

SMEETH PARISH COUNCIL
MINUTES OF ANNUAL PARISH MEETING
Wednesday 11th March 2015 at 7.00pm
Brabourne Baptist Church

1. Present

Cllr Herrick (Chairman), Cllr Mrs Pereboom, Cllrs Hinchliffe, MacPhee and Plowright, and Mrs S Wood (Clerk). Cllr Howard (Borough Councillor), Cllr Wickham (County Councillor) and Mr Graham Kingston (Community Warden) were also present. Five members of the public attended.

2. Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from Cllr Thorpe (Vice-chairman), Cllr Turner, Cllr Miss Martin (Borough Councillor) and PCSO Huckstepp (PCSO).

3. Minutes of the 2014 Meeting

The Minutes of the Annual Parish Meeting held on 12th March 2014 were agreed and signed as a true record.

4. Matters Arising

4.1 Sandy Place parking Costings will be obtained and a meeting for pre-application advice will be sought. There has been, as yet, no response from the Planning Officer to a request for this meeting. Cllr Hinchliffe recommended that the planning application be submitted.

4.2 Local Needs Housing (LNH) On hold pending the outcome of sites submitted under the ongoing review of the Local Plan. Cllr Howard advised that the shortlist of sites had been published for Saxon Shore. The Clerk is to contact the Rural Housing Enabler for an update.

4.3 Localism Cllr Hinchliffe reported that three meetings had been held with ABC, which had produced a list of all services delivered by the Borough Council in the parishes after visiting the four parishes in the cluster: Smeeth, Brabourne, Mersham with Sevington and Brook. The next meeting of the working group will be held in late March; ABC has a target date of October 2015 for implementing the scheme in the cluster.

5. Chairman's report

Firstly, I should like to thank all the Councillors who have served on this Parish Council over the past 12 months. It has again been a busy year with a variety of recent initiatives being taken forward and a considerable number of ongoing issues requiring input. Special thanks must go to our Parish Clerk, Mrs Sue Wood, who works tirelessly in the background ensuring that Councillors are informed and up to date with current developments. Sue also manages the Parish Council website and responds to various day to day enquiries on our behalf.

Also having important local roles are Graham Kingston, our Community Warden, and PC Ben Huckstepp, our Police Community Support Officer, together with William Howard and Jane Martin, our Ashford Borough Council Ward Members, and Andrew Wickham, our Kent County Council Councillor, and we thank them all for their input.

In no particular order, the key issues that have received consideration during the past year include the following –

The Community Led Plan

The Local Emergency Plan

Affordable Housing

Localism

SpeedWatch

Recycling

Parking problems

Highways and Footpath problems

Planning and Development proposals

Various consultations, in particular a number relating to Policing

The Parish Council does not operate in isolation and several of these initiatives have necessitated working with Brabourne Parish Council and local residents from both Parishes and we thank them all for their input. Progress in some areas has been better than in others but I think it safe to say that we are further forward in all areas than we were this time last year.

Finally it needs to be emphasised that everything the Parish Council does is for the benefit of local residents. Their input is highly valued and their opinions sought for – please don't be afraid to come forward with complaints, comments, or suggestions. Parish Council meetings held at Brabourne Baptist Church and are open to the public. This last year has seen the inclusion of an Open Session at each meeting to allow residents to voice any queries they may have so please do not hesitate to come along – dates and times are detailed on the PC noticeboard on The Warren.

6. County Councillor's report

Cllr Wickham read an account of the services delivered by the County Council, written by another County Councillor:

"Every so often someone will complain that they receive 'nothing' or 'very little' for their council tax. A good response might be to simply list the 300+ services Kent County Council provides. Of course not everyone uses all the services – there's no compulsion to visit a library, download an e-book or visit a country park. But there are other services that everyone uses such as our roads and disposal of your waste (and paying the government landfill tax of £80 a tonne on that waste). Some services might be considered more as 'insurance' such as emergency planning, gritting the roads and provision of saltbins.

