WEST HATCH ANNUAL PARISH MEETING

 Minutes of the Annual Parish Meeting of the West Hatch Parish held in the Village Hall on Friday 15th March 2024

**ATTENDANCE AND APOLOGIES**

**Public: 20 parishioners, G Midworth (Clerk to the Council),**

**Apologies: S Read ( Tree Warden), Somerset Councillors Sarah Wakefield and Ross Henley, and 14 parishioners**

**MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING**

**The minutes of the Annual Parish meeting, held on 17th May 2023 were approved and signed as a correct record.**

**REPORT FROM THE CHAIRMAN OF THE PARISH COUNCIL**

The Chairman’s report was read to the parishioners.

**Introduction**

This Report follows the same format as previous Reports to the Annual Parish Meeting, the last of which was held on 17th May 2023. The timing of the Meeting deliberately brings us back into holding a meeting early in the statutory requirement window of 1st March to 1st June.

We have held five Parish Council Meetings since the last Annual Parish Meeting (APCM on 17th May 23 and PCM’s 26th July 23, 4th October 23, 29th November 23, and 24th January 24). Additionally, Councillors have met informally on a number of occasions to discuss specific issues mostly relating to National Highways and the A358.

This Report covers the principal matters that the Council have addressed during the year and our ongoing initiatives.

**Parish Councillors**

Ben Haskins and Richard Sullivan were formally endorsed as councillors at the Annual Parish Council Meeting on 17th May last year. The Council now has, in addition to the Chairman and our exemplary Clerk, Gillian Midworth, six Councillors – Martin Middleton (Vice Chair), Kate Walters, Les Finlayson, George Knight, Richard Sullivan and Ben Haskins. Our Tree Warden (Sheila Read) and the Chair of the Village Hall Committee (Douglas Kerr) have standing invitations to attend Parish Council meetings.

**Thanks**

As mentioned in my welcome we owe much to those who give their time unreservedly to the Council and the work of the Parish. It is, perhaps, invidious to mention individuals as they all deserve our thanks but without the conscientious professionalism of Gillian Midworth, our Parish Clerk, we would be hard pressed to provide any coherent service to the village. It is worth noting that Gillian is also Clerk to Beercrocombe Parish Council. Our grateful thanks to her for all her unstinting work.

We also owe particular thanks to Robert Wheatley for his continuing oversight of the Parish Website, and to our two Somerset Councillors, Sarah Wakefield and Ross Henley who have lobbied the new Unitary Somerset Council on our behalf whenever their help has been sought.

**Somerset Unitary Council and Local Community Network**

Vesting day for the new Unitary Council, Somerset Council, was the 1st April 2023 and following redrawing of the Ward boundaries and the earlier Council elections, West Hatch is now part of the Blackdown and Neroche Ward.

 Integral to the Unitary structure of the County has been the development dividing the County into eighteen Local Community Networks (LCNs). West Hatch, along with Chard Town, Neroche, Churchstanton, Corfe, Pitminster, Ruishton and seven other parishes are now part of the Chard and Blackdowns LCN, LCN 18. The LCN also includes representatives of the Blackdown Hills Parish Network and Support Group as well as the NHS, Avon and Somerset Police, SPARK and the AONB. The primary role of an LCN is to act as a forum for discussion, consultation, and oversight but most importantly action, bringing together the Council, partners, and parish communities to deliver local aspirations and improved infrastructure outcomes.

To date LCN18 has met on three occasions and in addition to how it might assist Somerset Council in dealing with its current financial crisis by taking on Council assets or discretionary services, it has formed two Working Groups.

A Roads and Highways Working Group, chaired by Andy Grant from Hatch Beauchamp PC. The West Hatch representative on the Group is our Vice Chair Spud Middleton. Their initial focus is on Public Transport in rural areas, road maintenance (including potholes and flooding), speeding on our lanes, a possible Highways Stewardship scheme and how parishes may work together to make genuine improvements to our highway’s infrastructure.

The second Working Group is the Environment and Conservation Working Group, chaired by Mark Palmer, Chair of Neroche PC and our Parish representative is our Tree Warden, Sheila Read. Its initial focus includes a Nature Recovery Plan, Hedges and Ditches, Litter and Fly tipping, opposition to the proposed Orchard Portman housing development plans, dog fouling and the promotion of the LCN as an Environmental Sensitive Area (the Green Lung of Taunton).

These are early days for the LCN and its Working Groups, but it is our firm intention that the Working Groups will make a fundamental difference to the relationship between Somerset Council and our Communities, deliver change and not be just another ‘talking shop’.

