



Meeting of the Parish Council to be held in the Village Hall, Northiam at 7.00pm, Thursday 9 December 2021

**Members of the Public and Press are welcome and encouraged to attend.
The first 15 minutes of the meeting are set aside for questions from members of the public.**

MINUTES

ATTENDEES: Cllr Paul Redstone, Cllr Martin Mooney & Cllr Paul Ganly and approx. 30 members of the public.

1) ELECTION OF A NEW CHAIR

Following the resignation of Cllr Jacqui Harding, a new Chair had to be elected as the first order of business. Cllr Wonter-Smith proposed Cllr Sue Schlesinger and Cllr Robert Maltby seconded the proposal. Cllr Dean Johnson proposed Cllr Tony Wadie and this proposal was seconded by Cllr Penny Farmer. The two candidates gave brief resumés and then members voted. Votes were tied and so Cllr Tony Biggs who presided over the meeting in his capacity as Vice-Chair had the casting vote. Cllr Sue Schlesinger was duly elected as Chair, and proceeded to sign her declaration of acceptance of office and then Chair the meeting.

2) PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Maximum of 15 minutes)

Anya Pagden wanted to ask questions on two matters: St Francis Fields (SFF) and the Paddock Development.

Firstly, she wanted to know why Northiam Parish Council (NPC) had been allowed to be publicly brought into disrepute on Facebook with regards to SFF? She said an example of this was a post at the end of November following the resignation of the previous Chair. Despite several libellous statements being made by members of the public and much gossip, this post had been allowed to remain open for comments despite being reported to page Admins of which there are 5, plus a moderator. None have replied. She therefore wonders how many have their own agendas and is shocked by the fact that two are members of the CIC, an organisation supposedly upholding the values of NPC. She also wanted to know which councillors, and how many, have been acting illegally with regards to making business plans for SFF? To her knowledge, she had only seen posts asking for public opinion, and nothing that intimated that there is anything hush-hush being surreptitiously planned. She felt that NPC should be working on behalf of the village and investigate all income streams possible, but didn't feel that this was possible without putting something in the public domain to gauge interest.

Secondly, on the Paddock Development. She understood that the site has been sold under the 106 agreement on the previous application which says that Hanover Homes are no longer the owners. Does this mean that Optivo have taken on the site? Is this with the intention of replicating what has happened in Westfield in cahoots with Rother DC? She has a friend from Westfield who informed her what happened there and how the Parish Council in Westfield had been duped into having the site changed, after signing their 106 agreement stating that 40% would be affordable housing. The previous applicant had stated that "it was

not financially viable to provide 40% affordable” and so RDC had agreed to only 11%. How can Optivo suddenly make the whole site at The Paddock 100% affordable – how can they afford to do that if 40% wasn't viable?

She then went on to state that she didn't believe any of the affordable housing will be available to Northiam residents in the same way as previous housing on the Donsmead estate. Equally none of the remaining 60% of council houses will be for sale on the open market. This will enable RDC to empty their B&Bs and relocate tenants far from Bexhill. Having looked earlier today, there was still nothing on RDC's website stating Optivo's intentions. Even if a document stating the affordable situation was published today, it would only give the public 14 days consultation period, instead of the required 28 days consultation. She believes that Optivo and RDC are keeping the 100% situation very quiet in order not to alert the public. Optivo are renowned within the council properties that they already manage in Northiam as being uninterested in the managing and policing of their residents and properties to the detriment of other residents within their sites and the larger community of Northiam as a whole. She summarised by stating that the lack of amenities, minimal employment, no public transport and no police presence anywhere nearby would make the village attractive to criminal gangs who will be at liberty to recruit bored teenagers and could promote criminal activity similar to those 'County Lines' gangs seen in the national media.

She felt that this development is definitely NOT sustainable and should be refused. The Chair thanked her for her questions and contributions.

