

BENHALL & STERNFIELD PARISH COUNCIL

Minutes of the Benhall & Sternfield Annual Parish Meeting, held on
Wednesday 17 May 2023 at Benhall Ex Servicemen's Club

Present:– Cllr Hilary Graham, Cllr Sue Nicholson, Cllr David Secret, Cllr Archie Bhatia, Cllr Beverley Barclay, Cllr John Slade & Cllr Alan Woods.

In Attendance: 11 members of the public, ESC Cllr Tom Daley, the Responsible Finance Officer and the Clerk.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE. Cllr Riven Brace – personal reasons. Cllr Chris Durrant – personal reasons.
SCC Cllr Andrew Reid.

2. MINUTES OF THE LAST ANNUAL PARISH MEETING HELD ON 22nd MAY 2022 - TO CONSIDER THE APPROVAL.
The minutes were approved correct by all, proposed Cllr Nicholson, seconded Cllr Woods, signed by the Chairman.

3. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES. None.

4. GUEST SPEAKER – DR EDWARDS, CHAIR OF THE BOARD OF GOVERNORS, BENHALL PRIMARY SCHOOL.

Explained why Benhall St Mary's CoE Voluntary Controlled School is joining the All Saints School Trust on 1 September.

In 2018 the School had a highly successful OFSTED inspection, In 2022 it was placed in High Level Action by the Local Authority as a failing school. What had happened. Much was due to the impact of COVID but there was also a very high churn rate amongst the staff with no fewer than 5 headteachers in six years. The impact of this was for parents to lose confidence in the school's ability and started to withdraw their children. Staff morale fell and for the board we were fire fighting rather than taking a strategic view of the future. This could not continue. In our estimation the school would close within 5 years unless drastic action was taken.

Closure was unacceptable for numerous reasons. It is a quirky creative school, the thatched cat is a well known local landmark.

The school has always had a strong local reputation for creativity and outdoor learning and there is a latent desire amongst the staff to bring these characteristics back, we know that the parents also want to see a return of these characteristics.

The school is a nurturing environment with strong pastoral care.

We were also fully aware of the effects that closing a school can have on village life. Many have pointed to the example to Peasenhall to underline this observation. If we were to prosper then we would require significant support from the Local Authority, but we had low confidence that the Local Authority had the capacity and capability to provide the depth of support we would require.

In summer 2022 the board started to explore options for saving the school. Federation with other local schools was discounted mainly because of the reluctance of those schools to join with us. This left the option of joining a Trust. The benefits for a small school to join a Trust are many. It allows access to scarce skills, such as Special Needs. There are economies of scale to be achieved through, for example bulk purchase of school books. There are greatly enhanced training opportunities for our staff and, as governors, we are afforded the opportunity to meet our peers and develop best practice.

The Trust we have chosen is the All Saints Schools Trust which is based in Laxfield. It is a Primary School only Trust with 12 schools, all of whom are Church of England schools, spread in an arc from Bury St Edmunds to Laxfield. The Trust has a proven track record in implementing sustained improvements in poorly performing schools and was a natural match for our school. They also do not change the distinctive character of their schools. You will not see a change in uniform, the only change will be the removal of Voluntary Controlled from the school name.

We have completed our parent and staff consultation, gained approval from the Church Schools Board and the Department of Education for joining the Trust and are now in the TUPE consultation period. We are highly optimistic that conversion will be complete by 1 September. We have appointed an Executive Head from the Trust who is on-site 4 days a week to help with returning the school to its previous state, and take it beyond.

The capacity for the school is 105 pupils, currently 81 pupils attend, not many are from Benhall, the majority are from Saxmundham, some from Sweffling, Peasenhall & Snape.

Currently 25% of the pupils have special educational needs. The school would benefit from CAMs (child and mental health team), however a teaching assistant could be trained in the knowledge of mental health issues.

There is definitely a lack of funding from Suffolk County Council.

Cllr Graham thanked Dr Edwards for his presentation and looks forward to having a report back on the progress at the next APM.

5 REPORT FROM SUFFOLK COUNTY COUNCILLOR. The report from Cllr Andrew Reid has been circulated to all.

6 REPORT FROM EAST SUFFOLK COUNCILLOR.

The ESC report has been circulated to all.