**Finance**

The Parish Council Finance Working Party met on 18th January this year. Due to its financial difficulties Somerset Council is reducing and curtailing many of the discretionary services that it currently provides and is looking to Town & Parish Councils to either take on Council assets and services or provide a financial contribution. West Hatch is unlikely to take on any assets or provide a financial contribution. As standing items in the budget such as staff costs, insurance etc are predicted to be in line with 2023 and inflation, the Parish Council has approved a balanced budget and an increase in the Band D precept of £10 p.a. resulting in an annual precept of £35 per Band D property. This will provide a total precept for the Parish of £4700, an increase of £1350 from 2023/24. This increase will be used to create a Parish Service Fund to help maintain services, such as verge cutting and drain clearance. The Burial Ground Grant of £210 p.a. previously received from Somerset Council, has been cut and as the Parochial Church Council (PCC) has ample funds to cover this cost the Parish Council will not, in future, be paying for this.

The estimated balance in the Account on the 31st March 2024 is £4,426. During the year, the final tranche of the ‘Opening up safely and Reconnecting Communities Fund’ grant of £6,500, for the creation of better hospitality and recreation facilities for the village, was paid to the Village Hall.

 The year end balance also takes account of the receipt from Somerset Council of the Community Infrastructure Levy **(**CIL) of £1,890 in relation to a new development at Meare Green. The CILwas introduced by the Planning Act 2008 and is a standard charge to help pay for the provision, improvement, replacement, operation, and maintenance of infrastructure of the community, it is yet to be spent and any suggestions for its use around the Parish would be welcome.

**A358 dualling**

Parishioners will be aware that the consistent position of the Parish regarding National Highways’ scheme to dual the entire length of the A358, has been that we strongly support the Henlade By-pass proposals, the reconfiguration of the Southfield roundabout access to the A303 and the rationalisation of the A358 and M5 junction 25, whilst looking for improvements to the access of several of our minor roads/lanes to the A358. At the same time, we have been fully supportive of the Community of Parishes’ (CoP) approach to mitigating the worst excesses of the scheme should it be approved in its entirety.

During the year the Parish Council has had meetings with our MP Rebecca Pow, our Ward Councillors, National Highways management when, at their behest, we have discussed a totally inadequate ‘Position Statement’ in advance of their intended submission of the Development Consent Order (DCO). We have made submissions to the Secretary of State for Transport and the Roads Minister as well as keeping the Office of Road and Rail (ORR) informed of our concerns relating to NH’s conduct of consultations and their approach to the environmental consequences of their proposed scheme. We have also supported individual parishioners in their dealings with National Highways relating to environmental mitigation affecting their property.

The present situation is that the DCO is on hold and unlikely to be submitted by NH this year. The ORR, who are responsible for Government oversight of NH, are investigating National Highways conduct in relation to the scheme and Government is reconsidering whether the scheme should go ahead on environmental and financial grounds. There are indications that NH will not be submitting their A358 DCO this year and there are reports in the press that the scheme has been shelved, but we await formal confirmation whether this is the case.

**West Hatch Parish Emergency Plan**

The Parish Council is developing a Parish Emergency Plan to reassure parishioners that, in the event of an emergency, there is help at hand and they are not alone. Advance planning can help to identify threats, prioritise actions and minimise concern should the worst happen.

If there should be an emergency, we want to be able to respond immediately and effectively.

It is the responsibility of Somerset Council to make contingency plans for the central co-ordination of action required to meet any major emergency which poses a threat to people’s lives or health in a peacetime situation.

The purpose of the Parish Emergency Plan is to facilitate their task and act as an aide-memoire for the emergency committee where, in a very worst-case scenario the village might have to rely on its own resources. Les Finlayson will give a brief update on the state of the Plan.

**The D Day Commemoration and Beacon lighting celebrations**

The Parish Council are grateful to the Village Hall Committee for taking up the proposals to commemorate the 80th anniversary of D Day and look forward to an all-parish celebration of the event by a Beacon Lighting party in June.

**Twenty is Plenty**

The campaign to reduce speeding in our village lanes continues and Martin Middleton is leading with the placing of more ‘Twenty is Plenty’ and other warning signs at strategic points on our lanes. Further signs are planned. Contact with the National ‘Twenty is Plenty Campaign’ has been established and we are now aligned with and an active part of the Somerset County organisation with a parishioner as a lead representative. The LCN Transport Working Group has taken up the cause of speeding in our lanes and we are looking to see if a shared Speed Indicator Device (SID) or other, could be funded across the parishes.

**Potholes**

Following the recent installation of cables by Connor Utilities through many of our lanes, the need for additional repairs to remedy the damage and, in some instances increased flooding problems arising from their work, have been taken up with the Council and the contractors. We are assured that this remedial work will be undertaken as soon as possible and that additionally Church Lane and West Hatch Lane will be resurfaced during the year.

