

BIDBOROUGH PARISH COUNCIL

MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE PARISH HELD IN THE VILLAGE HALL ON 13 JUNE 2022 STARTING AT 7.45PM

PRESENT: Councillor Mrs Thorne (Chairman) and
Councillors Hawksfield, Shepherdson and Mrs Summers

18 Members of the Public

In Attendance – Neil Harris (Clerk)

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence was received from Councillor Mrs Vidler

2. Report of the Chairman of the Council for the Year 2021/22

The Chairman of the Council reported that as many of you were aware the Parish Council was currently in the process of reforming and reorganising itself following the discovery that it had not been compliant for many years with Local Government, and national legislation. This was no easy task as the Council had effectively found itself at ground zero and was steadily attempting to implement the correct procedures and good practices that are expected of a small authority.

The Chairman stated that she would wish to thank Linda Hedley who was not here tonight for her assistance over the last six months. Linda was parachuted in by the Kent Association of Local Councils to help the Council to get its house in order. She was pleased to say that the Council was getting there, all be it slowly. She then introduced Neil Harris the Council's new Locum Clerk. Neil has a wealth of experience having worked for Maidstone Borough Council for nearly thirty years, heading Democratic Services. Neil has served as clerk with another Parish and has experience in HR, Trusts and Charities, all of which will be very useful to us over the coming months. She was very much looking forward to working with him to resolve many of the outstanding issues that have come to light over the past year.

She then took the opportunity to make several points regarding the current status of the Parish Council.

The Council were currently involved in a dispute with its previous clerk. On the 1st April 2011 all clerks and administrative officers had to become paid employees and our initial legal work was to consider how we could regularise a position that was illegal. As she had explained on many occasions, this matter was one of employment law and was not subject to open debate and discussion. The Council was hoping that this would be resolved soon.

The Council's main objective was to sort out this year's Annual Governance statement which once again will detail that the Council has not resolved all of its compliance issues but that it was working towards this. The Council has appointed an Internal Auditor for this year and again this is where Neil's experience will benefit the Council in detailing its plan to ensure that moving forward, the Council is compliant with all current legislation.

There are still outstanding issues with relation to the recreation ground which need further clarification. This was not as many seem to believe a simple process and yes there were differences of opinion between the councillors as to how to deal with the trust. As none of the Council were practising Trust solicitors it did appoint a solicitor to undertake a general review of the Trust Deed. This led to further queries which she hopes once the Governance Statement has been dealt with, the Council will be able to address fully in order to ensure that the charity is being run effectively and lawfully. It does appear at first glance that additional legal support may be required especially in relation to the leases that have been granted. Once again, she indicated that she would be looking to the new locum Clerk to do a review of the Trust and report back to the Council so that it can make an informed decision of how best to proceed.

The Chairman also indicated that the Council would also need to consider its obligation regarding the cemetery and church wall. She did not want the parish to be faced as it was some years ago with a colossal bill for repairs. It was evident that a management programme was required, and the Council was looking at potentially spending a sum of money every year on regular maintenance work to avoid receiving a major bill as the Council has in the past. It is hoped that this approach can be worked up in the coming months. A survey was recently undertaken on the whole wall and once the report has been received, this can be the basis for discussions on how it manages the wall going forward. It was also evident that the Council needed to undertake a full review of the services provided as this had not been done for many years.

In conclusion, there are a number of ongoing challenges which the Council needed to confront but that this must be done in line with the governing documents that exist in relation to the recreation ground, the closed churchyard or indeed the extension of the 30mph zone which has taken some considerable time but is now proceeding through the proper process. Change is always difficult for some, but it is now apparent and obvious that the Council needed to modernise, follow proper practice and adopt the correct procedures to guide it through issues that will often have contrasting viewpoints, and that it must be ensured that all parties are included, and their points heard.

4. Public Participation

The public had an opportunity to raise questions and issues with the Council and for the Council to respond where appropriate: -

- The whole issue of the speed of traffic along Bidborough Ridge and through the village was raised. Discussion ensued on a possible pedestrian crossing and how this could be progressed though it was understood that it could be a difficult to find a location that satisfied all of the criteria. The Chairman stated that an item on this matter would be placed on the Agenda for the next Council meeting.

- The great majority of questions revolved around the issue of the Play Park in the Arthur Nicholson Recreation Ground including a recent survey showing 94% in favour of its retention and a number of associated issues. The meeting was informed by the Chairman that the Clerk would be investigating this whole issue and reporting back to the Council having considered all of the documents and the issues that have been raised. The Clerk also indicated that this would be a detailed investigation looking at all of the issues and that he was hoping to report back to the Council in September or October though he would be aiming to report to September.

19. Duration of Meeting

7.45pm to 9.04pm