

WINSFORD PARISH COUNCIL

Minutes of the Meeting of Winsford Parish Council held on Monday 21st March 2016 at 7.30pm in Winsford Village Hall.

PRESENT: Councillors David Godsal, John Bray, Colin Wilkins, Steve Hunt, Kevin Connell, Beverley Flanagan, Mel Mileham and Clerk Verity Vigars. Seven members of the public were also present. SCC Frances Nicholson, WSC Bruce Heywood and WSC Nicholas Thwaites arrived later having attended another Parish Council's meeting.

Parish Electorate's Opportunity to Speak:

Sarah Griffiths spoke regarding the open letter she had previously sent to Parish Councillors concerning the recent work on the Village Green. She explained that as an open letter the idea was a call for action and change and that she had put a lot of thought into it and consulted other residents. She was not impressed with the email replies she had received and believes they could be improved and more business-like. She had wanted to publish the reply but decided it was not constructive.

She then referenced a DEFRA document which suggested 'Rhododendron ponticum' is an invasive plant and that spreading it should be prevented according to the 1981 Countryside Act. She reported that it is a criminal offence with the possibility of a fine or maximum 2 years in prison and that the plant is classified as controlled waste and requires a licensed waste carrier and authorised landfill. She suggested that Councillors were irresponsible if it were that sort of Rhododendron. She said that she had been in contact with the Environment Agency (without citing the location) and that they had said it was illegal and that it should be a matter for the police who have a Wildlife Liaison Officer. She finished by saying she wants assurances from the Parish Council that they have not committed an offence.

The chairman asked for a transcript of this statement to be sent to the Clerk (**Afternote:** only a link to a website has been received).

George Strickland wished to thank the Parish Council for all their hard work and giving up their time over the years for the good of the village.

No other members of the electorate present wished to speak.

16:17 Apologies for non Attendance - None.

16:18 Declarations of Interest - None.

16:19 Approval of Minutes

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Parish Council meeting held on Monday 25th January 2016 (as circulated) be approved and signed as correct.

16:20 Actions from the Previous Minutes

a. Village repairs and maintenance

This item is to be covered later under its own main agenda item at 16:22.

b. Speed Limit

The Chairman reported that there had been some email correspondence between the County Council and the National Park and that he had asked for a progress report ahead of Wednesday. It was hoped FN could provide an update on her arrival, which she did.

She reported that in an attempt to reduce the impact of all the new grey repeater sign poles she had consulted with Gary Warren who had approached EDF about pole sharing, but they refused. She also consulted the ENP but they were negative about having the speed limit installed altogether. But in doing so

she had established that they are all BT poles, so Gary Warren (and his replacement) are now persevering trying to contact BT. They have assured FN that they are committed to carrying it out. If nothing happens with BT, FN will try to organise new poles which are dark green or brown rather than the unattractive pale grey colour that is standard. They need to be a maximum of 250m apart. SH asked whether the BT poles were at a distance apart to meet the Highways Agency requirement on repeater signs and FN confirmed that this had been checked and they complied.

FN also recommended that once the speed limit is in place that the village should be part of the community speed watch scheme which means training people to use the equipment to check speeds. Offenders then receive a letter from the police. This will firmly establish the new speed limit.

The Chairman thanked FN and apologised if it had caused her any ructions.

FN pointed out that it had been advertised in the papers etc. and no one had responded. Leading on from this, the Chairman reported that he had received a negative email from one parishioner (to which he had replied) about the speed limit, concerning the increase of signage and the expectation that it would not result in speed reduction.

c. Broadband

SH suggested that there was not a great deal to report. There is no change to BT's phase 1 and he has asked Airband for an update on phase 2 rollout (March to December 2016 subject to planning permission), ahead of tonight's meeting but had not received one. He also reported that he had seen an advert in Minehead advertising fast Airband broadband so was hopeful that it was on its way. He highlighted that there is a difference between BT Infinity and BT Superfast which is to do with the distance from the green box, not as the crow flies, but the distance the wire travels. He thought it would be useful to know how many residents had received leaflets, taken up the service and registered an interest with Airband etc. and it was **AGREED** to have a survey form at the Annual Assembly. It was also **AGREED** that SH would enquire with the National Park whether there was any planning applications imminent.