Much of Kent County Council's budget (and your council tax) is spent on school buildings and transporting children to and from school. If children are at their nearest appropriate school then KCC is obliged to pay for this but we also provide a £9m annual subsidy to make a deeply discounted bus pass available to all 11 – 16 year olds. If you don't have children you may think it unfair that you are expected to fund this through your council tax. And if you never travel by bus yourself you may baulk at the subsidy to many of the bus services. These and other transport services cost around £70m a year.

Then there are the services you would not want yourself but would surely want to see provided such as the coroner's court, trading standards, help to those fleeing domestic abuse and youngsters needing help to get off drink and drugs. Our biggest area of expenditure (over £400m) is on social care for adults – the elderly, the mentally ill, the disabled and those with learning disabilities and for children – keeping them safe from abuse, arranging adoption or care. You personally may get very little of these services but we would surely be appalled if they weren't provided.

This year our Budget Day at Kent County Council was on 12 February. It's where all 84 county councillors representing over a million people across Kent come together to debate and vote on the budget for a whole day so that a 'precept' (tax) can be set. The district/city council, Kent Police, Kent and Medway Fire Authority and the parish/town council also set their precepts and the district/city council then sends out the council tax bills on behalf of them. This year KCC agreed a rise of 1.99% (just under the referendum level) and none of the other political parties put forward amendments to vary this up or down. In my time at County Hall I have never seen anyone present an alternative budget but there's often fierce debate on the amendments and if you are interested you can watch it on www.kent.gov.uk and search for 'webcast'."

Cllr Wickham stated that if spending on road repairs were to be significantly increased the results would be obvious to council tax payers; however there would be an impact on other budgets the effect of which may be less apparent. Cllr Wickham noted that KCC has 40% less funding than when was first elected, a situation pertaining to services such as Kent Fire & Rescue.

Cllr Wickham went on to describe some matters of more direct relevance to Smeeth residents.

The proposed lorry park at Aldington is unlikely to go ahead; that at junction 11 may be expanded as part of an initiative to provide overnight lorry parking (acknowledged to be a countywide problem). Cllr Wickham noted that HGV parking is a daily problem, unlike Operation Stack. A series of lorry parks for overnight parking could be used when Operation Stack is needed.

The interactive speed sign at Smeeth School was funded from Cllr Wickham's grant. Repairs to the footway on Hythe Road between Fishers Garage and The Blue and White café are being carried out after intervention by Cllr Wickham.

KCC Member Community Grants have been given to the village hall for the kitchen refurbishment project and to Brabourne Baptist Church for repairs to the chimney stack.

In answer to a question from the floor Cllr Wickham advised that each County Councillor has a grant fund of £25,000; to apply for a grant an application form could be obtained from Annette Haigh at:

Annette.haigh@kent.gov.uk

The criterion is that the project be for the benefit of the community. Cllr Wickham noted that these grants could be used as seed-funding for new projects.

The floor welcomed repairs to the Hythe Road footway, criticism in the Letters page of the Kentish Express notwithstanding, because pedestrians had been walking in the road due to the poor state of repair of the footway. The need for maintenance was stressed to prevent encroachment by, eg overgrown hedges.

7. Borough Councillor's report

Cllr Howard stated that he works with Cllr Miss Martin to represent the parishes in Saxon Shore, and although the parish is in Ashford Borough it lies in the Parliamentary constituency of Shepway.

Cllr Howard noted that he offers advice on planning matters.

New houses have been built on Manse Field, however Cllr Howard stated that the village green had been part of the Borough Council's housing land bank but had been handed over to Brabourne Parish Council. The new homes are in Brabourne but may affect Smeeth, the homes are affordable housing for local young people.

