

# MINUTES OF THE WHATFIELD PARISH COUNCIL MEETING HELD AT WHATFIELD VILLAGE HALL 17<sup>th</sup> January 2024

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## Present

Mr. D. Cross	Vice Chairman
Mr. G. Smith	Parish Councillor
Mr. D. Dray	Parish Councillor
Mr R, Searl	Parish Councillor
Mrs J Harris	Parish Councillor
Mr S Clifford	Parish Councillor
Mr R Lindsay	County Councillor
Mr. L. Jameson	District Councillor
Mrs. L. King	Parish Clerk

## 1, Apologies for Absence

Mr. P. Whittle	Chairman
Sarah Eastman	Conservation Warden
Mrs J. Green	Tree Warden

2. Matters arising from Minutes of meeting held 29<sup>th</sup> November 2023 Minutes of 29<sup>th</sup> November 2023 meeting were accepted and signed. . Prop Roy Searl Sec: David Dray Unanimous

3. Correspondence . The Clerk has contacted Babergh Council arranged for the Playground litter bin to be emptied.

## 4. County Councillor's Report Gritting and Aldham road closure

Highways has agreed my request to grit the detoured school bus route between Whatfield and Elmsett. Because the school bus is going five days a week on this route, (following the road closure) it meets the criteria highways set for gritting. Highways have agreed to put this on their gritting route at least for the duration of the Aldham road closure.

The closure is likely to last many months, and possibly well over a year. I have asked repeatedly for timetable for the work but Highways are unable to give me one. There are in total about six roads across Suffolk that have collapsed similarly to Aldham owing to the storms.

Since the road is being undermined by a very deep waterway alongside it, it will need to be shored up and the waterway either piped or channelled in some way. Milestone, SCC's Highways maintenance contractor, have been commissioned to investigate what exactly is the best way to fix it and then a platform will need to be designed to ensure work can be safely carried out on a road that is collapsing several metres into a field below it.

## Overgang Ford

I have forwarded to your clerk the suggestions from Highways about signage improvements at the ford.

County councillors were recently given a special locality fund which allows us up to £3k over the remaining 1 and half years of my term but it must be spent on **replacement signs only**, not new, so I have said I will pay from that fund for the replacement of the damaged ford sign on the Whatfield side of the ford.

However I don't have any money in my discretionary budget for the extra, new signs that have been suggested.

There is no room, I have been told, on Overgang Road and Ash Street Road for extra signage further from the ford.

I have asked for a costing for the measures that have been suggested by Highways. It is up to Semer and Whatfield PCs whether you want to stump up for them. In terms of the cost effectiveness of funding these signs, personally I am not convinced that extra signage telling people it is a ford would make much of a difference to the outcome.

People must be aware that they are entering a ford, or a flood at any rate. There is a footbridge over the ford - which indicates it is a ford, and a gauge which indicates that it is a ford. It's hard to avoid the conclusion that people are knowingly taking a decision to risk it, (and then failing to read the gauge), rather than turn around and drive back the way they came.

## New bus services?

I am told that parish councils that have expressed interest in new or improved bus services will be told whether they have succeeded by the end of this week. There have been several different bids gone in from several parishes in the Cosford division, including two for daily services between Hadleigh and Stowmarket which I presume would include Whatfield and Elmsett as the current 461/462 does.

## County Budget proposes £64m budget cuts over 2 years

The complete axing of £535k funding for arts and museums has attracted the headlines and will impact places like Theatre Royal Bury St Edmunds. It will also impact vulnerable elderly and children from across the county who are supported by groups like Suffolk Artslink and Dance East, Food Museum.

Other cuts:

£11m staffing costs, initially by not replacing vacancies.

The county is taking £16m from reserves and £2.2m from risk reserve. There is a warning in the papers that the remaining £20m in risk reserve is now below the level need to provide full confidence that the council's financial risk.

The biggest cuts are in Adult and Community Services where they are proposing cutting £28m next year, £15m more than planned.

There are warnings from officers in the papers that the cuts for adult care "may result in an increase in customer complaints".

The county is also cutting all funding for skills development and **apprenticeship** programs. It warns that this means it is likely that the number of young people in Suffolk not in education, employment or training will rise as a result.

The programme to **decarbonize and retrofit school buildings to meet zero carbon targets is being stopped** from the end of this financial year. £3.57m will have been spent on this in the current year.

Over two years £3m will be cut from the £5m **Housing Related Support** budget which enables vulnerable people to live independently and helps stave off homelessness. The council papers say costs will be "rebalanced" which I assume means making the district councils take up the burden.

Former Children's Centres, now called **Family Hubs**, will be "redesigned" in an unspecified way following a public consultation next financial year to save £700k.

## 5. District Councillor's Report

The Councils biggest challenge over the next two months will be delivering a balanced budget for 24/25 and beyond. Finances are tough, the council have been hit by inflation, pay rises and lack of major development across the district. At the moment this leaves a budget deficit for 23/24 of £1.8M, and this is with increases in Council Tax of 2.99% and in existing fees and charges taken into account. It is therefore falling on councillors to make some difficult decisions will therefore have to be made to ensure that we can continue to provide services.