e. Wi-Fi access in the Village Hall

SH is still trying to establish whether Airband will provide a free of charge service (and support) to the Village Hall as previously implied and the Village Hall Committee is not prepared to spend money with BT if there is a free option available.

d. Highways (including signposts)

BF and MM had attending the recent ENP workshop on signposts and reported that the ENP are still trying for match funding from the original £10,000 and are now looking at the Heritage Lottery Fund. Highways have delegated it all to Parish Councils but for any work to take place, Chapter 8 Safety Training is required. Highways will put on a half-day course and pay for it. There is also someone in the village who has the qualification so may be able to supervise any signpost work. A total of 126 out of the 192 historic signposts have been surveyed by 26 different parishes. It was pointed out that any brown signs are not included in this scheme and would need separate funding if any action was required. A price list had been handed out for any replacement parts to give an idea of costing for the badly damaged ones but some just need a good clean. JB suggested the Exmoor Trust might be a possible source of grant money. BF/MM would check whether the ENPA had approached them.

16:21 Financial Report

The Chairman highlighted that despite the precept being unchanged from last year, the council tax bill lists a 0.5% increase for the Parish Council element but the calculation is also to do with the council tax rebate.

FN arrived.

The financial report previously circulated was received including that the cheque for the Wayleave payment of £19.19 had been banked; that the £672.00 spend on Parish Archive cupboards was expected to be reimbursed by BACS by the 31st March year end; and that the £38 reimbursement for the Rowan Tree had still not been received from the Village Hall Committee. SH **AGREED** to investigate. It was **RESOLVED** to pay the Clerk's Pay and Expenses of £193.33 from December 2015 to February 2016. It was also **RESOLVED** to transfer £330 from the CAF account to cover Mike Hillier's Village Green grass cutting invoices already paid from the PC account during the current FY.

It was **AGREED** that a log would be kept of hours that volunteers use the Hall whilst sorting the Archive so that a bill could be organised quarterly from the VH Committee to the Parish Council to cover costs. MM **AGREED** to find out if this cost could be included in the fund.

*FN was now asked to give an update on the speed limit - agenda item 16.20 (b) see above.
NT and BH arrived.*

16:22 Village Green Maintenance (including Old Rectory letter)

The Chairman read the following statement but added the point that he could not respond at this stage to the statement made at the start of the Meeting.

"I shall make a few remarks by way of introduction and we will then go through the letter in detail.

I was very disappointed and frankly quite upset when, two weeks after work on the Green started, I received the emailed letter from Sue McDonald and Sarah Griffiths. There were a number of reasons for my reaction.

First, prior to that we had all received emails, calls and comments of encouragement, gratitude and support from many people in the village, (many of whom came to help if they were able) that the Village Green was being returned to how it had been in the past. In the past few weeks we have been inundated with offers of plants and further assistance. Secondly, although you Sue and Sarah were around on many occasions when the work was being done nothing was said at all – many of the points raised in the letter could have been answered there and then without further ado. Thirdly I was more than a little surprised to discover that the letter to the Parish Council had been posted on Facebook 2 days before I had even had a chance to see it.

My initial reaction was to make a quick response to correct those things which I believed to be incorrect however I was not able to do that because your letter asked that the Parish Council review your concerns at the next Meeting and that was what we must do. Also, although I am chairman, I am not so presumptuous as to assume that all the other councillors would necessarily agree with all my views and therefore I would have to wait until this Meeting. Finally I was absolutely not prepared to have any initial response posted on Facebook. As it was, signs put up on the first day of the work, explaining what was being done and why had been mysteriously removed (together with the boards they were on) so it was very important to follow formal procedure even if it meant a long delay. Having sought advice from West Somerset Council I confirmed in my initial and subsequent reply to you that the subject was on the Agenda for this Meeting.

