

OFFWELL PARISH COUNCIL

MINUTES OF THE PARISH COUNCIL MONTHLY ORDINARY MEETING ON WEDNESDAY 17th JANUARY 2024 AT 7.30PM IN THE VILLAGE HALL

Present: J. Tristram Chair), T. Norris, M. Norfolk, D. Blackmore, A. Welch-Thornton,
T. Pepper

In Attendance: A Jenkins (Clerk), DCC Cllr. M. Hartnell, EDDC Cllr. H. Parr

Members of Public: 0

The Chair welcomed everyone to the Council meeting and outlined / reminded everyone of the Covid-19 measures which had been adopted for Council meetings.

OPEN SESSION

No matters raised.

COUNCIL BUSINESS

- 1. To receive apologies for absence and to approve reasons given (LGA 1972 S.85 (1))**

Cllr. Whithear

- 2. To receive any declarations of interest relating to items outlined in this agenda (this does not preclude the duty to declare further interests as applicable)**

None

- 3. Minutes of the Meeting held on 6th December 2023**

The minutes were declared a true record of the proceedings, proposed by Cllr. Norris, seconded by Cllr. Welch-Thornton, all in favour.

- 4. Matters arising from the Minutes**

Cllr. Tristram reported that Highways had very promptly dealt with the two Highways issues in Mill Lane which he had reported.

- 5. Reports:**

- a) Police**

The Clerk advised that PCSO England had written about the Honiton police station front office reopening on the 2nd February 2024 and inviting a representative of the Parish council to the official opening day event at 10.30 to 1.30 am on

Tuesday 20th February 2024. Cllr. Blackmore said that he was prepared to attend on behalf of the Parish Council.

b) District and County Councillors

DCC Cllr. Hartnell gave a report mainly focusing on the finances of Devon County Council ahead of target setting for the various service areas of the Council ahead of budget setting for 2024/25 in what is going to be an interesting year for everyone in Local and National Government.

He said that setting the DCC Budget for 2024/25 is like any year, a huge task for a large-scale organisation. Over 79% of the nett revenue budget of £743.4million proposed for 2024/25 is spent on children's and adult service areas i.e. £588.5m with £154.8m for the others.

Demand in these two areas in particular continues to surge, where DCC must legally provide them, often at very high costs over and above what is termed discretionary services, such as routine roads maintenance (other than safety issues) of a 12,000 mile road network, bus service subsidies, climate change initiatives and much more.

The funding for this comes from a wide range of Core funding income from the Government and Other Grants totalling around £236.4m, but most of the income is derived from Council tax and a share of Business rates.

This is set against set against a background inflationary cost of living pressures and huge challenges to Local Government in general. Social care provision is particularly impacted by increases to the national living wage, which at first glance a 30p per hour increase announced by the Government does not seem vast.

However, it will add an extra £25.7m to the DCC wage bill, which will need to come from further savings and efficiencies.

There is an above inflation proposed 10.4 per cent increase in the revenue budget for children's services with a 6 per cent rise in adult services and 4.7 per cent extra for climate change, environment, and transport.

Reductions in other departmental spending means an overall rise of 6.3 per cent in the council's budget for next year within the total spend of over £743 million where Officers of the Council have worked closely with the DCC Cabinet to secure best value across Devon's operations and ensure continuing financial sustainability.

To set a balanced budget, savings, alternative funding, and additional income of £49.6 million have been identified. Overall, there is additional funding of £43.8 million or 6.3% for services next year. It is not planned to support the proposed budget targets by using general reserve balances. This reflects a strategy of DCC living within its means and to set service budgets that are affordable.

He reported that Highways had received additional funding in the Autumn Statement which had awarded an additional £13m+ in highways funding for DCC, with £6.6m available as an in-year award.

Minor Highways Improvements could also now be funded by Town & Parishes Communities who ask to use their own money to make minor improvements to roads in their area will soon be able to do so after DCC cabinet gave a trial scheme the go-ahead.

Self-delivery schemes could be for a 20mph zone or traffic calming for instance.

In December the cabinet approved recommendations for a Community Self-Delivery of Highway Improvements trial, a proposal that had cross-party support. A step-by-step guide or 'checklist' will be published enabling communities to understand the steps that are required before any work is carried out. Highways service receives requests from communities for permission to pay for and make small improvements to a highway in their area. These requests are where communities have funding in place, but our highways service lacks the capacity to deliver it on their behalf as quickly the community would like. The results of the trial will then help us determine if the proposal should be turned into a permanent scheme.

The guide itself has been co-authored by the Highways and Traffic Management Service with the support of the Engineering Design Group and lays out the typical steps that need consideration before work is carried out.

Steps include appointing a competent designer, environmental considerations, road safety and maintenance audits, consultation with affected parties and any changes to Traffic Regulation Orders.

The Clerk pointed out that whilst this is a welcome initiative by DCC the legislative powers of Parish Councils only enable it to contribute towards traffic calming measures and does not allow it to pay the whole costs. DCC Highways would have to pay a proportion of the costs.

