

Minutes of the Annual Meetings of the Parishes of Ashburnham and Penhurst

Thursday 25th April 2024 at 7.30 pm in the village hall

31 people including 21 electors plus 5 members of the Parish Council and the parish clerk plus ESCC Cllr Kathryn Field and RDC Cllr Chas Pearce assembled from 7pm for a light buffet reception and to view the exhibits staged by the Art Club and Penhurst Retreat. The business meeting commenced at approximately 7.30 pm. In accordance with Local Government Act 1972 (c.70), Sch 12, s.17, the Deputy Chairman of the Parish Council, Cllr Paul Spicer, chaired the meeting as the post of Chairman is currently vacant.

Introductions

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Apologies for absence
Parish Cllr Richard White

Penhurst Parish Meeting

1. Chairman's introduction.

- a) The Chairman asked if there were any additional Penhurst agenda items and there were none.
- b) The Chairman asked for a show of hands from Penhurst residents and there were none.

2. Parish Council Report

- a) Planning - In the year 1st April 20223 to 31st March 2024 - 4 planning applications were received.
Three supported by the parish council, two approved, one undecided.
One neutral stance and approved.
- b) The limitations to the water supply were highlighted by the application for a new holiday let. The council noted the issue in their response to the planning application but there is little else the parish council can do. There are, however, precedents for planning authorities holding off approvals if the water supply is inadequate.
- c) There being no other business the Chairman closed the Penhurst Parish meeting.

Ashburnham Parish Meeting

1. Chairman's introduction.

The Chairman asked if there were any additional Ashburnham agenda items and there were none.

2. County Council Report - ESCC Cllr Kathryn Field reported as follows:

- a) The County Council's portion of the Council Tax will rise by 4.99%. This includes a 2% precept for Adult Social Care.

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- b) The Government's view was that any shortfall in Councils' budgets should be met from reserves. This was done in the sum of £9m but this is only a one year fix.
- c) Children's Services have been inspected by Ofsted and has been judged good with outstanding features. The outstanding features are services to Looked After Children.
- d) The County Council is short of foster carers and is looking to recruit.
- e) The County Council in its role as corporate parent is looking to help Care experienced young people by finding work placements, experience etc.
- f) The Director of Children's Services is retiring at the end of the month. Carolyn Fair is taking over.
- g) Adult Social Care is due a CQC inspection and has been peer reviewed by the LGA as preparation.
- h) Since the last Assembly a new highway contractor has been appointed, Balfour Beatty.
- i) Many thousands of potholes have been repaired, but not enough. 30 gangs are out working which is many more than usual.
- j) Straying into my Rother brief:
Rother has a pot of £60k for Rother Business Energy Efficiency Grants. LED lighting, air source heat pumps, double glazing, solar panels, insulation, energy efficient machinery and equipment. Businesses can apply for £5k with a minimum contribution of £1k. Launches 7 May, first come first served. Details are on Rother website www.rother.gov.uk/regeneration/uk-shared-prosperity-fund/ Also <https://www.clean-growth.uk/>

3. District Council Report (RDC Cllr Chas Pearce)

RDC Cllr Chas Pearce, in his first year as the councillor representing Ashburnham and Penhurst, reported as follows.

- a) The District Council has had to make further cost savings by closing public toilets, raising parking fees and making parking fees cashless.
- b) The precept has increased by 2.9%, the maximum the government will allow and there remains a £3.8mil deficit.
- c) The housing shortage means that demand for temporary accommodation has tripled and the Council now owns 52 houses which costs less than renting accommodation needed.
- d) By means of astute financial management, the Fit for the Future scheme and other elements supporting their financial resilience, the Districts has only had to take £0.5mil from reserves.

4. Parish Council Report

- a) Governance. Following the resignation of Nicci Gagel we have a vacancy to fill.
- b) Planning. In the year 1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024 - 13 applications about which PC was consulted - 3 withdrawn, 2 are undecided, leaves 8: We were neutral on 5 of which 4 approved and 1 refused. We supported one which was approved, We opposed 2 applications of which one refused and one approved.
- c) Financial Report. Income from the precept was £13,650 last year and in setting it for this year, i.e. April 2024 to March 2025, council were keen to limit the increase to less than inflation and have asked for £14,500. Because there is a small increase in the number of council tax payers this year the increase amounts to less than 3% to council tax payers and the amount paid by a Band D payer increases from £73.32 to £75.38 for the year.
- d) Council areas of activity (report by lead councillor).
 - i) Events and defibrillators. Cllr Chris Sinden reported that the new defibrillator is operational at the pavilion and will soon be on the national database. The council were able to purchase it at a 50% price reduction thanks to a government subsidy. The number of active organisations in the village is in double figures and includes the cricket club, W.I., M.I., table tennis, PANTS, Art Group, Coffee Stop, village lunches, library and cafe, short mat bowls and the village walk.

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- ii) Verges and Rights of Way. Cllr Paul Spicer reported that after a couple of years of only having one cut of the verges per year and timing it late after flowers have seeded, the population of wild flowers continues to grow. If sight lines at junctions become obscured highways will cut back the obstruction within 24 hours of being notified.
- iii) Environment. Cllr Jay Ashworth reported on a successful litter pick in March during which 80% - 90% of the roads in the village were covered. In February on a pick on Hammer Hill she had collected several sacks of rubbish including 82 empty alcohol containers. The next litter pick will not be until the autumn when vegetation has died back.
- iv) Highways. Cllr Ron King reported that more reporting by the public on the highways portal is still essential. On specific issues -
 - 1) Diversion signs are left up for long after work has finished.
 - 2) There is little integration regarding different diversion causes and a recent signed diversion directed people at Ponds Green to take Farthing Lane which was already closed.
 - 3) Salt bins are generally now identified and filled, but if anyone knows of one that has been missed then please let him or the clerk know.
 - 4) The collapse of the carriageway on the A271 near Hammer Hill was finally mended after several months of lobbying.
 - 5) Farthing Lane is scheduled to reopen on 10th May having been closed since last November due to a bridge collapse.
 - 6) The Parish Council will next meet highways in May for the 6 monthly SLR meeting.