What we, the Council will do now is to go through the letter. I will read out each paragraph, give my initial response and then ask you to make your comments if you have anything to add or subtract. "

[The text of the letter is blue; the Chairman's response is red]

Dear Parish Councillors,

Re: Works on the Village Green, 6th - 11th February 2016, Open Letter to Winsford Parish Council

We would like to thank the Parish Council for identifying that the Rhododendrons and brambles around the village green required "cutting back", and organising the volunteer working party. **What should be remembered throughout is that everything was done by volunteers, when they were available, so things inevitably took and will take time and nothing can be instant!** However, as residents who live in close proximity to the green, we feel it necessary to raise some concerns, and would encourage the Parish Council to review these at their next meeting.

1. Appearance of the Village Green and its Safety

We appreciate that regular maintenance of the village green is both essential and desirable. However, we are disappointed that no consideration seems to have been given to the appearance of the green as a whole, or its safety.

All the Rhododendrons on the left of the green, as viewed from the Royal Oak, have been reduced to stumps. This has left an unsightly view of a bedraggled village green, and the privacy previously enjoyed by properties in this area and village green users, has gone. **Not the purpose of the VG.** The right hand side of the green has fared much better and been more considerably tidied. What a shame that this thought-out approach was not applied to the whole site. **It was thought through. The area on the right was trimmed**

using hedge trimmers and loppers because it was less developed. The thickness of the branches on the left side was very considerable as could be seen from the logs – the trunks we cut down had no foliage on the bottom 6 feet or more.

The lack of any barrier to the stream now poses a significant risk to village green users. If a child should fall into the stream, or injure themselves on one of the jagged stumps, who is responsible? As confirmed by others with children and grandchildren it is now safer as the brook can be seen and it is possible to keep an eye on children. Don't let's forget that the whole of Exmoor with its rivers and streams poses a risk.

We understand from the article on the village website (added February 15th, 2016), that there are plans to reinstate a fence and native planting, and to let the Rhododendrons "return to their flowering beauty".

When are these remedial works scheduled to take place? Advice is being sought from ENPA (See Afternote at the end of 16.22). Nothing will grow...

BF added that the open banks keep children safer and that they have never been fenced. There is a beach type area and when the previous duck races were held you could stand on both sides.

MM added that a lot of thought was put in and until the work started and the scale of it was realised there was no option. They will grow back to a reasonable bush size. The stumps could not have been removed entirely, although this may have been nicer, because of it destroying the bank and jagged stumps are everywhere in the park. The PC is investigating buddleia and other foliage. Kids cannot play hide and seek in it now and not be seen, so it is safer.

BF added that she had consulted Patrick Watts-Mabbot who suggested that they can be cut right down or left. They can be removed by injecting them and that help is available from the Park for both removal and re-planting but that it will take time.

CW added that it is a much better community setting, rather than a secret garden. It is a positive and people are commenting that they did not even know the seat was there because it was so hidden.

BH contributed that it is not a popular plant on Exmoor.

Finally, SH added that 3 people had commented positively to him about the work.

KC added that he has only heard positive feedback and whilst in the short run it might be unsightly it will be an improvement.

2. Lack of Clear Notification Before Works Commenced

Given the extent of the works, we feel that their timing and impact should have been more clearly communicated to local residents. The "cut back of overgrown Rhododendrons..." is mentioned briefly in the Parish Council meeting minutes (dated November 30th 2015). However, we feel that such major works should have been publicised more clearly. The entry in the minutes is hidden amongst other items, there are no specific dates given, and there is very little detail about the works to be undertaken:

WINSFORD PARISH COUNCIL

Minutes of the Meeting of Winsford Parish Council
held on Monday 30th November 2015 at 7.30pm in Winsford Village Hall.

PRESENT: Councillors David Godsall, Kevin Connell, Steve Hunt, Mel Mileham, John Bray, Colin Wilkins, Beverley Flanagan, SCC Frances Nicholson, WSC Bruce Heywood and Nicholas Thwaites and Clerk Verity Vigers. Mike Hillier was also present at the beginning to discuss village maintenance.

15:72 **Apologies for non Attendance** - None.