EDDC Cllr. Parr reported that:-

The External Auditors, Grant Thornton have finally released their report on East Devon District Council 2021/22. The report raises some extremely concerning issues on governance standards and that poor working relationships between certain officers and members led to a breakdown in the operating effectiveness of some governance arrangements at the Council in 2021/22 and 2022/23.

'There were allegations of some bullying behaviour by both officers and members. The auditors saw evidence that suggested there was sometimes a lack of understanding of the roles and responsibilities of officers and members, which could impact on decision making,

She said that the report had been debated at the Audit and Governance committee meeting on Thursday 14 Dec 23. During the debate she had expressed serious concern about the bullying and that this was the third external report to have found bullying. Recommendations from the previous reports designed to improve matters had not been carried out and the problem was still present. Staff well-being was her first concern.

She also reported that the Overview Committee had considered the matter of Public Toilets. It had been agreed:-

1. To extend the closing date and any necessary revenue budgets for Category B and C Sites [eg. Colyton Dolphin St toilets] until 31st March 2025, to allow a further 12 months to enable an urgent revisiting of negotiations with town and parish councils to look at freehold disposals and other changes to the offer, according to a specified timetable and including a renewed effort through Ward Members to engage town and parish councils, with the reality of reduced or removed public toilet provision at the sites, should agreement not be reached.

2. For EDDC to write to the Secretary of State to push for public toilets to become a statutory service, and to invite other councils in Devon and Cornwall to also do so.

She also advised that EDDC is preparing for a Peer Review, to take place shortly - a team of officers and cllrs from other councils will carry out the review, and report on the efficiency of the council. The last Peer Review took place in 2019 and the findings had been very positive,

c) Clerk

None

d) Offwell Neighbourhood Support Group

None

e) Highways Matters

1) 20mph

DCC Cllr. Hartnell reported that Highways had agreed that there would be another scheme this year for some 20 mph applications to be considered, approved and funded by Devon Highways. He said that those communities who had submitted unsuccessful applications last year would be reconsidered. There was no need to submit a new application unless there had been some material changes.

2) A35

None

3) Bus Service

DCC Hartnell advised that he had no further news to report about the bus stop issue.

4) Other Highways matters

The Clerk reported that the Chair, Cllr. Norris and himself had met for a site visit with DCC Cllr. Hartnell and Steve Kelly, the local Highways Officer to look at the issue of the unnamed lane and Ramsden Lane junction with the A35. Whilst all agreed that the junction of the unnamed lane did present various issues for all road users, Cllr. Hartnell and the Highways Officer said that Devon Highways would not fund any changes to the junction. Cllr. Hartnell did however say that under the trial Community Self help scheme recently announced that it may be possible for the Parish Council subject to conducting a survey within the Parish as to what changes were wanted and supported by the Community and that they would be prepared to fund the changes to the junction. The cost of any changes would however be quite substantial.

f) Footpaths Report

The Clerk advised that the Footpaths officer had reported two issues.

The first related to the footbridge over Offwell brook where path 8 meets path 19 of Northleigh. Several slats are damaged, a few quite badly and the handrail was rickety. Cllr. Tristram advised that the footbridge was the responsibility of Northleigh PC. It had been reported to them previously and he would contact them again to let them know that it had not been repaired and was getting worse.

The other reported issue was that the little footbridge over the ditch at Northleigh Hill road end of footpath 27 is very slippery when it's wet and could do with some

netting on it. Cllr. Tristram advised that he would look at it and see what could be done.

g) Any Other Reports

None

6. Correspondence

None

7. Finance

a) Current Financial Position

The Clerk reported that there is £3,679.80 in the general account and £3,137.82 in the CIL account.

b) Expenditure to be ratified

None

c) Expenditure to be approved for which bills have been received

- 1) Payment to A.Jenkins of £238.48 for the Clerk's net salary after tax/NIC deduction for the month of October (18/12/2023 to 29/01/2024)
 - 2) Payment to HMRC of £59.60 for PAYE
- Payments proposed by Cllr. Norris,, seconded by Cllr. Norfolk. All in favour.

d) Change of Bank signatories

The Clerk reminded Councillors that he was waiting the return of their completed forms in order for the Bank to proceed with the change of signatories.

e) Budget & Precept

The Clerk gave Councillors a budget report based on an Excel spreadsheet document (as attached). The spreadsheet, showed the Annual budget amounts for 22/23, the amounts paid up to the 17th January 2024, any balances due to be paid by the year end on the 31st March 2024 and the estimated annual 2024/25 budget amounts.

The Clerk gave a verbal presentation of the various year costs, the projected year end spends and balance and the 24/25 budget.

The Clerk explained that the haycart planting had been very kindly sponsored by Honiton Garden Centre in 2023 but as advised previously this had not been renewed. The Council had paid the Garden Centre an amount of £85.00 in December 2023 to set up a credit facility for the purchase of the of the spring/summer plants.

