

## **BELCHAMP ST PAUL AND BELCHAMP OTTEN PARISH COUNCIL**

Minutes of the Belchamp St Paul Annual Parish Assembly held on Tuesday 9 April 2024  
at 7.30pm at The Community House, Gages Road, Belchamp St Paul

**Present:** Councillors Sarah Mardon (Acting Chair), Ruth Carter, Dominic Curran and David Middleditch plus Cllr Holly Chaplin (Chair of PFMC), County Councillor Peter Schwier (left after Item 5), District Councillor Iona Parker (left after Item 5) and three members of the public. In attendance: Diane Smith (Clerk) and John Douglass (newly appointed Clerk).

### **1. Welcome and Apologies for Absence**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked them for attending. She then introduced the Councillors present. Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors David McKee (PC Chairman) and Robin Lock, Tree Warden John Pheby and Emergency Officer/Footpath Warden Peter Hesketh. The Chair reported that Cllr Harvey Bamford had resigned from the PC a few days previously because he was moving away from the village.

### **2. Consideration of the Minutes of the APA held on 4 April 2023**

The Minutes of the 2023 APA were approved and were signed by the Chair.

### **3. Matters arising from the 2023 APA meeting**

**a) The Cherry Tree, Knowl Green - Planning history (Item 3a)** – It was noted that no further applications had been submitted relating to this property, in the last year.

It was agreed to consider the Reports from the County and District Councillors at this point in the meeting because of their respective busy schedules.

### **4. Essex County Council Report (County Councillor Peter Schwier)**

County Cllr Peter Schwier reminded everyone present that his full 2023-24 Annual Report was available on the PC website along with a special Annual Report booklet, produced by ECC, using graphics to impart a large quantity of data and information in a more easily readable format. He did, however, wish to highlight a few important points: ECC will have a proposed gross spend of £2.5bn in 2024-25, an increase of £55m on 2023-24: The ECC element of Council Tax in 2024-25 will be increased by 2.99% plus the social care precept by 2% (an increase of £72 per year per Band D household). Among comparable councils, it is still one of the lowest council tax rates in the country: £496m will be spent on providing long term support and social care, which includes £207m on people aged 65+ and £289m on working aged adults: The County Councillor Locality Fund grant scheme had supported 6 local parish projects during 2023-24, with grants of between £400 and £2500 being approved.

County Cllr Peter Schwier stated that it continued to be a pleasure and privilege to serve the residents of all the villages within the Heddingham Division and he looked forward to continuing to do so. He then invited questions and responded to queries relating to the following matters: The role/responsibilities of a PC Emergency Officer? - He saw this role as collating data on contact details for local bodies who may be required in an emergency situation (Doctors, Vets, Environment Agency, Floodline, ECC Emergency Helpline etc) but advised the PC to seek more information from the EALC: Provision of local First Aid training? - The PC had investigated the cost of running a First Aid course and found it prohibitive. Such training would benefit residents who might need to use the defibrillators provided in the villages and also members of the P3 Footpath Group, where First Aider's are required within every working group. He suggested that the PC apply for a County Councillor Locality Fund grant to enable them to run a First Aid course that would meet both these needs.

The Chair thanked County Cllr Peter Schwier for his attendance, his report and for his work on behalf of residents throughout the year.

## **5. Braintree District Council Report (District Councillor Iona Parker)**

It was noted that District Cllr Iona Parker's full Report was available on the PC website. She did however highlight the following topics: The BDC Budget for 2024-25 will be £19.6m: Although there remains a forecast deficit of £2.3m over the medium term (to 2028) BDC are looking at ways to address this and the Council remains in a sound financial position: The BDC element of Council Tax will be increasing by 2.96% in 2024-25 which represents an increase of 11p per week for a Band D property: The Councillor Community Grant Scheme will continue with each District Councillor having £1250 to award to local projects in their ward: Street Cleaning Grants to Parish Council's will continue: The BDC garden waste subscription service has proved more popular than anticipated, with a take up of over 50% bringing in an income of around £900k: The Council is looking to charge a Council Tax premium of 100% on second homes in the District from 1 April 2025: BDC will soon be revising their Local Plan to ensure that it is kept up to date: The provision of a new Doctor's Surgery in Sible Hedingham is moving forward and building work should commence shortly: Despite opposition from BDC, Wethersfield former airbase is now being used to accommodate asylum seekers and the previous prison proposals for the site remain 'on hold' in the background.