15:73 **Declarations of Interest** - None.

15:74 **Approval of Minutes**

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Parish Council meeting held on Monday 28th September 2015 (as circulated) be approved and signed as correct.

15:75 **Actions from the Previous Minutes**

a. Village repairs and maintenance

Thanks were given to Mike Hillier for all he has done and is doing for the village. The Jubilee tree has died and the new tree is being replanted by Exmoor Trees on 9th December and is paid for by the Quiz team winnings of KC, CW and others. It was **AGREED** to have a day in early February to cut back the overgrown Rhododendrons and brambles with chainsaws etc. surrounding the village green. A bonfire site had been arranged. It was raised that the water is flowing faster on Halse Lane since being resurfaced and it was **AGREED** Mike Hillier would keep a close eye on the drains and keep them clear. JB noted that the hedge on the right hand side had been made but not trimmed so the leaves had been dropping and blocking the drains, but should be better now. It was noted that Highways are aware of water coming out of Townsend corner bank and missing the drain and have decided to dig up the road and make it right (it has been marked out). It gets slippery where it crosses the road. It was also raised that it floods outside Apple Tree Cottage and it was **AGREED** that Mike Hillier would keep an eye on that drain too.

Nothing was hidden unless instructions for looking at the drains was also hidden. The minutes of the previous meeting on 28 Sep 2015, a meeting which the authors of the letter attended, has the following "It was **AGREED** that a day would be arranged by the chairman for volunteers with chainsaws, tractors and trailers etc to clear back all the overgrown rhododendrons and brambles. Then once it is manageable again, routine upkeep of it can be added to Mike Hillier's task list." At the time it was agreed to wait until after the

shooting season for availability of volunteer help. The 30 Nov minutes quoted in the letter state “It was **AGREED** to have a day in early February.....”.

We are also extremely concerned to hear from several different sources that information about the works was deliberately withheld from local residents to avoid objections. We hope that this is not the case. This final paragraph of note 2 is very disturbing and absolutely not the case.

CW reiterated that it was in the minutes and not hidden.

3. Adequate insurance and Disposal of Waste

We have some concerns that the village green was left open to the public while chainsaws were in use. Does the Parish Council have adequate insurance to cover the use of chainsaws by volunteers in a public place? Had any damage been caused to persons or property, who would have been liable? No one was employed to do this work. Yes we have insurance and I can confirm that not only do the two people who used chainsaws (of which I was one) have decades of experience and the appropriate equipment but also have personal liability insurance. Furthermore a Risk Assessment was carried out and the picnic tables placed as a barrier with two people ensuring that no one went near.

A large amount of wood has been left in a pile on the skittle alley. Is there a deadline for its removal? The large amount of wood, the very large branches referred to earlier, were not actually on the skittle alley (but why not?!) were removed not long after having been advertised as free to anyone both on the website and in the Parish Magazine.

We understand that the waste generated by the works has been removed to a private bonfire site. However, some of it appears to have been dumped in the old quarry at Edbrooke (on the right of the main road out of the village to Copleham Cross). Is this a permanent solution or will this also be moved to the private site for burning? The waste is clearly visible from the road and could encourage fly tipping if not removed. The majority of the waste was taken to a field of mine, not because I wanted it but because it was important to get it all off the Green as quickly as possible. Any bonfire so close to thatched properties would be totally irresponsible. Because of the very wet weather after 5 trailer loads it became clear that with another load the tractor would not be able to get out of the field. The remainder was not “dumped”! The quarry referred to is private property, belonging to the Milton Estate and I spoke, personally to the owner who was delighted to help. Many will recall the use of that for the trees and rhododendron waste that were cleared a few years ago from the banks along the road to Copleham.

MM reinforced that the operators are very experienced and wore full safety gear.

