

The Belstone Annual Parish Meeting

28th July 2020

Draft Minutes

Present: Parish Cllrs Michael Ash (Chairman), Ann Norman (Vice Chairman), Peter Cooper, Susan Norrish, Jon Pike, Theresa Weaver and Kate Little (Clerk)

Devon County Cllr James McInnes, Eddy and Robin Hill, Chris Townsend, Chris Walpole, Edward Currie, Sophia Clyst and Bob Weaver.

Ian Solomon attended via a Zoom Meeting connection to test whether this form of attendance was viable. It proved difficult to see and hear all participants just using a laptop with no additional form of microphone.

Preliminaries

Chris Walpole took a photo of those present at this first open meeting of the Parish Council since the Covid-19 pandemic lock-down in March 2020.

The requirements of the risk assessment for the use of the Village Hall for this meeting were read out by the Chairman before the meeting commenced. The hall had been set out to ensure that all participants were 2m apart and hand cleaners were provided. The kitchen was out of bounds and only one WC as available. The doors were kept open for the duration of the meeting.

1. **Apologies:** Cllr Paul Boyce, WDBC Cllr Lynn Daniel, Ian Brooker (DNPA Ranger), Marion Walpole and Ella Curnow
2. **Minutes of the Annual Parish Meeting held on 9th April 2019:** These were agreed as a correct record of the meeting and signed by the Chairman.
3. **Matters Arising:** None
4. **Annual Report of the Parish Council:**

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT – 2019/20

During the year the Council has held eight meetings and three special planning meetings.

Council elections were held in May 2019 and Theresa Weaver was welcomed as a new member. A letter of thanks was sent to Elisabeth Emerson thanking her for her services to the Council over a number of years.

Members of Devon County Council, West Devon Borough Council and the Highway Authority, plus members of the public have also attended.

Eight planning applications have been discussed and all but two have been approved by the Dartmoor National Park Planning Authority.

The kerbing project on the village car park was done in December and has turned out to be a successful job. Our thanks to the village organizations which helped with the cost, which was not as high as expected, at £5,895.60.

The precept for 2020/21 was confirmed as £2,308, an increase of £131 over 2019/20.

The Council has received and noted regular updates from the Belstone Climate Change Group.

Village seats have been checked and repaired as necessary. A new seat was donated by David Westlake (in Australia) to replace the one in memory of his grandfather, which had become unsafe.

A meeting was held in January with Highways to discuss the roads and drainage systems in the village and around the parish. We had a good discussion, with both parties putting their point of view.

Work undertaken on the roads has included some re-surfacing on the Tongue End to Belstone section and various potholes filled. Fencing work was undertaken at the cattle grid at the end of Skaigh Lane and at the Tor Down grid.

The question of cattle around the village and open commons is still being looked at, with various ideas being put forward.

The village lamp-post was at last repaired, after it had been knocked back at an angle by a lorry.

The stone litter bin has now been removed and does not seem to have caused a problem with rubbish being left about.

Various reports and consultation documents have been discussed and responded to where necessary.

Finally I would like to thank my vice chairman, fellow councillors, the clerk and also Simon Herbert, the internal auditor for their work over the last year. Thanks must also go once again to Mrs Kuhn for looking after the pound garden.

Michael Ash
Chairman
28/7/20

5. Statement of Accounts:

Statement of Accounts for the Financial Year 2019/20

Introduction

As the Annual Parish Meeting is taking place at a different time of year from usual (July instead of April), due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lock down, the annual accounts for the financial year 2019/20 have been finalised and internally audited. The Internal Auditor's report is attached.

It now remains to authorise the accounts and to agree these and the Certificate of Exemption from the Annual Governance and Accountability Return from PKF Littlejohn, the Smaller Authorities' Audit Appointments Ltd's (SAAA) appointed external auditors.

The first quarter of the 2020/21 financial year is now complete and the return for this is reported in the following ordinary Parish Council meeting agenda.

Financial Year 2019/20

The balance in the Parish Council two accounts stood at £2,921.22 as at 31st March 2020. This was divided between the current account which held £1,279.08 and the business reserve account which held £1,642.14. This as an increase of £658.17 on last year.

The kerbing of the village car park took place during the year, at a cost of £6,913. £4,000 of grants were secured from Devon County Council and the Dartmoor National Park Authority. The balance was made up of contributions from Belstone Commoner's Association, the Village Hall Committee, the Belstone Players and Belstone Parochial Church Council.

The sum of £1,002 was recovered from VAT expenditure during the year.

Only one S137 payment was made - £50 to the North Devon Search and Rescue Group.

The 2020/21 Precept

The precept for 2020/21 has been set at £2,308, an increase of £131 in 2019/20. Changes in the budget are the result of funds being set aside on a four year cycle for elections, an annual fee for the Information Commissioner's Office (in respect of the data protection legislation) and the clerk's salary being brought in line with national pay scales, with 3% being included for a possible national local government pay rise.

This report was signed by the Parish Council Chairman and the Responsible Financial Officer.