**Broadband**

Following repeated attempts to ascertain from Airband why the installation of full fibre has not yet taken place across the Parish, as we were assured it would be by autumn last year, we have been advised, after consultation with Somerset Council and Connecting Devon and Somerset (responsible for and funding Airband) that Airband is in the process of a company take over and that information on the installation of full fibre in the Parish will be made available to us once the Airband financial restructuring is complete. The delay has been taken up with our Ward Councillors who are also having difficulty accessing any information regarding the state of play with Airband. Any information on this project will be posted on the Parish Web site as soon as it is received.

**Parish Fingerpost restoration project**

The project continues under the guidance of Spud Middleton and any assistance from interested parishioners would be very welcome.

**Litter picking**

Some individual parishioners and the Village Hall Committee are pursuing the issue of litter around our lanes. Litter pickers, hi viz tabards, gloves etc will be made available from Somerset Council.

**Planning matters**

There have been a number of planning matters during the year, these have included:

* + - * Case Ref: 47/23/0002/LB

 Proposal: Installation of solar panels to the southern and western roof pitches at Park Farmhouse, Griffin Lane, West Hatch. The Parish Council has no objection to this application.

* + - * Case Ref: 47/24/0002/LEW

Proposal: Application for a Lawful Development Certificate for the existing use of stables for training racehorses and livery at The Stables, Vincents Farm,

West Hatch Lane, West Hatch. The Parish Council has no objections to this application.

* + - * Case Ref: 47/24/0003 (please quote on all correspondence)

Proposal: Replacement of conservatory with the erection of a single storey extension to the side of Crown Cottage, Slough Hill, West Hatch. The Parish Council has no objections to this application.

Finally, my apologies for the length of this report, but there has been a lot going on and my thanks to all who contribute to making the Parish a happy community and pleasant place to live.

That concludes the Parish Council Report.

**REPORT FROM THE VILLAGE HALL COMMITTEE**

The Village Hall secretary gave the following report:

Village Hall Activities last year 2023 - 24

· Ongoing weekly activities include 4 yoga classes, including one for those with limited movement. Both Becky England and Ness Bourne take two sessions each and have very different styles. Becky delivers fast moving flow style yoga sessions whilst Ness focusses on the neurological links between our brains and our bodies. She is working with local GPs who refer people who are recovering from operations or have ongoing health conditions that need specialist support.

· A quilting group used by West Hatch people meets bi-weekly in the Village Hall.

· A monthly book club meeting at the hall now has 9 regular attendees and Lynne O’Connell has encouraged us to read a range of genres.

Other Activities in the past year have included:

· Wakes for local people – we have not charged relatives, but a donation is accepted should they wish to support the hall.

· An Easter Egg Extravaganza held on 8th April was a successful event with some 16 families present and a really good array of activities for children of all ages. Claire Clements and her family and Kelly Doble cleaned the hall and devised and delivered some excellent activities. It was good to see Claire’s older children take charge of activities so ably.

· Coronation BBQ 6th May in the Church Field with nearly 100 attendees. Philip Bray cooked a hog roast and vegetarian options were also available with many people from the village helping to set up and take down, loaning a marquee and donating salad dishes as well as clearing away and washing up. The evening ended with a bonfire in Stuart Doble’s field.

· A Breakfast Bap morning held on 10th June was well attended and folk stayed on chatting and eating cake/enjoying bottomless coffee from 10-12 mid-day.

· A Cream Tea was held on Saturday 8th July in the Village Hall and also outside in the sunshine, was well attended.

· On 22nd September a talk by Alick Simmons on the care of sentient animals made us think. A ploughman's supper was enjoyed with puddings.

· A Rock & Blues evening was delivered by Trevor James and Gazza on 6th October. Appetising nibbles and cider were offered to all who came along.

· A talk from the Hawk and Owl Trust on 20th October with Nick Sperring speaking was very interesting. We had chilli con carne, rice, and naans.

· Our annual Autumn Celebration was held on 28th October 2-5 pm. Apple pressing, Pumpkin Carving, Apple Bobbing, Drawing and face painting and children's activities were enjoyed by all.

· A Quiz Night was held on 25th November. Douglas Kerr did a super job as the Quiz Master with a full house of folk taking part.

· Two sessions of Christmas Wreath Making on 1st and 2nd December were attended by 29 ladies, with the sessions led by Marion Kerr. The ‘profit’ was shared 50/50 with the Church.