5. Village Hall

- a) The Chairman reminded the meeting that the Parish Council is now Sole Managing Trustee of the charity.
- b) The charity trustee AGM was held Saturday 13th April and 26 people attended - minutes on parish website.
- c) Supporters are forming a Friends of the Village Hall group and charity trustees have invited them to send a couple of them to trustee meetings.
- d) Trustees have started improvements to the kitchen and these will be completed in the next month with a new floor covering.
- e) Trustees have it in hand to install WiFi and to improve the car park.

6. New village hall

- a) Project status. The Chairman read out a statement that Cllr Richard White made to the Parish Council meeting on 27th April 2024, that forms part of the minutes of that meeting and where he said that, having reviewed the position he had concluded -
" . . . that it was time to pause further engagement with the new hall plan for a period of 3 to 5 years. He recalled that a referendum in 2015 found a high level of support for a new hall at the cricket ground and planning permission was granted in 2017. Since then there has been an exit of key supporters of the project who have moved away and since the Covid pandemic people have become more risk averse and construction costs have spiralled. He noted that local successful new hall projects all had a significant element of development gain from housing developments and a hurdle with grant applications is that we already have a village hall. Furthermore, he does not see any prospect of gaining the support necessary in the village for the substantial borrowing likely to be necessary.

Cllr King asked what the latest estimate is of the cost of the new hall and Cllr White suggested £600k at least. Cllr King noted that some other halls struggle financially and Cllr White reflected that the scale of the new hall was probably over ambitious. Members agreed with Cllr King's suggestion that it was best to discontinue the involvement of the Parish Council until such time as a new team with new drive emerges.

Cllr White advised members that he has discussed the future with the group of activists

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most involved with fund raising for the new hall and they are in agreement with his conclusions. It is also their wish that the funds raised to date be deposited in a high interest bearing account or bond for a few years. If the time comes when they feel there is no prospect of the funds being used for the purpose for which they were raised, then they would wish that they be spent on improvements at the pavilion but not the current village hall. The group will continue with the organisation of the Country Fair in 2024 and plan to split the proceeds between the new hall and St.Michael's Hospice. After that they will step back. They will be happy to assist any new group that steps up to organise a Country Fair in 2025, but do not plan to play a leading role in the organisation of it."

b) Assignment of funds raised and not spent.

The Chairman informed the meeting that funds raised and not spent amount to £12,738. He then invited public discussion.

i) A number of people questioned why the fund raising team planned to add to the funds raised by assigning part of the proceeds of this year's Country Fair to the new hall project.

CLlr Jay Ashworth responded that this year's events were already in advance planning when the decision to pause the project had been made, but they have responded to the pausing of the project by increasing the proportion of profits donated to charity to 50%. They had selected St.Michael's Hospice inspired by the wish to pay tribute to the late Bob Parsons who for so many years tended the cricket ground and prepared the wickets. She reminded the meeting that the same fund raisers also organise the village bonfire and the catering for the Vintage Motor Cycle Club concours.

ii) There was a comment made which implied criticism of members of the fund raising group for not being at the meeting and Jay Ashworth was quick to make a firm rebuttal of any criticism of them given their many years of service in raising thousands of pounds for numerous projects in support of the village. Matt Lambourne vigorously supported that view and others were generous in their praise of the amazing work fund raisers have done and there was a general consensus that any criticism was out of order.

iii) The main area of concern was the fund raisers' plan to put the money away for 3-5 years in case a new set of people come forward to re-start the project. However, most people didn't think it should just be handed over to the Village Hall, but that there perhaps should be a vote of some kind amongst villagers to see what positive use it could be put to now rather than just have it sitting in a bank.

iv) The Chairman pointed out that the Parish Council does not have absolute jurisdiction over how the funds in hand should be spent. However, the Parish Council can write to the fund raisers asking them to reconsider their plan to put funds on deposit. The letter could also suggest that rather than the fund raisers specifying that their funds, if and when applied to support for the village, be applied to the pavilion and grounds they instead first find a way of consulting widely to determine the majority wish of the village.

v) Jay Ashworth reminded the meeting that the current team of fund raisers plan to take a back seat after this year's country fair, but are happy to support a new fund raising team. John French drew attention to the age profile of people attending the meeting and urged that attention be given to engaging a younger generation in actively supporting the community. Others echoed that view and Maggie Evans suggested devising a forum where they could be involved. Martin Jones said that it had to be recognised that many who are active participants in club and group activities that take place in the village do not live in the village and are less likely to become active in fund raising.

vi) The Chairman wound up the discussion by suggesting that people think about a way in which the majority view of the village can be ascertained regarding both the timing and the application of funds assuming that the fund raising group are amenable to the proposal that they consult more widely and do not proceed with planning to make a unilateral decision.

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7. Any Other Business (None)

8. Next Annual Meeting

The annual meeting next year will be on Thursday 24th April 2025.

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