It was resolved that the 2019/20 accounts for the Parish Council, which have been signed off by the Internal Auditor, Simon Herbert, be approved.

Proposed by Cllr Jon Pike and seconded by Cllr Theresa Weaver.

6. DCC Cllr James McInnes:

This is the first face to face meeting I have attended since before the lock down. I have been working from home throughout, attending virtual meetings via Teams and Zoom. I want to thank all those who have kept life moving throughout the pandemic. Working from home to seemed to work well although there is always a need for some social interaction. It was interesting to note that some families with needs opened up better when using the virtual system than at face to face meetings – perhaps it felt more natural for those well used to using online forms of communication.

In Devon we are fortunate in only having 12 Covid-19 cases reported and no deaths in the last week. There have been no cases at all in West Devon or Torridge for the last few weeks. West Devon is listed as 149 out of 150 local authorities in this regard. Most people obeyed the call to stay at home here and that helped to keep the incidence of the infection low.

We will have to learn to live with Covid-19, getting out and about where it is safe to do so. Devon has been asked to pilot a track and trace system and I sit on the board overseeing this – it helps to speak with one voice for Devon.

We are now moving on to the second stage - the consequences of the lock down, eg on the economy. Tourism has been hard hit. DCC has had to spend £4m more than budgeted for, including with dealing with children coming into care. When the schools open up it is anticipated that other hidden issues will emerge, such as parental anxiety. Equally for care homes and support from the Government will be needed. DCC is determined to do all it can for the residents of Devon in this unprecedented time for everyone.

Questions to Cllr McInnes -

1. **What services will be cut as a result of the extra expenditure?** (Chris Townsend). None to date. DCC will send a strong message to the Government about the resources needed to cope. It is the Borough and District Councils that are in a more perilous position financially with the loss of their parking income, on which their spending budgets are often based.
2. **What are DCC's plans for climate change going forward?** (Cllr Theresa Weaver). People enjoyed the cleaner air and quiet, which reminded us of what it used to be like. We are moving forward, but delivering these will not be easy nor will it happen immediately.
3. The potholes are causing severe problems and there are benefits to less traffic on the roads. **When will the Okehampton station project be up and running?** (Edward Currie) The project needs £12-14m spending on the track alone and whilst the land is still available for the park and ride station, the funding is difficult. I should also point out that DCC is going to seek planning permission for a special school on the Okehampton Business Park.

The Chairman thanked Cllr James McInnes for his update and answers to questions.

7. WDBC Cllr Lynn Daniel:

This has been a challenging time for West Devon Borough Council. We had set our budget in September 2019 for the current financial year and had balanced our accounts. Then along came the Covid19 outbreak, which is still with us, and we face a big financial hole. Our officers responded so well and we are grateful for the community efforts made across the borough to support the isolated and vulnerable people. It has made me so proud and humble to be part of the caring community we have locally. I give my thanks to all those who stepped up and made things happen.

Community groups online meetings - WDBC have monthly online communities meeting because it is likely that there will still be hardship for at least the next year and we want to ensure local assistance will still be available. The details will be sent to your Parish clerks. This will enable a representative from any community groups that wish to continue, to have a forum to meet other groups and discuss ways the council can provide support. The next meeting is 6th August and will contain information about wifi improvements, heating grants, grant funding, and signing up to a regular bulletin.

If Belstone PC wishes to be involved in this, let me know and I will send you the link. Cllr.lynn.daniel@westdevon.gov.uk

Covid19 DISCRETIONARY GRANT -- The final tranche of payments ended Friday 10 July, following six weeks of the scheme being live. Payments have been made to 125 businesses across West Devon.

Covid19 Recovery plan - We have 3 busy weeks of workshops in action now, discussing how WDBC enables our local communities and businesses to recover from the Covid19 emergency.

As expected, there has been a fair amount of crossover between the sessions and some common themes have emerged which will help shape the plans that will go before councillors in September. Over the summer, officers will now pull together the plans whilst continuing to deal with the ongoing response phase of the pandemic. If anyone wishes to contribute ideas for a recovery plan please let me know.

Devon Communities Together Virtual Resilience Forums – These forums will be going ahead online on 29 and 30th July, tickets from Eventbrite. Parishes should have received invites for their councillors to join. The theme is ‘**helping communities to help themselves**’. I see there is a discussion on **flood resilience** and **local Covid19 management plans** which may be of interest.

Councillors Grant – Don’t forget that I have a small grant fund that I can use to support local groups and schemes. Please apply to me if you need funding for your group or cause. Email as above.

Cllr Lynn Daniel 27/07/20

8. Ian Brooker's Report

First of all, my humble apologies for again not being present at your annual meeting! Very different circumstances this year for my absence and it's always a shame not to meet people face to face. My thanks to Kate for reading this report to you.

I returned to work in mid-April last year to find an ongoing situation with several reports of vandalism occurring in the Skaigh Valley and Belstone Cleave. This included boulders being rolled down from the road to the access tracks below; path revetments being destroyed; two bridge gates being ripped from their hinges; the Lion's Mouth fountain being damaged and damage to one of the seats. There were also open fire sites with elaborately made stone surrounds, in various locations. A man had been found living rough in his car on a couple of nights but at first could not be connected to the damage described as nothing had been witnessed. He had also become quite aggressive when challenged about the overnight use of his car on the common.