The passing of Peter Wood was regretted, he had been an active member on behalf of Saxon Shore and promoting Ashford. The borough has received £120,000,000 for road improvements; other projects are the upgrading of Dover Place and the station forecourt. £6,650,000 has come from the private sector, eg the Designer Outlet; £4,000,000 will be spent on the expansion of the Outlet; a new Railway Museum is being created. Funding for the new college of approx £10,000,000 has been secured from the SE Enterprise Development Partnership: the site is being cleared and work will commence shortly. Students will remain at Jemmett Road until the new college is provided. It is acknowledged that this is next to the Memorial Gardens, and the area will be monitored.

The site opposite Debenhams will be redeveloped and will include an IMAX cinema, it is hoped to include a stage element.

Cllr Howard felt that Ashford has a positive future.

A discussion from the floor followed. Negative opinions of the town centre were expressed, citing the large number of empty shops and lack of variety. Cllr Howard replied that the percentage of empty shops is lower in Ashford than elsewhere; he agreed that a livelier town centre is needed – the canopy over the bandstand would partially address this. The need for the canopy was queried, and it was suggested that County Square be used instead; Cllr Howard advised that County Square is private property and cannot, therefore, be used in this way.

Cllr Howard stated that Ashford is compared unfavourably to Canterbury, but the latter Council owns a greater proportion of its High Street. Ashford Borough Council is buying properties when they become available and investing in the town centre. He acknowledged that there are differing opinions on the bandstand but private investment is based on commercial judgements, eg IMAX judged that there was capacity for another cinema but not a theatre given existing theatres in Canterbury and Tunbridge Wells. Cllr Howard agreed that improvement is needed in the town centre and investments are being made. Ashford is currently judged the 38th best place to live in the Halifax survey but it is aiming for higher.

Cllr Hinchliffe asked for an update on repairs to the shared space. Cllr Howard replied that the materials to effect repairs are being ordered; the flume is to be removed. Cllr Wickham stated that the problems were due to incorrect materials having been used, this will be addressed. The shared space was criticised from the floor and concerns re safety expressed. Cllr Howard disagreed and offered to walk the shared space with those worried about pedestrians' safety.

On another road safety issue Cllr Wickham advised that clamping of illegally and inappropriately parked HGVs is to begin in April; offending vehicles will be warned and then clamped; he stated that he had asked that vehicles parked at Smeeth crossroads be clamped. Cllr Plowright replied that the Parish Council had been advised by the Police that no action can be taken against these vehicles because the area is no longer a slip road but is now a layby and they cannot be moved on.

Cllr Hinchliffe reported the apparent lack of communication from some KCC officers; Cllr Wickham will follow this up.

8. Financial Report

The draft Statement of Accounts was circulated by the Clerk (attached).

The Clerk noted that the Reserves should include provision for the costs of a by-election or Standards Board investigation, which together total ~£6000. Parish Council reserves have been actively increased to fund capital expenditure on projects such as measures to alleviate the problems of parking in Sandy Place. The Reserves are of a similar order to those held by other Councils.

9. Any Other Business

- 9.1** Consultation on housing at Calland. Cllr Howard replied that the consultation has been completed, the Chairman noted that the Parish Council had fed back disquiet on the consultation. Cllr Howard stated that there are no detailed plans at present and therefore there is likely to be further consultation, in addition to the opportunity to comment during the planning application process. The initial consultation had been brought forward because government funding was available. Cllr Howard advised that no significant decision could be made after March because of the purdah period invoked by the elections. He noted that residents are still able to submit comments.
- 9.2** Allocation of local needs housing was queried. Cllr Howard stated that Local Needs Housing is for those with a confirmed local connection; affordable housing is allocated on a points-based system with points given for a local connection, which could be either living or working in the area.
- 9.3** Complaints re horse riding on footpaths. It was noted that horses should not be ridden on footpaths; Cllr Howard will take this up and Mr Kingston will monitor the situation and liaise with the stables.

The meeting closed at 8.35pm.