· Christingle was set for 10th December followed by nibbles and mulled wine/warm apple juice in the village hall joining our parish get together. The hall was filled, and local folk brought food whist we offered mulled wine and mulled cider or apple juice. Carols were sung and led by David Bidgood.

· A New Year’s Eve social with a chance to learn Tango dancing – led by Andrea Coleman. A donation of £5 per person was expected and we all brought food along to share.

· Breakfast Baps and bottomless coffee was offered on 27th January 2024.

· Cake Decorating on 16th March is full with 20 attendees including one man!

Who are we? The Committee includes Douglas Kerr, Chair; Petr Baverstock, Treasurer; Margaret Luck, Secretary; Daivd Lodge, Catherine Lodge, Lynne Baverstock, Kelly Doble and Claire Clements.

We have benefitted from the support of Friends of the Village Hall, including Cally Ballantine, Mike and Andrea Coleman and Louise Biccard.

Our next plans: We brought the friends and committee together following our work on improving the hall exterior and interior to decide where we wanted to be in the future. We are looking to improve the kitchen area, increase space for internal storage, sort out the audio/visual aids we have to be more inclusive in our delivery and improve the seating in the hall. In addition, the rear exit area needs re-plastering and damp proofing to be fit for purpose for the longer term. We also want to improve our communication with everyone by creating a bespoke website for the hall with the ability for users to purchase activities online.

We would like to extend our activities further and encourage more people in our small hamlet to engage with us.

What have we also achieved?

· Improvements to the hall internally and externally

· New guttering/sealing of external windows/rotting facias

· New curtains in the main hall

· Painting and decorating of the hall and ceiling

· An outside shed for storage

· Installation of a smart meter

· Purchase of gazebos, outside seating, pizza oven, mugs and kettles.

A list of items has been created for hire by the community: e.g. pizza oven, gazebos, tables, chairs, glasses, plates, mugs etc.

The Treasurer of the Village Hall also gave a short report:

Following the Covid pandemic, the Village Hall received recovery grants of £18900 from the District Council and these funds have been earmarked to improve the interior and exterior of the hall.

The next stage of the improvements is the redesign/improvement of the kitchen, installation of audio and visual aids and the seating and refurbishment of the rear exit area. To supplement the funds available, an application for a National Lottery grant has been submitted.

As at the end of February 2024, the bank balance stood at £7780.

**MATTERS RAISED BY PARISHIONERS**

**The lack of progress by Airband with the installation of superfast Broadband was raised as initial indications from the company were that the project would be completed by Spring. Airband are apparently in the process of a restructuring, but the Parish Council will continue to monitor the situation.**

**REPORTS FROM COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS AND REPRESENTATIVES**

* **Tree Warden**

Preservation and health of trees is increasingly in the news for their importance in combatting adverse climate conditions and helping to improve soil health. Just as importantly, their intrinsic majesty, beauty, colour, flowers, food, shelter and overall importance for wildlife and human enjoyment is something which has probably been under appreciated for a long time.

The ’Ancient Tree Forum and Register’ is an organisation which records ancient or veteran trees. The definition of exactly which these are varies from variety to variety, depending on the rate of growth and longevity, so that a slow growing species such as oak or yew will not reach ‘veteran’ status as soon as a faster growing beech. (We have a 100+ year old Perry Pear tree which has veteran status because it is exceptionally large and old for its type).

The Yew trees in West Hatch churchyard are probably between 250 and 350 years old, so even though their girths are between 10 and 13 feet they are not yet old enough to be classed as ‘veteran’.

If you know of a wonderful or vulnerable tree which you think we should record to keep safe, get in touch and we can measure and retain the record.

If such a tree is under threat it is sometimes possible to get a tree protection order, (TPO) from the council to ensure it is not felled because it looks aged, or for development purposes (such as a road scheme) or damaged by overenthusiastic lopping.

Concern has been expressed about three of the tall trees on the corner of Griffin Lane and West Hatch Lane which appear dead and therefore a potential hazard. Somerset Council have surveyed them but don’t consider them to be a danger at present.

* **Community Ranger – Forestry England**

Chris Goode, local Community Ranger for Forestry England, introduced himself, having recently been appointed to the role. He is responsible for a large area of the Blackdown Hills and East Devon, including Thurlbear Woods and Staple Hill.

He mentioned that parts of Thurlbear Woods is currently closed to the public to enable routine thinning of some trees to take place but that the Nature Reserve operated by Somerset Wildlife Trust is still accessible.

The issue of dog waste was mentioned, and Forestry England has drawn up a ‘dog code’ for walkers and is looking to engage with commercial dog walkers to address these issues.

**The meeting concluded by the Chairman thanking those that had attended, and the meeting closed at 8.50pm.**