

EXTON PARISH COUNCIL

Minutes of a Council Meeting held on Wednesday 31st January 2024 in Bridgetown Village Hall at 7.30pm.

Present:

Guy Thomas-Everard (Chairman), Colin Rawle, Janette Webber, Steve Rowe, Frances Williams, Tonia Matthews, Robert Takle and Jennifer Yates (Clerk).

Councillors Frances Nicholson and Steven Pugsley were also in attendance.

The meeting was opened at 19.30.

- 1. Apologies:** None
- 2. Declaration of Interests:** None
- 3. To approve the minutes of the ordinary meeting held on 6th November and the extra-ordinary meeting held on 11th December and any actions:** The minutes were approved by all.

4. To discuss planning application GDO 23/13:

Location: HALSE FARM, WINSFORD, MINEHEAD, TA24 7JL

Proposal: Prior notification for Relocation of 3 no. Emergency Services Network antennas and MHAs to a new slimline antenna mount increasing the height of the structure to 17.4m, installation of 3 no. new Shared Rural Network antennas and 5 no. ground-based equipment together with the installation of remote radio units, mast head amplifiers, GPS nodes and associated apparatus and ancillary works.

Following discussion it was agreed that the Council supports this application on the understanding it is likely to improve the provision of service to this rural area

- 5. Reports from the Somerset Councillors:** Somerset Council is in trouble financially and is in the process of arranging to devolve assets. The main impact for Exton Parish Council is Highways. All Statutory duties will continue but they are few in number and therefore parishes will ideally work together going forward to make good for the missing services, or make decisions to go without them. There is also the issue of the potential closure of the recycling centre in Dulverton. Cllr Nicholson feels that this decision has been reached without due attention given to the usage levels and proper assessment of the need for it in this area. There will be a public meeting on the 27th February and evidence will be shared of the high tonnage/visit and usage of the site. All are welcome to attend and share their views. Also the impact on climate change priorities need to be considered as people from the area would have to travel a long distance to the next nearest sites. The potential for increased fly tipping was raised as a concern by all. It was agreed that it would be beneficial for research to be

carried out as to what further items could be collected from roadside collections to limit the need to go to the recycling centres.

Highways services which are likely to be most affected are verge trimming, salt bags and bins, and drain/gully clearance. The LCN has already piloted some work sharing a contractor through the work done through Dulverton on gully clearing. It has also set up several subgroups. It is hoped that the LCN umbrella may be able to cover some of the services which will be lost for parishes to buy into. The LCN has no fundholding capability which is why Dulverton ran the previous scheme and going forward similar arrangements would have to be made. Councillors Nicholson and Pugsley will be encouraging the development of fundholding at LCN level to support the facilitating of providing joint services to the member parishes. A question was raised re the legal responsibility for hedge cutting and it was agreed that further research would be needed but it was most likely that drivers are expected to drive according to the conditions of the road and it may lead to more careful driving. It was considered that it is likely going forward that local contractors are likely to be more affordable than sub-contracting council teams, should they even be available. A question was raised re the issue of insurance and it would be expected for contractors to provide their own liability insurance.

- 6. To discuss the financial situation at Somerset County Council, and the impact on Parish Council budgets and responsibilities:** Somerset County are facing a budget deficit of approximately £100,000,000 and as a result have agreed several ways forward. They intend to enter a program of cuts to services, activities and staffing They will make the request to the government that they are allowed to exceed the cap of 5% increase to council tax and instead apply a 9.9% increase this year. They also propose to use some of their reserves and to borrow some money. They will also sell off some assets to local councils where it is possible to do so, eg public toilets. These actions mimic what would be put in place should an external body come in to take over in the event of the County declaring themselves bankrupt under a section 114 notice. They will also be carrying out a boundary review to reduce the number of County Councillors and associated costs.

The cuts to services will have the greatest impact on Parish Councils as all non-statutory services are likely to be ceased. These include highways services including a reduction in gully and drain clearances, verge trimming and the provision of salt bags/bins, all of which have potential safety implications for the parish. It is expected that local Councils will now take on some of these responsibilities, although there are currently no details or costings available to help Councils budget. The local LCN (Local Community Network) may be able to source contractors for the parishes to use, as organising it as a group would reduce costs, however due to the lateness of this all happening the Parish Council will need to agree their budget before this is all in place as it is just a proposal at present. Somerset Highways have been asked to produce costs for the three main highways services above but have failed to do so at present. SP

advised that some local parishes have costed what it would cost to provide the services themselves and it would appear that each would be likely to be around £1000 with an additional cost of £500 for administration/contingency. It is hoped that by working together those costs could be lower. The LCN could potentially also support in coordinating work from a Highway Steward program, but the cost would appear to be too large for one LCN so SP is opening discussions with other LCNs with a view to sharing one Steward. If the LCN do support by coordinating the provision of some highway services they are exploring the option of dividing costs using a formula to make it fair for parishes with lower populations, however this is in discussion only at present. SP reported that parishes are using a range of approaches when budgeting including using reserves and increasing their precepts by varying amounts. It was noted that this is not a one year issue which should be considered when budget setting, and concern was raised that if the parishes do start providing services let go by the County Council then it could end up being a permanent change.

7. Finance:

- a) To receive a finance report and approve payments:** The latest statements show balances of £2,446.62 in the current account and £1,636.11 in the reserve account. It was agreed to pay £25 for SLCC membership and £34.80 for better provision of email inbox size to FluidLabs.
- b) To set the budget and precept for 2024-25:** FN and SP shared that other parishes were making a range of budgeting decisions to meet the new challenges of providing services taking into account the level of their reserves and whether they wished to provide the mentioned highway services being discontinued by the County. It was also noted that the Parish Council does have some reserves and predicts a carry forward amount this year, particularly as the lengthsman scheme has been discontinued and therefore that money can now be used towards the new Highways costs going forward. Debate then took place during this meeting with regard to the devolved highway services which the Parish Council will be responsible for providing. It was agreed that the budgeting must take into account that the County's financial emergency is not a one year issue, so even if the costs for the new responsibilities were met mainly from reserves and carry forward this year the precept would have to go up by a lot next year to replace the reserves and continue to provide the new services. It was agreed that the most prudent and financially responsible decision would be to raise the precept this year to meet the new costs using some new precept and some carry forward, with the aim that next year it would not need to go up by such a large amount, bearing in mind that next year the costs of the services purchased during this financial year would provide a known cost going forward, something not available this year. It was agreed to add £2,000 to the precept to put towards the costs of the verge trimming, salt bins and bags and gully clearance. This would raise the precept by 47.62% and raise the band D contribution from

£43.19 to £63.13, a difference of £19.94. This remains low compared to local parishes. This was proposed by GTE, seconded by CR and agreed by all.

8. Reports from Councillors on meetings or training attended: Cllr Webber reported that she had attended the LCN meeting which was mainly focussed on the County budget issues and the resulting affect for LCN members. The police commissioner gave his annual report and is aware of the potential rise in fly tipping.

9. Any Other Business:

There is the date of 1824 on the Rock Face and it was discussed whether the anniversary needs to be celebrated/marked in some way. It was decided to discuss this further at the next meeting.

There is a need to fell a number of trees near Milton corner. This would involve needing to close the road for parts of the day. Due to the roadworks on Exford Road and the resulting diversion it has been suggested that the works cannot be carried out until May. However it is considered that this is too late as it will be disruptive to the increased traffic from Tourism by that time. It was agreed that permission to carry this out earlier would be sought.

10. Date of next meeting: 4th March 2024 at 7.30 subject to the receipt of planning applications.

There being no further business the meeting closed at 21.10.