

Annual Parish Meeting Tuesday 16th April 2024

Agenda: *Chairman of Parish Council's Address : Mark Palmer*

County Councillor's Address: Sarah Wakefield

Brief Updates from:

Jane Hole - Community Review and development of Water Quality Monitoring Group

John Parsons- Precept and Parish Council action on ditches and drain maintenance

Fiona Gledhill and Dave Knight - Village Gateway at Staple Fitzpaine

Sue Hayman - Public Rights of Way and Maintenance Group

Meeting:

Speaker: **Mark Palmer** introduced the meeting as the Parish Meeting and not a Parish Council Meeting

Sarah Wakefield and Ross Henley present. Thanks to all who had turned out, however please email issues to Emily (Clerk to the Parish Council)

A358: Henlade to Ilminster (2024) now on hold, no clear information on progress. A blow to Henlade due to pollution from the existing route, however more traffic would affect other users on local roads.

Fingerposts: cleaning and touching up paint work will be undertaken in the next few weeks by a workgroup.

Staple Fitzpaine Village Gateway: This issue has been rolling on for several years from when John Thorne our County Councillor was in post. Permission has been granted by highways to reduce the speed limit from 40mph to 30mph after a survey. The costs of the gateway will be borne by the Parish Council

Local Community Network (LCN) - Transport Working Group (TWG) are looking into the costs of portable Speed Indicator Display units (SIDs). These vary in design and as the cost of one is rather high the 16 parishes in our LCN have agreed to share the costs to purchase a few to share amongst the parishes.

Hedges and Ditches: Services in our community will be diminished due to the financial circumstances of Somerset Council.

It is the responsibility of landowners to cut hedges at the appropriate time of the year and clear ditches to stop water running from their land onto the highways. The PC will work with local landowners to facilitate this. Ditches in the Wych Lodge area have been cleared and the farmer has contributed to the costs.

Public Rights of Way (PRoW): Any issues on PRoWs which include footpaths and bridleways should be reported on ROAM - Somerset Council's Definitive Map, and also to the Parish Council so that a picture can be built of the issues in our parish. A Working Group of parishioners would then work on an 'as and when' basis with the PRoW department to replace footpath furniture etc.

If you are a walker please take a pair of secateurs on a walk with you especially during the summer.

Elections: The Returning Officer has been asked to move elections from Thurlbear School to Neroche Village Hall as it is problematic for the Headteacher, concerning the safe guarding of his pupils from 7.00am until 10.00pm. Although we may have to use the school in the event of a PC election.

Taylor Wimpy: Possible development at Orchard Portman. There is no news as yet but leases of local farmers have been extended for a further five years. The intention of the parish is to keep this as Open Countryside

Role of PC in Planning Matters: The role of the PC is to represent local views. The PC can only comment on the actual application at the time and not speculation of what may be intended. Comments must be agreed at the PC meeting and can only be based on planning matters. Advice to parishioners is that they raise any concerns on the Planning Portal as the PC has only one voice, as each parishioner has. Objections must be clear, concise and objective.

Vacancies: there are three vacancies on the Parish Council at the moment

Neroche Hall: To help with the acoustics in the hall enquiries have been made about a PA system

Speaker: **Sarah Wakefield** - County Councillor who attends the PC meetings each month and is Deputy Chair in our local LCN

Sarah feels we have an active PC in Neroche

Broadband: The role out of Broadband in our area has faltered. CDS (Connecting Somerset and Devon) is not responding to contact and it is thought that Airband is in difficulty, however she is clear that it is **not** good enough and will take concerns back.

Orchard Portman: Somerset County has asked the Audit Office to investigate but they declined.

Overage: This is an agreement to pay more to the seller when planning permission is given. This could be more than thirty years to fruition.

5 Year Housing Plan: Somerset Council do not have a five year housing plan largely due to phosphates being present in the soil, this allows speculative applications from developers.

Enforcement Officers: Enforcement Officers require planning permissions to be applied. The department needs you to report any issues you have.

Somerset County Council becoming a Unitary Council in one day was an impossible task. There are 570,000 residents in the County and the council has been asked to do much more with less money. Somerset Council is working with other organisations to balance the budget, having to sell off land and other assets. £35,000,000 savings on top of £40,000,000 savings last year - even with a 5% increase in the Community Charge, Somerset is still lower than most other councils.

Voluntary redundancies - reduction of 1000 staff.

Intention to lobby Members of Parliament to raise lack of funding for County Councils.

Other items are:

Several Environmental Initiatives

Recycling - very good

Trying to deal with the phosphates issues - raised monies

Supporting children who cannot live in their homes

Exceptional hardship scheme for the Community Charge

New plan for the Octagon Theatre

Levelling up for Tone Dale and Wellington

Social Care relies on unpaid carers - a new strategy is in place

Speaker: **Jane Hole** (Parish Councillor) Progress on Community Review

Autumn 2022 Community Review supported by the Community Council for Somerset.

Steering Group included four parishioners and four Parish Councillors

Questionnaire sent out in March 2023 to all parishioners in Neroche. There was a 32% response which is quite a robust response for an online questionnaire

Information is on Neroche Community website along with all the planning applications for our area.

