

Monksilver Parish Council

Minutes of a meeting held on 26th February 2024 at 7.30pm

at the EMN Hall

Apologies for absence were received from: Cllr. Christopher Hill and Som. Cllr Christine Lawrence

Present: Cllrs. Mervyn Orchard-Lisle, Chairman, Andrew Howe, Vice-Chairman, Katherine Adams, Daniel Cotterill, John Stace, Sue Westbury, Som. Cllr Marcus Kravis (MC).

Members of the public present: Zoë Freeman, Stuart Tudor-Jackman, Wendy Tudor-Jackman and Kevin Walker.

In attendance Mary Jacobs.

1. Mervyn welcomed everyone to the meeting. Mervyn had received a request earlier in the day from a member of the public wishing to raise an item. This item will be moved up the agenda to be heard after the Somerset Council and LCN reports.
2. **Declarations of interest.** None
3. **The minutes of the meeting held on 27th November 2023** were amended to read on page 2. para 3 An MPC Councillor asked if Hinkley was paying its way..... The minutes were then approved as a correct record.

4. **Somerset Council report.**

MC confirmed that the Somerset Council had met and had agreed a balanced budget. He gave his apologies for not attending the meeting arranged by Williton PC over the possible closure of the Williton Recycling Centre. The invitations had gone to the Williton Ward Councillors and he had not been aware of the meeting. MC informed the meeting that an email had been sent from The Chairman of SC, Bill Revans. SC will be meeting with the waste contractors to agree the best way forward. MC thinks that the likely outcome will be that all recycling centres will remain open, but on reduced hours. MC confirmed that the No.28 bus has been saved. The general consensus from the MPC councillors was that Bill Revan's email was unhelpfully vague with no definitive outcomes. MC stated that, the issue SC has is that each department has to cut costs. If the budget was not balanced a S114 notice would be served and the government administrators would then immediately cut services and increase the council tax.

The MPC Councillors then raised the following questions directed to Mr Kravis:- MC asked if they could be recorded in the minutes so that he would have a list and could then answer them.

- a) **Referring to the balanced budget.** The original deficit was £100K. It was then reported that it was reduced to £80K. It then shot back up to £100K. Where is the financial evidence to support these significant changes? Where is the transparency?
- b) **Referring to the Williton Recycling Centre.** Is there a date when Somerset Council will inform us of the outcome of negotiations with the waste company? The papers presented to Somerset Council on Tuesday 20th February, included the letter signed by Cllr. Peter Payne, Chairman of Williton Parish Council, where Monksilver was a signatory. Numerous questions concerning the financial arrangements and practical due diligence were asked in that letter, to which we have had no detailed response to our enquiries. How does the closure of a recycling centre meet SC's green credentials? Who owns the land? What does the recycling centre cost to run? How does this compare with other centres.

MC responded that he did not think that there is a set date. The land is owned by SC. He is unaware of the costs, but he would find out. Dan commented that if SC own the land that it will be better to retain Williton and reduce travel.

- c) **Referring to land acquisition.** Have any of the former Somerset Councils ever purchased land to develop that was subsequently found to be contaminated and/or suffered a significant drop in value?
- d) **Referring to the former Somerset Councils financial positions.** What was the financial position of each of the District Councils and the County Council at the point of the formation of the new Unitary Council? Was one or more Council rolling over debt? If so, why was this not made public?
- e) **Referring to the sale of assets and project procurement.** MC informed the meeting that at the time there had been a Government scheme which had allowed money to be borrowed at 2%. It was not until later that it became known that unfortunately, the finance officers had not used the government scheme and had borrowed elsewhere at the higher rate of 4%. At the outset it was a good scheme, with £2m being raised in the first two years. MPC then asked who had signed off on the purchase of assets and new projects? Was it officers or portfolio holders? Who undertook the due diligence? Who is accountable? Which assets are being retained and what is their value now compared to the cost of purchase? What interest charges on borrowings have been incurred? Which assets are being sold and what is the sales value? What did they cost to purchase and what interest charges have been incurred? There had been some bad decisions made and the money would have been better spent on infrastructure. Somerset Council should be there to serve the public not to buy investments. It should have been spending taxpayers' money on the services required. This is not what it was doing. The officers are not experts in this field.
MC defended SC by saying that it was the Government's fault that they are having to sell the loss-making assets now, whereas in the future their value would have increased. MPC's view was that SC's surplus money should be invested in easily accessible funds if they are going to be needed to cover future shortfalls, as they are clearly needed now.
- f) **Referring to the reduction in staffing.** What will be the cost of staff redundancies? Why is there disparity in redundancy pay with some old Councils liable for 3 x salary and others at 1.5 x salary? On the forming of the Unitary Somerset Council why was there not standardising of redundancy arrangements negotiated at the time every employee was transferred to the new Unitary Somerset Council?
- g) **Referring to the planning regulations.** Is any of the housing development being built on flood plains? Are public transport facilities (i.e. buses) being provided for new housing developments? What are the regulations regarding planning diversity? Please forward the presentation you mentioned at the November meeting.

MC responded that all the housing in West Somerset is to meet supply. We benefit from new housing bonuses.

MC undertook to answer all these questions in (a) to (g). MC also invited any further questions.