Trevor Gilbert (TG) who had previously submitted his questions for consideration by the Parish Council (see separate attachment) then took the microphone. He began by stating that he had made a request under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 for copies of correspondence between councillors and members of the CIC in respect of SFF. He added that in his opinion, the council could save themselves embarrassment if they were open & transparent and followed certain guidance & procedures. He asked if any business had been conducted outside official channels. Cllr Schlesinger (SS) said the council would identify the best options for SFF from the CIC report and the report by Batcheller Monkhouse (BM). Cllr Biggs (TB) said that there were several options on the table, but until the change of use had been received from Rother, discussions were on hold. The Clerk confirmed that this had been requested on Tuesday 7th December.

Cllr Maltby (RM) stated that there was a plan for the whole of SFF, and not just the stables. TG recognised the good work done so far and reiterated that the equestrian side of things needed transparency & due diligence. He further asked if there was a tool kit from RDC to ensure the right processes are being followed.

Cllr Streatfeild (JS) stated that the BM advice says that the current situation is unsustainable as there is not enough land for the number of horses. The land can generate around £25k. If the current tenant can provide that income, they are at liberty to reapply but that the community aspect must be respected.

Paloma Alos then commented that when SFF had been bought she had had high hopes that it would be something positive for the community. Serving drinks at the Pop Up Pub was a wonderful experience & she felt very disappointed when observing the personal attacks tonight.

Dean Morris asked why a change of use was required and how was this missed? He felt that if the Council is doing things like that, how can the village have confidence in them?

Judith O'Connor from the CIC explained that whilst they were aware that change of use was required, Rother's planning department had completely collapsed during the pandemic and it has taken 12 months to get change of use for the bungalows through the system. RDC hasn't had sufficient resources.

Someone suggested a public meeting for all villagers to discuss the options of the stables.

TG asked if after the resignation of 2 chairmen what is the PC doing about such toxicity? SS said it is disappointing but hopes that things will get sorted out. TB explained that a 9th councillor is needed and then as reasonable and responsible adults, everyone can sit down and address issues in an open, honest & transparent way and that those meeting would be minuted and available to the public.

TG asked again how the village can have confidence and how the change of use issue was missed?

TB stated that the interim clerk had picked up certain points and admitted the Council has failed on certain points. However, the Council is trying to move forward & rectify things.

JS stated for the record that councillors are not allowed to have a business relationship with the council & therefore as an individual he cannot set up DIY livery.

Cllr Martin Mooney asked if there is a disciplinary process in place? The Clerk confirmed that there has not been a written complaint to the Council against a councillor. The Monitoring Officer has been involved in a complaint about one councillor made by another councillor.

Lauren Sapstead said that she has made a formal complaint to Rother DC about one councillor.

- 3) APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE:** None were received – Cllrs Farmer, Johnson, Maltby, Biggs, Wadie, Streatfeild, Schlesinger & Wontner-Smith were present.

4) DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllrs Farmer & Streatfeild declared a personal interest in Item 13 a (ii) under the Code of Members Conduct.

5) MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF 11 November 2021

The minutes of the meeting of Northiam Parish Council held on 11 November 2021 (appendix 1) and the additional Planning Meeting held on 30th November 2021 (appendix 2) were approved by all members as true & correct records of the proceedings and were duly signed.

6) MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

- Cllr Mooney was still awaiting a copy of the Tree Survey – the Clerk agreed to send this to him.
- The road signage re-painting outside the football fields cannot be carried out at this time of year, but will be looked at again in the Spring.
- Quotes for the tree surgery work are being collated after visits made with contractors by Cllr Biggs.

7) REPORTS BY PARISH, COUNTY & DISTRICT COUNCILLORS

(a) District Councillor Martin Mooney had previously submitted a report from Rother (appendix 4)

(b) District Councillor Tony Ganly

(c) County Councillor Paul Redstone had previously submitted a report from East Sussex (appendix 5)

Cllr Maltby asked about funding for pavements as they are in an atrocious state in places. Cllr Redstone said that it is best to report specific issues on pavements on the website. Prioritisation is by certain criteria and works are undertaken in a certain order. Cllr Farmer said there used to be an annual Highways meeting in the village where certain issues could be pointed out. Cllr Redstone suggested that NPC makes a request for a Strengthening Local Relationships (SLR) meeting with Highways to reinstate a physical meeting.