Cllr Graham congratulated Cllr Tom Daley on his re-election.

Cllr Daley informed that he is now part of a 3 member ward which includes Cllr Sarah Whitlock and Cllr Katie Gray, all 3 represent the Green Party. He is very interested in Parish Council issues and wants to help to deal with any concerns the PC might have.

A new cabinet at ESC is still to be formed. He has today met with the energy minister and made the point that Parish Councils must be kept up to date with local energy infrastructures.

Chairman's initials.....

Cllr Secret informed that he will look at the David Bowring statement and will draft a response on behalf of the PC.
Cllr Graham informed that the recent meeting with EDF regarding the Fen Meadow project had proven that the PC had not been consulted on the reserved matters. The PC has only seen the process but not seen the details.
Cllr Nicholson suggests that the PC has been ignored in planning matters and in particular in the Local Plan.
ESC Cllr Daley advised that there will be a new portfolio officer for planning, he will see if a meeting with the new officer can be arranged for the PC.
Grants and funding available for East Suffolk Business’ – UK Share Prosperity Fund. Training and grants through the Digital Springboard.
Move to net zero, grants available.

7. REPORTS TO BE RECEIVED FROM VILLAGE ORGANISATIONS

History Group report given by Chair person Jane Evans. What a difference a year makes in Benhall & Sternfield? Certainly for the History Group it’s been a year of what feels like non-stop action. The History Group has arranged two displays of material from the community archive, one for the Platinum Jubilee and also at the Flower Show last year.
In addition, we have put on two talks, one by Manette Baillie aged 100 and another by Michael Peters. Our successful annual Quiz Night was held in March this year and was over-subscribed. It will be semi-annual this year with a new date already booked in November 2023.
Events in timeline order
Jun 2022 Jubilee Exhibition at Benhall Club and creation of a Jubilee History Book
Aug 2022 Flower Show display of aerial views of the village
Sep 2022 Updates to History Group’s web pages
Nov 2022 Manette Baillie’s talk at aged 100
Dec 2022 Purchase of new digital equipment (Laptop & Printer) out of grants from Sternfield Lands Trust and East Suffolk Council
Feb 2023 Talk by Michael Peters re Bell-ringing (Tower and Handbells)
Mar 2023 Quiz Night. The event was over-subscribed and a huge success.
Mar 2023 Daffodil Show. The History Group co-ordinated several different organisations for a successful Display to replace the cancelled Stratford St. Andrew’s Show.
Apr 2023 Move to new premises.
In March last year the Parish Council kindly gave the Group a grant of £250 which enabled us to purchase new digital recorders and went some way toward the purchase of a Tablet. As a result we have been able to orally record the following people in the last year:
Bob Sharman, Graham Smith, Cathy Feakes, Tim Trotman, Derek Stiff, Manette Baillie, Janet Mayhew, Peter & Philip Sampson and Michael Peters. We have also digitally filmed two talks for the first time using the Tablet: Manette Baillie and Michael Peters.
On 28th April the History Group successfully moved from Smokehouse Farm to new premises at The Straw Barn, 7 Benhall Green. The new facilities will be able to safely house the new digital equipment purchased and provide a larger space to warmly welcome visitors from within and outside of our community to come and view the archive.
We have a major Exhibition of maps & images from the archive on 19th & 20th May 2023 at Benhall Club and looked forward to welcoming all the members of the Parish Council.
Thank you for supporting your local History Group.

Sternfield Town Lands Charity – Cllr David Secret reported that the trustees are ex-officio as Rector - vacant
Pat Robbins – representative of the Parish Meeting for 4 years from May 2022
Kathryn Feakes – co-opted trustees for 5 years from February 2022
David Secret – representative of the Parish Meeting for 4 years from May 2021
The Charity is governed by a Trust Deed dated 16 September 1902. The Trustees met once during the year on 27 March 2023. The most recent annual accounts are for the year ending 31 December 2022. Assets of investments and bank accounts amount to £8,022, generating an annual income of £206. As per the Trust Deed, one eighth was paid to Sternfield Church. The Trustees agreed that no further payments would be made from the previous year’s income, and the residual income accumulated.

