence

- a) Email – Police & Crime Commissioner precept survey

This was noted and the information has been shared as requested.

- b) Email – WEBNOS defib site check

Noted. Cllr Horton told the PC that the bulb in the cabinet was no longer working and she had enquired about getting this replaced to find that this cannot be done and therefore it would mean the entire cabinet would need to be replaced costing £5,000. Cllr Horton said there were security lights at the village hall which come on in the dark and she would see whether this lighting would suffice in being able to see and use the defibrillator. It was agreed that no action be taken for replacing the cabinet.

17. Planning

- a) Borough notifications since last meeting
- b) Applications received since last meeting

All were considered and noted.

18. Agenda items for 14th March 2023

- Elections
- Update on Acorn's anaerobic digestion plant proposal
- Environmental contract
- Village hall update

The meeting closed at 21:25.