

BELCHAMP ST PAUL AND BELCHAMP OTTEN PARISH COUNCIL

Minutes of the Belchamp Otten Annual Parish Assembly held on Monday 8 April 2024
at 7.30pm at The Red Lion, Fowes Lane, Belchamp Otten

Present: Councillors Sarah Mardon (Acting Chair), Holly Chaplin, Tony Money, and Hannah Rumsey. County Councillor Peter Schwier (entered during Item 4.4 and left after Item 5) and one member of the public were also present. In attendance: Diane Smith (Clerk) and John Douglass (newly appointed Clerk).

1. Welcome and Apologies for Absence

The Chair welcomed everyone and thanked them for attending. The Chair then introduced the Councillors present. Apologies had been received from PC Chairman David McKee, District Councillor Iona Parker, Tree Warden John Pheby and Emergency Officer/Footpath Warden Peter Hesketh.

The Chair was sad to report the recent death of former Parish Councillor Stephen Nice. Stephen Nice had represented Belchamp Otten on the PC for many years and had made a significant contribution to the two villages during that time. Everyone present wished to record their condolences to his wife and family.

2. Consideration of the Minutes of the APA held on 3 April 2023

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

3. Matters arising from the 2023 APA meeting

- a) Land Registry application for Title Absolute for Churchyard Green at Belchamp Otten (Item 6.1) – The application had been submitted in April 2023 but a decision was still awaited from the Land Registry.
- b) Free Tree Scheme (Item 6.3) – The PC considered making an application for 105 whips but concluded that no suitable site(s) could be identified at that time.

4. Annual Reports

4.1 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.

Following the PC elections in May 2023 we had a full complement of 4 Councillors to represent Belchamp Otten and I'm delighted to see them all here tonight, including Holly Chaplin our newest Councillor. This will however 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 BSP 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 in the former Telephone Box in The Street: 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 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. Thank you to all local residents who have engaged in this process.

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.

Two other individual issues in Belchamp Otten, which the PC have addressed this year, are firstly the prolonged problem of a dangerously parked car on the Otten Road/ Church Street junction. This has however now resolved itself as the owner of the car has moved away from the village. The second problem is the felling of a TPO protected tree in Fowes Lane. BDC have been unable to identify who was responsible for cutting the tree down and/or who is the recorded landowner. If you can provide this information to the PC please get in touch with the Clerk.

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.

Thanks must go to our Belchamp Otten Litter Picker, Fred Eady who continues to keep the village looking at its best and also to County Councillor Peter Schwier and District Councillor Iona Parker for 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 Otten Parish Councillors for their work on behalf of the Council throughout the year.

4.2. 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.

4.3 Tree Warden's Report (John Pheby – Read by the Clerk)

The Chairman's Report has already covered the felled TPO tree in Fowes Lane. John Pheby would like 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 watching because of the disease that they have but 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 both our villages during the last year.

4.4 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.

5. 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. However, he wished to highlight the availability of graphic sheets which have been produced to depict the key services that ECC provide and the work that they undertake. A selection of the sheets were circulated and it was agreed that they imparted the information in an easily understood format. County Cllr Peter Schwier stated that it continued to be a pleasure and privilege to serve the residents of all the villages within the Hedingham Division and he looked forward to continuing to do so. He then invited questions and responded to queries relating to the following matters: Potholes – Many potholes occur because of excess water on the roads. If ditches were cleared more frequently this could help the situation? County Cllr Schwier agreed with this view but pointed out that most roadside ditches belong to the relevant adjacent landowners and not to ECC so their ability to address this solution is limited. The Chair thanked County Cllr Peter Schwier for his attendance, his report and for his work throughout the year. County Councillor Schwier left the meeting.

6. Braintree District Council Report (District Councillor Iona Parker – Read by the Clerk)

District Cllr Iona Parker’s full Report was available on the PC website. The Clerk 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% 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 Cleansing 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 achievements in the last year include the adoption of an Empty Homes Strategy (to bring empty properties back into the market), the launch of a Small Grants Scheme (to provide funding of up to £10,000 to start or enhance community projects that support local residents with the cost of living) and the delivery of 329 Affordable Homes (target had been 250) for rent or shared ownership through Housing Associations. The Chair wished to record their thanks to District Cllr Iona Parker for her report and her work throughout the year.

7. Public Forum - Overflowing ditch in Fowes Lane – It was agreed that the PC would chase BDC for an update on their investigations into this problem. Previous works seemed to have improved the problem but the flooding of the road has now recurred. Everyone present wished to record their thanks to Cllr Sarah Mardon for taking on the role of Chair for the meeting.

The meeting closed at 8.18pm.

Signed: (Chairman) April 2025