

# BETHERSDEN PARISH COUNCIL

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## ANNUAL PARISH MEETING

Minutes of the Annual Parish Meeting held on the 10<sup>th</sup> April 2019 in Bethersden Village Hall at 1800hrs.

### **Present**

Cllr A Boyd (Chairman), Cllr C Simkins (KCC), Cllr A Pickering (ABC), six members of the Parish Council and 27 members of the public.

### **Apologies for Absence**

Cllrs: S Dacre and R Orchard.

### **Financial Report (Parish Clerk)**

Last year was a bit of a bumpy ride which all goes to show why it is financially prudent to always have sufficient financial reserves

Income was in line with expectations, whilst expenditure exceeded the budget by nearly £37K.

This was because of several factors:

- 1.£18K for the renewal of the footpaths in the George Field.
- 2.£17.3K additional staff costs caused in the main by staff illness, extra administration costs and the correct assessment of the actual working hours.
- 3.£2.3K dedicated computer, accounts package and new email accounts.
4. £4.5K extension to St Margaret`s Churchyard burial ground.

In the end with an expected current account expenditure for the next financial year forecast to be approx. £50K the precept was set at £29,300 against £23K for the previous year. An increase of £6.3K, This represents a Parish Rate at Band D of £40.59 against last year`s £32.58, an increase of approx, 25%.

We have cash reserves of £81K on the current accounts.

We also have £182K of S106 monies available to be spent in this parish on specific designated projects with the agreement of ABC.

This is money from various developments.

For example it can be spent on improving and renovating the car park and footpath at the recreation ground, children`s play equipment improvement, the football pitch, Bethersden Cricket Ground and so on.

So as you can see, there are funds available for various specified capital projects.

### **PCSO Report (L Jones & K Richard)**

They gave an overview of the current situation and reported that crime was low in this Ward, although recently there was an outbreak of petty vandalism recently. The young people have been spoken to. The PCSO's are now working a lot with the Neighbourhood Watch Scheme, and stressed that it was essential to report every incident and obtain a CAD number otherwise it is impossible for them to know what is going on. With the recently introduced 'Crime Stopper', reports can be filled online with regular updates now on the internet.

### **Community Warden (C Carter)**

Reported that she tried to visit each village at least twice a week, and visits the three primary schools regularly. She now holds a weekly surgery in Woodchurch. Highway and has mainly to deal with fly-tipping and highway issues which are regularly brought to her attention.

### **Chairman's Annual Report (Cllr A Boyd)**

I welcome you all here tonight for the Parish Meeting and the Annual Report for Bethersden Parish Council for the year 2018 to 2019.

Before I start may I offer our best wishes to Mary Shaw, who was Clerk to Bethersden Council until last year following her heart attack the previous autumn. She has not fully recovered and was taken to St Georges Hospital London a couple of days ago for further treatment.

The membership of councillors serving on the parish council has remained the same as last year.

We have continued to be served and supported by Mr Alan Pickering as our Borough Councillor, by Mr Charlie Simkins as our County Councillor, Kathy Carter as Community Warden and the PCSO's Kate Richardson and Luke Jones.

It has, again, been a very challenging year.

Many parish council meetings have been attended by a large group of electors with lively contributions during the public observation time at the beginning of the meeting before the Parish Council meeting started.

There has been put into public circulation, before the start of some of the Parish Council meetings, pugnacious, cruel, defamatory and unnecessary documents containing comments made by the publisher's that have been designed to malign, harass, alarm and distress the Chairman and the Clerk – and at one time - the IT, contractor.

This has caused the loss of respect and trust between the members of the Parish Council as well as the community and the Parish Council

For example, a Parish Councillor accompanied by another, calling on the Clerk to provide the Parish Council audited accounts for 2017 2018, in order to for them to exercise their "public rights" to inspect the accounts. This involved 35 hours of the Clerk's time in preparation. This, about 20 days after he started as Responsible Finance Officer - searching for missing documents, that were lost or destroyed by the first Locum Clerk, and then collating them

Mr Tearle on taking up the post as Locum clerk was engaged at a lower remuneration per hour than Mrs Headley.

The increase in the cost of the clerkship that, over time, included three clerks remunerations and administration costs, has led to a very high overspend on clerk's salaries. This had to be addressed in this year's budget with an increase in the precept.

Administrative costs, PAYE etc over those months were also caused by both extra administrative demands and time taken to address the extensive challenges that were made on the Clerk.

It would have been irresponsible to leave the new 2019-2020 Parish Council with insufficient funds to cover the basic funding of circa £50,000 needed for the Parish Council to function.

The general guidance for Parish Councils is it should have working reserves of double the precept.

After receiving very high levels of administrative demands regarding correspondence and communications, the Clerk had at times to exceed his hours.