4. Future Communication & Engagement with the Community

Overall we are disappointed by the lack of information given to local residents before this and previous Parish Council schemes. We appreciate that councillors give up their own time to campaign for the village. However, we feel more should be done to engage with the community as a whole. The actions of the Parish Council have a direct impact on local residents, and too often their views have not been sought or considered before actions take place. I have some sympathy and we are trying hard to improve in this area. The good folk of Winsford have traditionally been very reluctant to read or take note of things on noticeboards or in the magazine. They now also have the website which has been created for them by the Parish Council with great effort and at no cost to the parishioners, would that we could do more! It is very similar to the problem faced by people laying on events; Winsford folk buy their tickets at the last moment! Not sure what the previous Parish Council Schemes have been.

The following extract is taken from the Good Councillors Guide, published by the National Association of Local Councils:

“The job of your council is to represent the interests of the whole community. Understanding the needs of different groups in the community (such as young and elderly people) is an important part of your role as councillor. Occasionally there will be a conflict of interest requiring sensitive judgement... Making difficult decisions, in an open and reasoned way, is something that local councils need to do well.

As a councillor, you have a responsibility to be well-informed, especially about diverse local views. You cannot assume that you represent the interests of all your electors without consulting them.”

I couldn't agree more and I am very proud of what Winsford Parish Council has achieved, but we cannot have a referendum every time we need to do something on behalf of the community. The Agenda for each Meeting is always available the week before and we encourage people to attend.

We would urge the Parish Council to analyse the current decision-making process and how they communicate with local residents. We suggest a Communications Policy that is inclusive, actively encourages openness, nurtures public opinion, is neighbourly and promotes a positive community spirit for the future well-being of Winsford and its residents.

The Chairman thanked Sarah and Sue for the suggestion of a Communications policy, and replied that research has been carried out from PCs all around the country and we do all the things anyway but the Vice Chairman is to prepare a policy and present to the next meeting. We can do more now that we have a website but we can't make people read things. There is also the Tuesday coffee mornings where messages can be got through to some of our older residents not all of whom use emails.

KC added that having a Communications policy will not change behaviour; we need to keep encouraging people.

BF added that the website is the latest innovation but there is still the noticeboard and the shop, and we all communicate as much as we can. A business card has gone to everyone in the parish notifying them that the website resource is there but constantly needs information and we are trying our best in what and how we communicate, so saddened to have received those comments.

NT contributed that Dulverton have done a website, have a noticeboard, adverts, newspapers etc. and people still do not appreciate what is going on. There cannot be a consultation on everything that is why there is a mandate in place.

We very much hope that our comments are taken in the constructive manner in which they are intended, and look forward to receiving your considered response shortly.

We would be grateful if you would post this letter on the village noticeboard.

With Kind Regards,

Sue McDonald & Sarah Griffiths
(The Old Rectory)

The Chairman concluded by saying, that the open letter was not displayed on the noticeboard as it was already on Facebook for the world to see. No-one was trying to conceal anything. Everything done was done as it should have been. The response to the letter will be tonight's meeting minutes. He hoped that the subject could now be closed and we could all move on.

SH added that if the "previous Parish Council Schemes" referred to in the letter applied to the village shop move he would remind everyone that that had nothing whatsoever to do with the Parish Council.

(Afternote: The Chairman and BF had a site meeting with Heather Harley, ENPA Conservation Officer (Farming and Land Management) who not only congratulated us on what we had so far achieved, but reassured us that DEFRA's new Countryside Stewardship Scheme includes an option for rhododendron control and there was no question of the PC of having committed any offence. Whilst it was sensible, in some cases, to have the stumps removed in their entirety it was not a practical solution in this particular location as there would be a high risk of damage to the banks. Heather recommended digging soil surrounding the stumps and cutting them off as low as possible. She subsequently produced a written report, with advice both on subsequent treatment of re-growth with an approved herbicide, and considerable advice on future work, in terms of planting, with the aim of enhancing the visitor appeal and wildlife value of the site. It was interesting that as a local person she "...had no idea what lay behind the bank of rhododendron until it was removed to reveal an absolutely charming and valuable village focal point".)

16:23 Procedures - Nothing additional to report other than the Communications Policy which is being drafted for review at the next meeting.