8. CHAIRMAN’S REPORT – Dr Hilary Graham

I am happy to report that this lovely village is thriving. It is great to see that the daffodils are again splendid – what a good idea it was, thanks to all the helpers. On a plant theme, last year I reported that the fruit trees in the little orchard were doing well, and they still are, but only because of the volunteers (particularly Richard Evans) and Angela Nicholls’ outside tap, which saw them through the frighteningly hot summer. Carol and Chris Durrant and David Burns kept the little trees on the Green alive- thank goodness.
Once again the Council had to deal with a bombardment of stuff about the various energy initiatives, David Secret has waded through and made sense of them.
The village celebrated the Queen’s 70th Jubilee at the Club, and the Beacon was safely and brilliantly lit by Alan Woods and John Slade, There was something for everyone, bringing the village together.
GOOD NEWS, County Councillor, Andrew Reid has recently promised that the pathway on the main road to the Railway Farm Shop will actually be repaired and re-surfaced this year...let’s wait and see...
It’s not exactly to do with PC business, but our eldest resident (you know who I mean), celebrated her 100th Birthday by driving around Silverstone in a Ferrari- achieving 130mph and overtaking a couple of Aston Martins. Probably many of you will have seen this in the local press or on Telly.
Once again we thank our Committee members for carrying out their allotted tasks nobly.
David Secret with all the energy issues.

Chairman’s initials.....

Sue Nicholson who keeps us a breast of the planners proposals, and with David prepares the Council’s response. Chris Durrant manages the upkeep of the Green and he and Jo Pemberton deal with our various media needs. Jo Pemberton, sadly is leaving, but has generously offered to continue helping us with social media and also the defibrillator. (Thank you Jo) Archie Bhatia is managing the cemetery. Riven Brace continues to look after trees and the Wadd (with a little help). Alan Woods & John Slade represent the Club whilst Bev Barclay gets involved with lots of different things, and your Chairman just sits back and watches. The whole show would fall apart were it not for Carol Durrant, our financial overseer, whose steady hand keeps us on course. Thanks to our Clerk, Mel Thurston for cheerfully putting up with us and thanks to Steve and the Club for hosting us and joining in with our village events. Lastly, remember that our Parish Council meetings can be attended by the villagers and we invite you to come and tell us your views and ask questions of us. After all, we’re here to try to do what you want and we need you to tell us.

9. FINANCE REPORT. The RFO briefly summarised the income which the PC receives. The PC has two main sources of income, the annual Precept and CILs. Other monies are received such as cemetery fees, VAT refunds and occasionally grants from SCC and ESC for specific projects. For the accounting year 2022/2023, the PC requested an increase in the Precept from £9K to £9.5K to allow for increased costs. The Precept aims to cover all running costs, such as salaries, insurance, grass cutting, payroll services etc. The frequency and amount of CILS (Community Infrastructure Levy) which is paid, is very difficult to predict. During the accounting year, no payments were predicted. However, as a result of a change of development status from Self Build to ‘Built for Sale’, CILS was applied and the PC received just over £2.4K. Unfortunately, this money is restricted in so much as it is not there for day-to-day expenses, but must be spent on infrastructure within the joint parish as a result of the additional development. The PC ended the 2022/2023 year with a CILS holding of £6K. THE 2022/2023 ACCOUNTING YEAR - The Parish Council opening balance (current account + savings) at 1st April 2022 was £16,562.83 The closing balance at 31st March 2023 was £17,737.32 (which includes £6K CILS money). It is generally recommended that Parish Councils have a minimum level of savings roughly equivalent to their Precept – so Benhall & Sternfield ended the year within this recommendation. At the last APM I explained that 2022/2023 would be a lean year in comparison to the previous year, as the overall ‘cash’ holding of the PC was much reduced. However, large projects were undertaken this year:- £1,350 for emergency tree work. A new grit bin for Sternfield and dog poo bin for the village green - £432. Repair and extension of the boardwalk on the Wadd - £3,930. A full wet and dry cut of the Wadd - £696. Repair and refurbishment of the Sternfield village sign - £305 NEXT YEAR - Although running costs have increased once again, the PC made the decision not to increase the Precept. Some savings will therefore have to be made to balance income against spend. The parish newsletter will be restricted to 2 pages in black/white unless part funded by other parties (such as the History Group, Benhall Club etc). Budget for the telephone kiosk panels will be halved, reducing the number of changes during the year. The Wadd will not be cut this year. As for last year, no donations are thought to be possible this year, but this will be reviewed towards the end of the accounting year. Once again, the Precept will be more or less fully spent during the year (though much depends on the frequency of grass cutting, tree work, emergency repairs etc). No more CILS money is expected this year, as there are no new developments expected to take place during the year. The PC have agreed to donate £3K towards the refurbishment of the footpath on the B1121. This will be taken from the CILS holding, resulting in £3K remaining. To summarise, I predict that at the 31st March 2024, the PC will have in the region of £11K in savings, of which £3K will be CILS. The RFO reported that permanent aluminum signs have been donated by the Walled Garden for the community orchard. Cllr Graham thanked the RFO once again for her work.