District Cllr Parker then invited questions and responded to queries relating to the following matters: Government New Homes Bonus – This should be spent on areas where new houses have been built: Recent 'Empty Homes' policy – What constitutes an “empty home”? BDC is developing this policy and more information will be provided in due course, but properties subject to probate are expected to be excluded from the proposal: Use of Wethersfield former airbase for asylum seekers – It was suggested that a direct bus service to larger towns (i.e. Colchester) should be considered. It was noted that BDC receive funding (based on the number of beds) towards providing services (such as waste collection) to the site: What plans did BDC have to control the forecasted medium term financial deficit? BDC were rationalising their use of buildings (less office space required post Covid), sharing IT and Payroll systems with other Councils to reduce costs and drafting a strategy on Assets/ Investment Development to focus on local buildings and facilities. The Chair wished to record her thanks to District Cllr Iona Parker for her attendance, her report and her work on behalf of residents throughout the year.

County Councillor Peter Schwier and District Councillor Iona Parker left the meeting.

## **6. Annual Reports**

### **6.1 Chairman's Report (Read by the Acting Chair Sarah Mardon)**

In the absence of the PC Chairman, it falls to me to read out this report on the work of the Parish Council over the past year.

At the PC elections in May 2023 a total of 6 Councillors were elected to represent Belchamp St Paul. The remaining vacant seat was subsequently filled in September 2023 by Dominic Curran and we welcome him to the PC. In the last few weeks 2 Councillors have, however, resigned and I'd like to take this opportunity to thank John Pheby and Harvey Bamford for the significant contributions that they have both made to the community during their terms of office. This will also be one of the last meetings for our Clerk, Diane Smith who is retiring in the next few weeks. Her experience has been invaluable to us for the last 9 years and we wish her well. I am pleased to say that John Douglass from Bakers Road has been appointed as our new Clerk and we welcome John to the Council.

The PC continues to undertake its regular but diverse work on behalf of parishioners. This includes - managing the defibrillator outside The Community House: reporting potholes, signage and vegetation problems to ECC Highways: providing a Christmas Tree on Cole Green: cutting local roadside grass verges: overseeing the local Speedwatch Group and also the local Parish Paths Partnership (P3) Group. The Speedwatch Group has now resumed regular monitoring sessions under a new co-ordinator, Cllr Dominic Curran, and he is seeking more volunteers to enable additional sessions to take place. Please speak to the Clerk if you are interested in joining the Group.

One of the most important functions of the PC is to consider all local planning applications submitted to BDC, and comment as appropriate. This last year has been dominated by the Solar Farm application off Bakers Road, BSP. The PC held a public meeting in August 2023 to discuss the application and this was attended by

88 Local residents. A subsequent survey of all residents showed that 75% of the 130 who voted, opposed the solar farm development. The PC reflected the public vote and formally submitted detailed objections to BDC. The planning process has been prolonged and is still continuing, with a re-consultation being undertaken by BDC in early 2024. The PC have submitted multiple additional comments at every stage and continue to monitor the situation.

As well as the regular work of the PC, individual projects in the last year include the Local Development Code (formerly known as the Village Design Statement) for both villages, which is progressing well. This will enable the views of local residents to be recorded, and once the document is adopted it will form part of Planning Guidance within the BDC planning process. The Working Group held 2 exhibitions in Autumn 2023 to obtain input from residents. Having analysed the responses, a survey based on the information provided at the exhibitions, will be delivered to every house during the next few weeks. Please take the time to complete and return the survey and let us have your views. You can opt to be entered into a Prize Draw at the same time.

I am pleased to report that the long-standing problem of a dangerously parked car on the Otten Road/ Church Street junction has been resolved as the owner of the car has moved away from the village. However despite continual pressure from the PC the defibrillator outside The Community House remains out of service because the East of England Ambulance Service are unable to source a new battery for the device. The Chairman wishes to thank all Councillors for their enthusiasm and commitment to Council matters over the last year and also thank Diane Smith (Clerk) and Cllr Tony Money (RFO) for continuing to complete the administrative work of the Council so capably. Tony is stepping down from the RFO role, which he has filled so ably for many years. However Cllr Holly Chaplin has kindly volunteered to take over the RFO role and Tony will continue to be involved in PC matters as a councillor.

Finally the Chairman expresses his thanks to County Councillor Peter Schwier and District Councillor Iona Parker for both taking such a keen interest in the PC and providing regular updates on ECC and BDC matters. Those present wished to record their thanks to PC Chairman David McKee and all the Belchamp St Paul Parish Councillors for their work on behalf of the Council throughout the year.

### **6.2. Footpath Warden's Report (Peter Hesketh – Read by the Clerk)**

Peter Hesketh reported that the most significant change during the last year was the provision of a brushcutter, from ECC, and the training of 3 volunteers to operate it. Since August 2023 approximately 1500 metres of footpath have been strimmed and the P3 Group will continue to make good use of the new machine. However, please note, that it is unrealistic to expect 3 part time volunteers to strim all the footpaths in the two parishes each season, so problem areas will be prioritised and we will do what we can. One of the 'lost' footpaths on Belchamp Otten's patch was mentioned in last year's report. This required a bridge to span a deep, overgrown ditch to enable walkers to use the full length of the path. The ditch has since been installed by ECC and has opened up this part of the network which has been inaccessible for a considerable time. In January a proposal was submitted to Essex to replace the footbridge on FP14 in Belchamp Otten which runs at right angles from Gages Road, alongside Lamberts Farm. At this point I am adding something to Peter's report, because approval of the works was received just a couple of days ago. Peter will be asking for volunteers to construct the new bridge shortly. Peter also has a list of replacement waymarker posts that need attention and he will be working through that list in the coming weeks. Those present wished to record their thanks to Peter Hesketh for all his work organising the P3 Group during the last year.