ACTION: The Clerk to arrange an SLR meeting & copy in Cllr Redstone

8) PRESENTATION BY CIC ON ST FRANCIS FIELDS

Judith O'Connor made a presentation to summarise the purpose of the CIC and progress so far. She began by recapping: that St Francis Fields (SFF) was purchased 2 years ago to prevent large scale housing with a 50-year loan of £1.4m costing £75k per annum. This cost is covered by the additional £50k precept and rental income from the bungalows & stables. The precept is paid by householders as part of the Council Tax bill. For a Band D property, £3.58 per month increase is the part attributable to the additional precept. If the rental income is maintained, the cost to householders will reduce over time.

The Parish Council (PC) doesn't have the General Power of Competence to allow them to run things themselves and so a Community Interest Company (CIC) had to be set up to manage SFF on behalf of the PC as Managing Agents. As a business with social objectives, any surpluses are reinvested, not distributed to shareholders. The legal process to set this up was not straightforward and the CIC has only been in existence since May '21. There are 6 directors appointed from people who put their names forward last year and had relevant experience. Next year there will be an opportunity for more people with relevant skills or experience to contribute to join the CIC who will then have voting rights at the AGM.

Meanwhile a volunteer team have dealt with various issues to improve the conditions at SFF where very limited maintenance work had been carried out in the latter years of the Blue Cross. Works included tree and ground clearance work, electrical work, a rat problem, a site survey regarding flooding and the oast cowl which needed to be made safe as a matter of urgency. Adding to this the team who helped to run the Pop-Up Pub (PuP), and there is a total of 40 volunteers. Like other clubs & societies run by volunteers, the aim is to make the village a better place. The CIC identified the most urgent works & despite volunteers will need grant funding before it becomes self-funded.

The PC receives the income from the stables & bungalows (see above). The agreement states that other income generated goes to the CIC to be re-invested. The income from other streams such as storage, grazing, the PuP will be used as evidence for match funding. At Open Days, villagers put forward proposals and a pub was the number one request. Also, one field to be earmarked as a burial ground.

There is a need to improve the facilities in order to open more frequently next year including creating a disabled WC and a new kitchen which would also allow for a café on site. Good progress has been made in researching & costing other proposed ventures such as woodland management, a fitness trail, art exhibitions & craft fairs and a dog exercise area. But all future plans are now awaiting the necessary change of use status from Rother's planning department. The current status is still for an animal rescue centre.

At the stables, the current tenancy expires in May '22. A councillor made a request for DIY livery to be considered and the CIC's report provided to NPC in October includes advice from Batcheller Monkhouse on various options. Again change of use is required for livery. Judith O'Connor finished by saying that the first quarterly report was given to the NPC in October but this is not on the website so if anyone would like to see a copy, they can email a request. The email address can be found in the Parish Magazine, on the village website and on the noticeboards at the entrance to SFF.

9) ELECTION OF CIC LIAISON COMMITTEE AND NEW TERMS OF REFERENCE

Cllr Schlesinger put herself forward as the new Chair to be on the CIC Liaison Committee, and Cllrs Biggs and Wadie also put themselves forward. There were no other offers to join the committee so these three councillors now make up the sub-committee who will liaise with the CIC. Terms of reference will be proposed at the next meeting of the Parish Council in January for full council approval.

10) STABLES AT ST FRANCIS FIELDS

To vote on the future use of the stables at St Francis Fields – this item is deferred until such a time when the change of use has been confirmed by Rother’s Planning Department.

11) UPDATE ON COUNCILLOR VACANCY

The Clerk provided an update and clarification on the procedure regarding the Councillor vacancy. The vacancy advertisement is currently being advertised at Rother DC, and in the Parish Office and on the village noticeboards. The deadline to request an election is Wednesday 22nd December. Thereafter, if there are fewer than 10 requests, the Council follows the process of co-option to approve a new councillor. This is more akin to a job interview, with applicants putting themselves forward and explaining their credentials, and councillors voting to approve the new member.