The Parish Council had not incurred any costs from the May 2023 parish elections.

During the 2023/24 year the Parish Council had made donations totalling £700, comprising £150 to TRIP, £250 to the King's Coronation Party in the Village Hall, £100 to Offwell PCC for the maintenance of the Jubilee Lamp and electricity supply for the previous 5 years and £200 to Offwell PCC as contribution to the maintenance costs of the churchyard cemetery.

The Parish Council had also committed itself to giving an annual £50 grant to the PCC grant for the Jubilee Lamp maintenance and electricity supply.

In January 2023 the Council accepted a budget of £8,048 and set a precept of £6,956 for 23/24 supporting the budget with £1092 from reserves.

The total projected spend for 2023-24 is £7837 which is within the budget forecast of £8,048.

The Clerk said that the Council had for a number of years supported the Budget from the reserves but this has reduced the reserves to an unsustainable level and the Council now needed to set a realistic precept this year. It cannot continue to support the budget by drawing on reserves and should actually try and increase the reserves to an acceptable and

moderate level. He recommended that the Council consider setting a precept of £9,000 this year.

He said that for illustration a £9,000 precept would mean that a Band D property in Offwell would pay an amount of £47.62 for the Parish Council Tax. This would be an increase of £10.82 annually (or 90pence monthly on the 23/24 amount based on last year's precept of £6,956.

(The Band D property calculations based on the Offwell tax base of 189 were:-

£9,000 Precept divided by 189 = £47.62 for a Band property

£6,956 Precept divided by 189 = £36.80 for a Band D property)

Councillors discussed the draft budget . Cllr. Pepper proposed accepting the budget of £8,078, seconded by Cllr. Norfolk, all in favour.

The Chair thanked the Clerk for his work in producing the report and budget forecast.

Cllr. Tristram proposed that the 2024/25 precept be set at £9,000, seconded by Cllr. Blackmore all in favour. The Clerk to submit the completed precept form.

8. Planning Applications

a) 24/0010/FUL - Offwell House Offwell Honiton EX14 9SA

The proposal seeks to add a small boot room to the Grade II listed property, construct a new garage on the existing rear driveway, garden alterations and gazebo.

Cllr. Blackmore proposed that the Council support this application, seconded by Cllr. Pepper, all in favour.

b) 24/00101/LBC - Offwell House Offwell Honiton EX14 9SA

The proposal seeks to add a small boot room to the Grade II listed property, construct a new garage on the existing rear driveway, garden alterations and gazebo.

Cllr. Blackmore proposed that the Council support this application, seconded by Cllr. Pepper, all in favour.

c) 21/1798/FUL - Land On The East Side Of Tower Road Offwell Honiton

Change of use of an existing agricultural building and associated works for use as a Livestock Collection Centre.

The Clerk reported that following the December meeting it had been reported to him by local residents that Stags, the applicants had now started livestock collection centre operations from the site even though they were in breach of the planning conditions. He had sent an email with photographic evidence of the operations to the Planning Officer and the Enforcement Officer with copies to the Ward Councillors expressing the Parish Council concerns about the applicants ignoring the planning conditions and enforcement officer and now operating from the site in a clear breach of the conditions. Further to the email he had also spoken to EDDC Cllr. Arnott (one of our Ward Councillors) who had followed up on the matter and had asked Planning and the Enforcement Officer to investigate and advise further. He had subsequently been advised that the Enforcement Officer had contacted the new planning agent at Stags who has now taken on the task of supplying the information to discharge the planning conditions associated with the livestock centre. The Stags planning agent had assured the Enforcement Officer that the relevant information would be submitted before the 31st January 2024. The Planning Department had also contacted Stags and told them to cease business operations on the site until all is in order.

Cllr. Norris also advised that a number of local residents had also reported the matter to the Planning Department.

- b) **23/0735/FUL – Land North Of Honiton Golf Course Northleigh Hill Road Honiton**
The construction of a Youth Football Facility, including clubhouse, parking, storage and football pitches to suit all age groups.

The Clerk advised that this planning application had still not been reinstated onto the planning website and that he would keep a watching brief on the matter and keep Council advised at future meetings.

10. Electricity Sub Station

The Clerk advised that he was waiting to hear from the sub station technician as to when the tree stumps are to be removed and whether they will permit the Council to plant a hedge.

11. Production of an Offwell Parish Infrastructure Delivery Plan (IDP)

To be deferred to the July meeting

12. Councillor Training – Wednesday 24th January 2024

The Clerk reminded Cllrs. Norris and Blackmore about the new Councillor training session which will take place in Kilmington Cricket Pavilion at 6.30pm on Wednesday 24th January 2024.

13. Agenda Items for Next Meeting

None

11. Date and Time of Next Meeting

Wednesday 21st February 2024

The meeting closed at 8.50pm

Signed *C. Whithear*

Date **21/02/2024**