### **6.3 Tree Warden's Report (John Pheby – Read by the Clerk)**

John Pheby wished to report that the 3 trees planted on Cole Green 2 years ago are progressing nicely. The Flowering Cherry had a display of blossom this Spring and the 2 Horse Chestnuts are breaking out into leaf. As stated last year the remaining mature Horse Chestnut trees on Cole Green still need close monitoring because of the fungal disease which is affecting many of them to a greater or lesser extent. It is good to report that no further mature trees have been lost in the last year.

Those present wished to record their thanks to John Pheby for continuing to keep a close watch on the trees in BSP during the last year.

#### **6.4 Emergency Officer's Report (Peter Hesketh – Read by the Clerk)**

Peter Hesketh is pleased to report that there hasn't been a need for the Emergency Officer to be mobilised in the last 12 months. The role of Emergency Officer could involve much deliberating, planning and head scratching to decide what emergency could be imagined, then what the response should be and the tools and equipment necessary to deal with it. However, it must be remembered that should the emergency be serious, our role as 'locals' will be to assist the powers at BDC, ECC and the Emergency Services.

Consequently, most of the planning is probably better left to the event itself when a more accurate assessment can be made of the situation and how we can assist. I have submitted a list of buildings in the Parishes that could potentially be used in an emergency but here again, the requirements, including the scale of the problem, wouldn't be known until it happens.

Those present wished to record their thanks to Peter Hesketh for continuing to fulfil the Emergency Officer role during the last year.

#### **6.5 Playing Field Management Committee Report (Cllr Holly Chaplin)**

Cllr Holly Chaplin reported that the PFMC now received income from BSP Rounders Team and AFC Sudbury who were regularly hiring the Playing Field, which helped cover day to day running expenses. The PFMC also wished to express their gratitude to the Fete Committee and volunteers, who donated £1047 of the profit from the 2023 Fete to the PFMC.

This year 'Open Park Day' was extremely successful with lots of people coming out with their tools and paintbrushes. The pavilion received some much needed TLC with a new coat of paint and a few minor window repairs. The play equipment was repaired and rejuvenated with paint and wood preserver and many of the points raised on the Wicksteed inspection have now been addressed, although there is more to be done. A huge thank you again to everyone who gave up their time and came out to help.

The Playing Field boundary was also pruned and cut back and where machinery was required this work was done at a hugely reduced cost for which we are very thankful. A small volunteer working party now keep the grass cut around the play equipment and we express our thanks to them and also to Fred Eady who maintains the grassed area and generally tidies up. The next Wicksteed inspection is due in May.

Notable expenditure in 2023-24 included £128 on the tractor and £1463 on Grounds and Equipment maintenance (cutting back the boundaries and on paint, wood etc for play equipment repairs – see above).

The following events are planned: Village Fete on 2 June (Proceeds split equally between the PFMC and PCC), Open Park Day and Autumn Harvest Festival in September (TBC). Other ideas such as Car Boot sales are also being discussed.

The pavilion has had some TLC this year so is not an immediate cause for concern but a decision on its future viability will need to be taken at some stage by the PC.

The Chair thanked Cllr Holly Chaplin for attending the meeting, for her Report and for all her work on the PFMC in the last year.

### **7. Public Forum -**

**7.1 Footpaths** - A member of the public wished to record their thanks to Peter Hesketh, Footpath Warden for all the local Waymarker signs which make the footpaths a pleasure to walk. They also queried where they could find details of the local Footpath numbers for use when reporting any problems. Both the Clerk and the Footpath Warden hold master copies of the Footpath Definitive Maps for BSP and Belchamp Otten and these can also be found in an interactive form on the ECC website. It was agreed to include a link on the PC website, to the interactive version of the Definitive Maps.

**7.2 Unauthorised tree work undertaken in Gages Road** - The Chairman had received complaints from residents about a roadside tree in Gages Road which had been extensively cut back by a nearby householder. The tree had been planted by the PC some years ago and the works were so extensive that the shape of the tree had been destroyed. It was agreed that the Clerk would write to the householder pointing out that the tree belonged to the PC and that no works should be undertaken to it without obtaining prior permission.

Everyone present wished to record their thanks to Cllr Sarah Mardon for undertaking the role of Chair for the meeting.

The meeting closed at 8.34pm.

Signed: ..... (Chairman)      April 2025