Once the word was put out, more information came forward with a description of a person that was similar to the rough sleeper and eventually I managed to track him down near Beloes.

After a discussion, he admitted to doing most of the damage and once a name was obtained it turned out to be a person who had been born and bred in Sticklepath hence why he knew his way around the various locations in the valley. He eventually shook my hand, apologising for the damage and agreed to stop his very destructive campaign.

Everything was reported to the Police and he was interviewed. Due to a variety of issues however, it was agreed not to pursue the matter further providing he kept his word which I can happily report has been the case ever since.

No sooner was this episode over however, a report came through of an abandoned pick-up truck at the southern end of Taw Marsh! The owner of the vehicle, who lives locally, has been prosecuted for other offences and fortunately the damage to the boggy area was superficial and has recovered but it was only due to the skilled operation of a local digger driver, that such a result was achieved.

It was good therefore to be able to do something positive for a change with the annual Himalayan Balsam Bash on the common in July. My grateful thanks to all the local volunteers that turned up and to the Belstone Commoners Association for supporting the provision of refreshments. Always welcome!

Not long afterwards however, it was back to the enforcement role dealing with a group of campers on the edge of Belstone Tors with an open fire. As witnessed by a local resident, the two males were very aggressive with verbal abuse from the outset. With lack of Police support, only the fire could be put out and the group of 4 finally departed the day afterwards but left behind an absolute mess of unused food and human waste.

It's a great shame that more and more of my time is being spent dealing with the minority who seem to be increasingly selfish in their approach and have no regard for their own responsibilities or to looking after and respecting the places they visit. This has been very evident as the 'unlocking' has taken place in recent months and although this is a countrywide problem and not just specific to Dartmoor, many questions have to be answered in order to restore any kind of balance.

Finally, I would like to mention the cattle incidents that have also occupied a good deal of my time, especially in the latter months of last year, following a very serious incident in the valley.

I was invited to attend the Belstone Commoners Association AGM last year and reported the incident, making reference to others that had also occurred. It was agreed that this would be further discussed at a forthcoming steering group meeting with relevant actions being taken.

I understand that the owners of the cattle have made a sustained effort this year to move the cattle onto the outer common and removed a rogue animal from the herd. Signs, although delayed by the current crisis, will be installed in appropriate places once agreement is reached, to warn all users about the presence of cattle on the common and to take the appropriate action when coming across them, especially if dogs are present.

If anyone has any continuing concerns then they should be addressed to the owner of the cattle and/or to the Belstone Commoners Association.

My thanks as usual to my Voluntary Warden, Ian Solomon, who continues to complete various tasks in the area and of course for the tremendous local support for other projects that I am involved with.

I would also like to thank the local people who have made a real effort to speak to people who sometimes are unknowingly (or sometimes knowingly), breaking byelaws such as sleeping overnight in vehicles on the common. We will never eradicate this activity but it has reduced due to this concerted effort and the message is getting around that this will not be tolerated.

I am more than happy to respond to any issues or questions that may arise from this report or from other concerns, so please contact me either on my mobile 07720 509273 or via e-mail ibrooker@dartmoor.gov.uk

Ian Brooker
DNPA Ranger

9. Report from the Skaigh Wood Trust:

SKAIGH WOOD TRUST ANNUAL REPORT – 2019/20

The Trust has held eight meetings over the past year and a group of Trustees did a walking inspection of the land in June 2019.

Since taking back the common rights attached to the Wood, the Trust has entered the South Tawton Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) scheme.

Rob O'Bryen has undertaken a survey of the Wood and the Millennium Wood and outlined work which will be needed. Some of the ash trees along the river path have ash die-back and will need felling. StoC will undertake some of the small thinning work, but the large trees require a qualified person.

Talks are still ongoing with Mr Luxton regarding the lease over parts of the woodland.

The insurance has been renewed with the NFU and Mr Luxton has paid his rent at the current rate.

The footbridge was cleaned and inspected and again found to be in good order.

Lastly, thanks to my fellow Trustees for their interest in the management of the Wood and to our clerk Kate Little and our auditor Simon Herbert.

Michael Ash - Chairman of the Skaigh Wood Trust.

Cllrs Ann Norman proposed acceptance of this report. This was seconded by Cllr Susan Norrish. This was agreed.

10. Any Other Business:

- **Why was this meeting not held virtually in the current circumstances?** (Sophia Clyst). The clerk explained the difficulty some parish cllrs had with accessing the online meeting options and that a thorough risk assessment had been prepared based on the one the Village Hall Cttee had drawn up. Robin Hill (Village Hall Cttee Chairman elect) added that the village was beginning to open up socially and the hall had already been used for a Commoner's meeting and would be open for yoga classes the next day. It was asked if the Village Hall Cttee could consider some form of online streaming of meetings.

There being no other business, the Chairman thanked everyone for attending and closed the meeting at 8.30pm.