- 5. **Minehead and Watchet Local Community Network.** The minutes of the recent meeting had been circulated to MPC. The LCN is asking for councillor input. MPC is not convinced that the LCN has developed to a stage where a regular representative would be beneficial. Mervyn proposed that attendance at the meetings should be on a rolling basis, assuming that one of the councillors was available to attend. MPC also expressed concern at the cost to Somerset Council in administering this network and stated that if costs need to be cut then this is one area where a saving can be made.

6. Any other business.

- a) **Localism Act – Renewal of the community asset The Notley Inn.** Kevin reported that the registration regarding Community assets expire after 5 years, and therefore he requested that this is renewed for a further 5 years. The most straightforward way is for the MPC to approve and to

request renewal. Kevin is prepared to complete the application form on behalf of the MPC. Simon and Caroline had always said that their ownership of the Notley was a long-term commitment, and there is no suggestion that this situation has changed. They had in fact purchased the business in the knowledge that it was subject to a community asset registration. The proposed renewal is to futureproof the business as a village inn for the following reasons:

- Futureproof against possible future change of use.
- There is no public transport out of the village.
- The inn is the social centre of the village, especially with the lack of a separate village shop.
- We should not be encouraging residents to drink and drive.

Mervyn invited a proposal. A proposal was put forward that an application to renew the “Community Asset” be submitted. This was proposed by Andrew Howe and seconded by Sue Westbury. Councillors were unanimously in favour. Kate asked that Simon and Caroline be made aware that a renewal was to be submitted. MPC thanked Kevin for agreeing to complete the application and confirmed that Mervyn would sign it on behalf of MPC. MC was asked to support the application when it is submitted to Somerset Council. He confirmed that as Ward Councillor that he would be notified. He also advised of his own personal involvement with the pub at Blue Anchor

- b) Stuart informed the meeting that the November minutes were missing from the website. Mary confirmed this would be rectified immediately.

Mervyn thanked Marcus and the public for attending the meeting and they all left.

- c) **Defibrillator.** 2023 was the last year Kate and Sue would hold the wreath making workshop as a fundraiser. Community fundraising events are to be encouraged, but ultimately costs need to be covered by the precept. MPC agreed that the operating costs will be covered from the precept in the future. Kate commented that the ring-fenced reserve amount is incorrect. Kate and Mary will back-track over the preceding years to correct the discrepancy.
- d) **Newsletter.** Sue had not written a newsletter recently, due in part to lack of things to write about. She suggested that in future, shorter and more frequent information be published in Pathways, as well as the notice board and the website. This would regularly keep most of the community updated with information.

7. **Matters outside of Monksilver.** None.

8. **Planning applications.** None

9. **Highways.**

Gary Warren had written to John on 13th February 2024 stating that he had reluctantly agreed to Ian Timmins request to relocate the signs at the Woodford end. The cost of the work is likely to be approximately £4,000. We should have some contingency to cover 2024/2025 rates, therefore £4,500 is more likely. The cost is being underwritten by four residents . Any other residents who wish to donate towards the cost will be asked to do so by the end of April. A ring-fenced MPC reserve account has been set up. The work has been planned for August. It is expected the dotted white lines at the road junctions will be repainted at the same time.

10. **BT Openreach.** The new pole has been erected, but the cables have not been buried underground.

11. **Flooding and Drainage Update.** Gareth Varney from the Environment Agency has been contacted as the telemetry alarm is going off all the time. He thinks that the device has been placed on one step too low. It will be raised to the next step up. A river maintenance appointment with the Environment Agency will be made and residents will be invited to watch. As soon as the date has been received it will be circulated to councillors and residents. The aim is to make residents aware of their obligations and to show them how to keep the river clear. The EA are happy to educate us about what needs to be executed in maintenance. Dan commented that when the river was straightened back in the 1960s it

allowed the water to flow away faster. The river was dredged in the late 1960s. Andrew commented that the problem is vegetative growth.

Colin Skellett, CEO Wessex Water is visiting on 5th April at midday. He is also the CEO of YTL, which owns Wessex Water. He is visiting to see the revamped pumping station. Andrew commented that the station is noisy. John confirmed that the new soundproofed doors will not be fitted for another three weeks.

12. **Finance.** Mary confirmed that the bank account has been reconciled at £6,619.44 on 26th February 2024. Of this £5,153.57 is ring-fenced for the various reserves, leaving a working balance of £1,465.87. This balance is in line with the NALC guidelines at the end of the financial year. Adding Mary as an authorised signatory has not been resolved. She has tried on several occasions, producing a copy of the minute. NatWest will not discuss with her. Mervyn has tried to authorise online, but it is proving difficult to upload.
13. **Pathways and Deer Management.** The Exmoor National Park Ranger is still absent, so that there is nothing to report.
14. **Neighbourhood Watch.** The latest newsletter had been circulated to MPC. Copies are posted on the website and the notice board. As the Neighbourhood Watch team are now producing their own newsletters, a dedicated person is no longer required.
15. **The dates of the next meetings are:**
 - 13th May 2024 at 7:00 Annual meetings to include the review of standing orders and the approval of the 2023-2024 annual accounts and AGAR (apologies from John Stace and Sue Westbury)
 - 12th August 2024 at 7.30
 - 25th November 2024 at 7.30

There being no further business, the meeting closed at 21.40.