10 REPORTS FROM PARISH COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVES.

Play Equipment – Cllr Chris Durrant, the annual RoSPA safety check was carried out recently with only minor comments which will be attended to.

Website – Cllr Chris Durrant, no major changes, updating key documents etc and a flurry of History Group input. Other material always welcome.

Grass Cutting – Cllr Chris Durrant, the contract with Gissy’s Grass Cutting continues to run well. The green was cut just before the Coronation weekend and looked very tidy.

Police Liaison – Cllr Chris Durrant, almost no activity in recent years since the loss of our PCO but I continue to look out for community meetings etc.

GDPR – Cllr Chris Durrant, no changes needed, continue as we are.

Planning – Cllr Sue Nicholson, the past year saw 14 Applications for Benhall and 4 for Sternfield, the PC Planning Working Group Cllrs Graham, Brace and myself have had a much quieter year than usual. For the APM last year, we explained how we handle Planning Applications. This information is still available from the website for anyone interested. The East Suffolk Local Plan is the ‘set of rules’ for the Planners to assess Applications. Of course rules always require interpretation so it’s not as transparent as it sounds. Developments which appear in the Local Plan are effectively, in principle, preapproved. So, for Benhall, this means an extension to Shotts Meadow of up to 50 houses, next to the current 9 houses. Since the first Outline Application was made in mid 2021, we have heard nothing more. Full details of the story to date are available on the East Suffolk website, including the PC’s very detailed objections to what we considered a deeply flawed application.

Chairman’s initials.....

The Saxmundham Garden Neighbourhood plans include 800 houses and, on the other side of the A12, employment area, hotel, lorry park, coffee shop. Whilst there is no more news specifically about this development, East Suffolk have undertaken a Community Governance Review of the boundaries between towns and parishes. As you will have read in the newsletter, we proposed that the boundary between Sax and Benhall is redrawn so that the entire Garden Neighbourhood will be within Saxmundham. This doesn't change its location, so close to our small village but should help our plea to avoid coalescence with Sax so we can retain our small village character. This change was approved and the boundary redrawn.

Benhall & Sternfield Parish Council is in no way against development, we just feel it should follow the rules and be appropriate to the size and style of our 2 villages.

Cemetery – Cllr Archie Bhatia, cemetery fees were increased for the first time in several years. A risk assessment has now been produced and this will run alongside the cemetery policy. Both on the website.

Defibrillator and Emergency Plan – Jo Pemberton has enjoyed her time as a Parish Councillor, however she no longer has the time to commit to it and has sadly decided to stand down. She is happy to continue to give CPR training at Benhall Club and Benhall Church along with basic knowledge of how to use a defibrillator. Will continue to maintain the defibrillator at the club.

She will try to update contact details for the Emergency Plan and will put an article on social media and the parish newsletter.

Happy to continue to maintain the Facebook page.

Benhall Club – Cllr John Slade has nothing to report.

Dr Graham thanked Cllr Slade & Woods for lighting the beacon at the Coronation event.

The meeting ended at 8.05pm.

Signed (Chairman) Date