12) FINANCES

- a) Budget setting. The first draft of the budget for the year 2022/’23 for discussion. Cllr Farmer suggested that an informal meeting of the Financial Advisory Group (FAG) sub-committee meet between Christmas and the New Year to discuss budget proposals in order to prepare the final draft of the budget for 2022/23 for approval at the January meeting of the Parish Council. The Clerk confirmed that this would be arranged.
- b) The payment report for December 2021 (appendix 6) was received and the cheques duly signed.
- c) The most recent bank reconciliation was received (appendix 7) and approved.
- d) The engagement of a new auditor for the year end audit in May 2022 was approved and the Clerk was asked to make the necessary arrangements with Mulberry & Co and instruct them to conduct a mid-year audit.

13) PLANNING:**a) New Applications**

- i) RR/2021/2840/L - Domons, Higham Lane, Northiam TN31 6JT

Proposal: Removal of CI post within kitchen. Strengthening and support to existing beam. Replacement of defective beam.

And RR/2021/2839/L – Replacement of window W2 (first floor, south elevation)

Councillors had no objections to these listed building consent applications.

Action: The Clerk to submit comments online through Rother’s Planning portal.

- ii) RR/2021/2743/P – Goddens Gill, land at Northiam

Proposal: Variation of condition 2 imposed on RR/2019/2738/P to allow amended layout, elevational treatment and mix.

Cllr Schlesinger read from some prepared suggested comments (see separate attachment).

Cllr Redstone suggested that the PC get in contact with Westfield PC’s Clerk & Chair. The Clerk confirmed that collaboration had already taken place and a letter was being drafted to be sent to Rother’s Planning Department, copying in county & District councillors and the local MP.

Action: The Clerk to submit an objection online and send a letter stating the reasons to RDC planning department and other parties as stated above.

14) VILLAGE MATTERS:

- i) Playground – an update on the insurance claim.
 Cllr Johnson had chased Jill Watson's quote for repairs to the playground slide and was meeting Alex Palmer the following day for a third quote. The approximate cost is estimated at £22,000. Cllr Farmer said that she had talked to Matt Chapman about finger-printing and despite certain names being put forward, nothing's been done.
 Cllr Biggs adding to her comments following his conversation with the police who said that they are not prepared to carry out forensic testing because the fire brigade won't confirm that the canister was the cause of the fire. Speaking to Battle Police Station, they explained that they are reluctant to act on names which have been put forward as insufficient evidence.
 Cllr Biggs further explained that the cost of insurance has risen by £1500 which could cause a knock-on increase to the precept. The youths that are mucking up the playground cause a direct increase in residents' council tax bills. Items in the playground are costly – the strip of land underneath the zip wire was re-surfaced at a cost of approximately £3k; the roundabout repairs cost approximately £8k. 25% of the budget is spent on the playground. Therefore, if anyone knows anything, they need to come forward and then the police can act. Cllr Farmer reiterated that she was very angry about the situation.
- ii) Councillors Reports. Cllrs Farmer and Johnson had already reported on the playground. Nothing further to add.
 Cllr Maltby reported that despite the gales on Tuesday night, the Christmas tree was up and the lights turned on. However, the usual nibbles had been cancelled, but would hopefully be reinstated next year.
 Cllr Biggs reported that the volunteers were still doing an amazing job in the cemetery. However, more volunteers would be very welcome especially those with battery operated mowers. Ideally, they would each be assigned a 20ft square to mow.
 S106 monies of £50k have been requested from Rother which once received will allow necessary surveying works to begin on the new burial ground.
 Requests have been made, and visits carried out in order to obtain three quotes for the tree surgery marked as High Priority in the Tree Survey.
 The process to open a new bank account to separate the precept into accounts for the village and the SFF Loan Account is underway and a meeting is scheduled on 10th January with Barclays.
 He also thanked Cllr Schlesinger & other volunteers for organising the Christmas tree & lights.
 Finally, Cllr Biggs stated that he had attended a meeting at the village school which becomes an academy in January. This should give them more purchasing power and hopefully attract more pupils.
 Cllr Streatfeild nothing further to report.
 Cllr Wadie also felt that pavements were in need of improvement, but had nothing further to report.
 Cllr Wontner-Smith nothing further to report.

Meeting closed 8.35pm