In September Colin Tearle was appointed Clerk, Proper Officer and Responsible Finance Officer to Bethersden Parish Council on 20 hours per week. and started the process of sorting the parish

documents and records, that were being stored in various places, prior ultimately for storing in the new Parish fire proof safe lodged in St Margaret's Church.

It was resolved to reduce the number of parish monthly meeting from 12 to 10 with August and January not being held in an attempt to reduce administration costs.

The Parish Council had moved funds from the Co-op Bank. This was a result of the Co-op bank being perceived to be, at one time, in financial trouble and it was then prudent to move funds away to safeguard the Parish funds.

We have now started to reuse the Co-op Bank account again, since the risk to funds appears to have receded and there was a need to reduce the cash holdings in the Lloyds Bank accounts to below the aggregate government guaranteed amount of £85000, per Bank.

The other Lloyds Bank Parish account is used to run the council day by day and has within the account, a sum of about £15,000 which is revenue from the tennis court lights accumulated since they were installed and is ring fenced for improvements to the tennis and MUGA courts.

This year, as last year the budget and precept setting process has been disputed. Please permit me to reassure members of the community that this was all legal and above board.

With the introduction of the new information laws Data Protection Regulations being presented, the council sourced advice from an IT expert and obtained its own "bethersden-pc.gov.uk" email accounts. This was to enable high security accounts and any "Freedom of Information" request, made by members of the public, to be easily accessed while protecting the private information stored under Councillors own private email accounts. This has been unsuccessful because of resistance by some Councillors to use it.

In June, it was resolved to purchase a laptop and finance package for the Parish Council to computerise the accounting practices of the Council. This would ultimately enable the Clerk to report to the Council the up to date information at the Council meetings - it has been a tortuous journey, but the relevant figures are now being produced.

We have also had to appoint a data protection firm Satswana to oversee our data use.

We have had considerable internal legal and procedural challenges from Parish Councillors throughout the year.

Following the recommendation of the now disbanded Kent Association of Local Councils advisory group it was resolved that all council committees were to be disbanded and all matters for resolution to be discussed and resolved by the full Parish Council.

This has not been accepted by some Councillors.

Some Parish Councillors have been continually going behind the backs of the Clerk and the Parish Council to the Head of Ashford Borough Council Planning Policy Officer, the Head of Ashford Borough Council Legal Services, the Chief Monitoring officer, the Neighbourhood Plan Inspector, Kent County Council, Environment Agency, Historic England, Southdown's Agency, KALC, all challenging the Bethersden Neighbourhood Hood Plan, and the functioning of the Parish Council. This was designed to cause as much conflict as possible to attempt to attain the failure of the Neighbourhood Plan and the Parish Council - which has cost implications. One of the objecting communications stated that they wished the Plan to be shelved for two years and then reconsidered by another parish council. The plan was returned to the Parish Steering Committee for clarification. This has cost another £2650 and a lot more personal time of the steering group members.

This is despite Ashford Borough Council considering the previous Bethersden Neighbourhood Plan being fit to be placed before the inspector. The Neighbourhood Plan has been forwarded to Ashford Borough Council for further public consultation.

Subsequent to the Council meeting on 5<sup>th</sup> March, on the 11<sup>th</sup> March myself and the Clerk had a meeting with the Ashford Borough Council's head of Planning Policy and agreed that this Bethersden Neighbourhood revised plan would go out to public consultation on 17<sup>th</sup> May 2019 to allow time for the Parish and Borough Councils elections to clear before it goes before the Planning Inspector.

The Clerk has researched and identified with the Section 106 Officer at Ashford Borough Council, various Sec. 106 moneys from past and present developments. He will be bringing forward for discussion and recommendations for resolution, by the Parish Council, for renewals and refurbishments of the facilities at the Recreation Field and other qualifying schemes. The Parish Council must put forward a costed scheme in order to attain these Sec. 106 funds from Ashford Borough Council, who administer the 106 monies.

Ashford Borough Council's Sec. 106 officer has awarded to Bethersden Cricket club £32000 from the Courtlands development and that money can only go to the cricket club.

The Council has Section 106 cash funds ring fenced from the George Grove development which cannot be used for any other purpose other than the George Field – this is where the funding for the renewal of the footpaths came from and was supported by £1000 from KCC Public Rights of Way. The rest of the remaining funds will be used to maintain the George Field for the remaining years of the life of the Sect. 106 agreement. The Parish council was delighted to receive the appreciation of users following the work on the two footpaths on the George Field. The work was overseen by the Clerk

The Clerk has put out to tender for the work to fence off and topsoil the Mill Field layby

The street cleaner was taken unwell and had to resign, for a short time a new candidate carried out this work, but they also could not continue. Following a failed recruitment drive a small works contractor was engaged to do this work, once a month, completing small repairs and monthly insurance safety checks required on the play equipment and recreation ground equipment as well as street cleaning – and he continues to this day.