### **Building in Babergh**

The council has, finally, become the only rural district in the country to partner with the Considerate Constructors Scheme (CCS). This is something I proposed a couple of years ago. However, despite being approved by full council, nothing happened. Thanks to our increased presence in the administration things have now moved on. The scheme sets out how construction teams should respect neighbours, minimise impact on the environment, and have an inclusive and healthy workplace.

Developers will be encouraged to sign up to the scheme when they are granted planning permission, but it will be mandatory in communities where construction could have a severe disruptive impact. The council is also looking at how this approach could be further strengthened in the future.

### **Second Home/ Empty Property Tax**

Babergh Councillors are also considering higher tax premiums for owners of second homes and long-term empty properties, following the introduction of new government rules. There are almost 600 empty properties in Babergh, and many residents are frustrated at the building of new properties while so many lay empty. Bringing these homes back into use will help meet growing housing need.

Proposals being considered by cabinet members would see the owners of properties left empty for a year or more paying double, with a premium of up to 100% from April 2024; properties empty for five years or more seeing their council tax bills treble with a premium of up to 200%; and owners of properties left empty for 10 years facing quadrupled bills, with a premium of up to 300%.

Also under the proposals, the owners of 576 second homes in Babergh would see their council tax bill double from April 2025.

## Call for Sites

Following on from approval of Part 1 of the Joint Local Plan the Council is already progressing with the production of part 2. At this initial point of the plan-making process the Council is inviting site submissions to be put forward for residential land use for consideration for future development. This is known as the 'Call for Sites' process.

## Homeless & Rough Sleeping Strategy

Babergh have developed a new strategy to help tackle homelessness and rough sleeping. This strategy has been developed by the new team and is focussed on.

- Early prevention & intervention.
- Make rough sleeping rare, brief, and non-recurring.
- Ensuring the health and wellbeing needs of households are met whilst in temporary accommodation.
- To expand and future-proof the role and remit of Central Suffolk Lettings - improving access to the private rented sector.
- To mitigate against the impacts of the cost of living.

There was a public consultation open for until the 14<sup>th</sup> of January.

## Car Parking Charges

Implementation of car parking charges in Hadleigh, Lavenham and Sudbury is being looked at again, as a way of closing the budget gap. A paper went before cabinet this month recommending a targeted consultation with towns and parishes across the district, to gauge opinion and to help develop options for changes to parking tariffs, which may come before council later this year.

## 6. Reports

i) Footpath Footpaths wet and muddy but still well used considering. Fallen tree at back of church now cleared of footbridge.

ii) Tree Wardens Weather I am sad to report the demise of some of Whatfield trees. Storm Henk wreaked havoc on our trees with over 50 miles an hour winds lots of our trees have lost branches. The tree casualties are one tree outside Barrards Hall and a large tree on the footpath 11 to 13 which has unfortunately blocked the footpath and demolished some fencing. The owner of the tree is going to remove the tree when the weather permits. The water meadows where the tree is situated are extremely wet at present and some heavy lifting equipment will be required. Unfortunately the tree is hard to access at the moment. I must say thank you to Michael, James Craske and their team who cleared the Whatfield to Hadleigh road of fallen trees in very heavy wind conditions. A very large branch has also fallen off the ash tree on the roadside of Huntys Vale Meadow, my husband has moved the branch to the conservation area and I have informed Sarah Eastman our conservation warden.

Tree Council and The Branching out Magazine I have received an email from Sam the branching out magazine, she informs me all about some of the Tree Council activity in 2023. Apparently the magazine has been raising money on Radio 4 appeal for the tree council, so far they have raised 10 thousand pounds. This is for community tree planting events in 2024, it's definitely a wonderful project. Unfortunately it has been oversubscribed by enthusiastic volunteers wanting to get involved in outdoor tree planting activities of 2023. The money raised will certainly go towards more planting projects in 2024. Another wonderful idea of the magazine is asking tree wardens to photograph the trees in their area, when laden with heavy hoarfrost, the magazine is going to publish some of the photos in its next publication. It's certainly a nice way of promoting our trees capes.

Health and Safety Issues I haven't received any complaints from any residents about any tree problems in Whatfield.

iii) Conservation Report . Richard is catching up with hedge trimming on the hedgerows in the meadows. The wet weather has prevented this work but he is now getting on with it. I am hoping to do some pruning between late January until the end of February on a couple of the most congested trees in Huntys Meadow when time and weather permits.

## Questions from the Public – None

## 7. Action Updates

Allotments All allotments are fine.

Playground The playground is in good order and the litter bin has been emptied.

8. **Planning** - All applications have been sent to the PC with no objections. Roy Searl will keep the council updated on the land behind the horseshoes.

9. **Health & Safety** –None

10. **Accounts and Payments** As of the 1<sup>st</sup> December 2023 we have a bank balance of £8912.

Next meeting 20<sup>th</sup> March 2024 at 7.45pm

Meeting closed at 8.33pm

Signed ..... Date.....