The three main points of interest were: **Climate and environment** , **Traffic Speed** and **Public Rights of Way**.

Overwhelmingly parishioners wanted to retain the rural nature of the parish.

Climate change and the environment are regular items in the Village Newsletter with information.

Water quality monitoring : Volunteers are needed to work with the West Country Rivers Trust to monitor water quality. This requires a volunteer to visit the same place on a chosen stream or river once a month to record the water quality. If you need more information please look up West Country Rivers Trust for resources. Most of our streams feed into River Fivehead or the River Parrett Orchard Portman feeds into the River Tone

Ditches and drains - the Parish Council is trying to deal with these issues now and will be working with landowners on this matter

Mount Fancy - always needs volunteers

Bumblebee group - If anyone would like to set up a group monitoring this species, Buckland St Mary has an existing experienced group.

Somerset Wildlife Group - also supports volunteers to survey wildlife.

Speaker: **John Parsons** (Parish Councillor - Finance Working Group)

John explained the rise in the precept. The precept was raised by 44% this year to accommodate the lack of funding from Somerset County.

The monies are spent on the hire of the Village Hall which is now monthly rather than bi-monthly partly due to the increasing number of planning applications in the parish which need to be reviewed within a month of submission.

The wages of the Parish Clerk.

The precept has raised 50% for the Finger Post restoration and a new defibrillator, there are also inflationary pressures.

The Community Plan raised issued the issue of ditching so the PC is trying to bring this under their control .

The raising of the Precept is to enable the funding of projects raised by the community.

Speakers: **Fiona Gledhill** and **Dave Knight** (Parish Councillors)

Staple Fitzpaine Village Gateway

There are many areas with speeding issues across our parish, at the moment the focus is on Staple Fitzpaine and there is a need to focus on one project at a time. Everything is tortuously slow when working with the Highways Department but a 30mph speed limit has been agreed.

When is it going to happen? A new contractor started in April so the new speed limit sign will be moved up the hill to where the Staple Fitzpaine village sign is.

Investigations are also being made into Staple Hill as it comes down from Castle Plain, although highways says that this section of the road is not suitable for a reduction in the speed limit. There is a need to collect and collate data and as such Fiona has set up a 'speed sheet' to record speed issues for all parishioners to use - using the 'What 3 words' application to pinpoint the area concerned.

Speaker: **Sue Hayman** (Parish Councillor)

Public Rights of Way

We have a wealth of footpaths and bridleways in our area but also many that are overgrown or obstructed. The Parish Council are in contact with the PRow department to manage some of the issues with footpaths and bridleways within our parish. The way this would work is yet to be determined and in the meantime we encourage people to report the issues they find on the Definitive Map and to the Parish Council so that a fuller picture can be formed. During summer months it would also help if walkers carried a pair of secateurs with them to cut back new encroaching growth, especially around entrances and gateways.

We would also like volunteers to work with us on replacing footpath furniture on an 'as and when' basis - so please come and join us.

Questions from Parishioners:

Q: Broadband grant - this hasn't opened up yet. Advice for when the grant is going live.

A: Sarah will look into it.

Mark has looked into the possibility of our own fibre connection, if Airband doesn't work we can look into trying it for ourselves.

Q/ Comment: Airband and BT seem to be in competition against each other

A: Ross explained that rural areas are disadvantaged with fibre installation and connection. Both Sarah and Ross have written to Rebecca Pow but have had no response. They also arranged to meet a Government Representative, who didn't turn up. There has been no information from Airband so nothing to report but this is an ongoing issue for both Sarah and Ross. The hope is that Airband does complete the contract which is with CDS (Connecting Devon and Somerset) The parishioner commented that Somerset Council should be able to manage the Broadband contract as it is 'in house'.

Q/Comment: Fed up with the situation, pain of digging up the road - commenting about the basics not anything smart. Please look into the opening up of the grant for broadband
A: Sarah will follow up.

Q/Comment: Community Partnership (getting own Broadband fibre). The quote was for £400.00 per property for 25 properties. As such it is not affordable given the distance between properties in much of our parish. The costs could be thousands of pounds and the impression was that a figure had been plucked out of the air.

A: Sarah and Mark advised parishioners to register an interest with Airband so that they are aware of you.

Q/Comment: Traveller Site at Curland, concerns and impact.

There was a lengthy discussion between some parishioners and councillors relating to the planning application 15/23/003. Parishioners were frustrated at the length of time it took to get responses from the Planning Dept. Many of the parishioners present were opposed to the potential development and asked the PC to oppose the planning application.

(At the PC meeting on the 9th April it had been unanimously agreed to oppose the application and also to send a representative to the Planning Committee Meeting, if one was called)

Sarah Wakefield has asked that this issue comes before the Planning Committee, as there has been so much local interest, rather than be dealt with by a single planning officer. She explained that parishioners would be able to attend this meeting to make their comments. However, there is a strict protocol for handling these meetings - in essence members of the public who wish to comment have a total of fifteen minutes, a maximum of five speakers with only three minutes each. Councillors also have three minutes each.

For further details: somersex.gov.uk/ Speaking at Planning Committee

Planning Department should inform all those who have submitted a comment on the portal regarding 15/23/003, as to when the Planning Committee Meeting will take place.