16:24 Parish Archive

The cupboards are installed. MM wished to express thanks to the ENPA for help from the Partnership Fund. All content has been moved but not yet sorted. The question was asked what to do with the old filing cabinets (which belong to the PC) and it was **AGREED** to check that the Village Hall Committee don't want them before doing anything. MM would speak about it at Wednesday's Annual Assembly. Then the

original volunteers would be asked to help with the sorting in the next week or so (and the hours log would be kept as previously agreed).

16:25 Emergency Planning / Community Resilience Plan

Mr Geoff Mackett from CRISP is coming to the Annual Assembly to speak and answer questions and after that we can take things forward. BF pointed out that she thought that the Environment Agency also planned to come with him on Wednesday.

16:26 Annual Assembly

Wednesday 23rd March, 7 for 7.30pm. **AGREED** to meet at 6.30pm to set up. The projector is needed as is tea, coffee and biscuits. SH was asked to give a broadband update.

16:27 Village Website update

BF reported that she is trying to build up the email list and then updates can be sent out. The site has been live for a year now and it is an ongoing process updating it. It was **AGREED** to amalgamate the broadband survey form for the Annual Assembly to include email addresses increasing the website email list, BF and SH to action.

Items were taken out of order to allow the SCC and WSC Councillors to leave.

16:30 Reports from Committees

- b. Exmoor Consultative and Parish Forum - Thursday 10th March. KC had sent apologies but JB attended and reported that it was mostly about the Exmoor Young Voices.

BH and NT reported that WSC were looking at ordering 2 new bins, which would appear in due course. CW raised the broken manhole in Ash Lane, which has signs around it but is dangerous and he had understood it would be fixed within 7 days. It was decided that it is a water drain and therefore not Skanska that fix it hence the delay. FN **AGREED** to remind Highways and cc the Clerk. It was mentioned that it was likely broken when the water people tried to lift it with a sledgehammer when they were testing the church drains with dye to see if they could charge it.

FN, BH & NT left.

16:28 Village Litter Pick Up / Clean for the Queen

The annual Village Litter Pick Up is on Sunday 3rd April, meeting at 10.30am in the car park. Information is on the website and noticeboards encouraging volunteers. Bags are provided but a good idea to wear hi-vis clothing.

16:29 Correspondence and Emails

- a. Local Volunteer of the Year Awards - **AGREED** to circulate to Councillors.
- b. Somerset Day Celebrations - 11th May 2016 - noted
- c. Review of ENPA's meeting structure, member engagement and good management - **AGREED** not to respond.
- d. Exmoor Society Spring Conference: Friday 22nd April, Theme: 'Exmoor's Future Landscapes' - noted.

Other correspondence was considered including CCS membership invite (which it was **AGREED** to pass on to SH for consideration by the Village Hall Committee). They provide grants as recently discussed at a meeting if you can demonstrate a need. It was **AGREED** to ask at the Annual Assembly if any idea of what could spend on, such as bowling green.

Bridleway closure notice - **AGREED** to send to BF for the website.

16:30 Reports from Committees

- c. Exmoor Area Panel - Thursday 3rd March. CW had previously emailed a helpful report from the meeting, including that dealing with the mass rainfall on 6th/7th February delayed highways 3 weeks and that they have been given £150,000 extra for gully cleaning. The Police highlighted a scam with Euros and offered advice on quad bike security. Regarding speeding - they are trying to do things but it is

difficult. The Fire Service will also come to people's homes and talk about safety if you know people who would benefit.

16:31 Planning Applications and Decisions

The 3 latest ones, Staddon Farm (6/40/15/112), Watersmeet, Exford Road (6/40/16/101) and Little Pitcott (6/10/16/102) are all still awaiting a decision.

16:32 Other Business Directed to the Clerk

MM requested that a letter of thanks be sent to the Thomas-Everard family for putting in the rocks to stop cars driving on the moor and for loaning the quarry for the Rhododendron clearance. It was **AGREED** that the Clerk would action.

16:33 Date of next Meeting

Monday 23rd May 2016 at 7.30pm. The meeting was closed at 9.24pm.

Date.....

Signed.....

DRAFT