Speed Watch has not been in action due to the shortage of volunteers, some of whom were disillusioned by the reaction by police to the reported miscreants. Volunteers would be welcome in order to revive the speed watch. If anybody is interested, please speak to the Clerk.

Attempts by the Parish Council to resolve the boundary between the George Grove residents and the George Field is still in awaiting legal submissions.

The Parish Council arranged on 11<sup>th</sup> November 2018 in the George Field, for a beacon and candles to be lit and refreshment provided along with songs by Roger Kelly, to remember the fallen members of the Parish community in the 1914-1918 world war, some 100 years since the end of that conflict. It was very well supported by the community.

Attempts to resolve the George Field and George Grove drainage system have, to date failed, following the developer leaving the site. The Parish Council, despite all attempts, have been left with an inefficient surface water attenuation system on its land and other unimpeded drainage from the development flowing straight into the Bethersden Stream. This system in Ashford Borough Council's own report stated that it "was not fit for purpose." But they still signed it off with the developer. The building control assessment passed as acceptable and it not "in the public's interest" for Ashford Borough Council to pursue or do anything else.

The Parish Council cannot accept this situation and is pursuing the matter in order to help prevent flooding in Forge Fields and further stress for the occupiers.

The village is enjoying the relief received from the overhaul of the foul water system by Southern Water which, by the lack of any communications being received from victims, it seems also to be a great success. We much appreciate Southern Water's work on this system.

The Bethersden Stream and the pipework to the School Road culvert is still unresolved. The Environment Agency has been carrying out further survey work to support an action that maybe will lead to a satisfactory solution by installation of an alternative culvert outlet. CCTV of the two pipes taken in 2013 indicated that the existing pipework was badly silted up, roots had penetrated the pipes and the pipe work in places was cracked and defective. The parish council continues to put pressure on the Environment Agency.

The developer of Courtlands has indicated a willingness to desilt the Bethersden Stream from Church Hill culvert to the downstream boundary of the Courtlands development - subject to the Environment Agencies agreement. We have been fortunate that there have not been heavy rains to challenge the present system and put unnecessary stress on the residents by flooding in their gardens in Forge Fields. The work the Parish Council asked KCC Highways to do to prevent road water drainage flooding in the front of two properties in Forge Fields appears to be successful. Thanks to Cllr Simkins for his assistance.

We are very pleased to see the Football pitch being used again. Although the club is from Woodchurch, they are giving an opportunity to the Bethersden young players who wish to join in and I hope they will. The football field soils have been assessed by an agronomist and recommendations made. It will be followed soon by applications of lime and fertiliser to correct current nutritional imbalances. This will further assist in the playability of the pitch. Progress is slow regarding the Tennis club lease and outstanding matters are yet to be agreed in order to put it before the council. The lamps on the tennis court have been renewed as their live span, estimated to last for 3000 hours, is now over. As two lamps have failed, it was prudent to change the remaining ones during one visit by the contractor. The MUGA court lights have a while to go. The parish Council with the assistance of KCC Councillor Simkins is trying to get information together for justification of a controlled crossing on the A28 to be installed.

The un-controlled crossing of the A28 in the region of Forge Hill at the point where the lowered pavement indicates a crossing point, is totally unacceptable and very dangerous as pedestrians that have to cross there at their own risk. A site of the proposed crossing will become clear once the surveys have been completed. With the volume of traffic on the road, we are advised that a pelican crossing would be required with associated street lighting. We are advised by KCC, that the crossing would have a very high capital cost £75K– 100K. Cllr Simkins has generously funded a traffic survey of the A28 from his KCC member grant. KCC has found that traffic is travelling on the whole at the regulated 30 mph speed limit. He is now funding a survey of pedestrians to prove the need of a crossing and identify the expected users.

Work continues by the Parish Council and KCC Highways on the A28 to deter HGV's from using the local lanes as a rat run to the North and South of the A28.

Quotations for the new extension of the Recreation Field car park and the repair to the existing, along with the new path to the Pavilion has been put on hold until a complete plan has been costed for the upgrading of all the Recreation Field facilities, taking advantage of the Sec. 106 monies when it has been completed.

Research has started on the renewal and up grading of the Recreation Field car park the play equipment and facilities. We would like to involve you - the community - in the selection of equipment available. Do you the parents or even the children - the users - want to have a meeting where you can all see the choices and help decide?

It has been suggested that the tall slide should be replaced as the regulations have changed, demanding wider safety requirements, the height is also a concern. The suggestion is it should be replaced with a basket swing and further soft pour surfaces. The replacement suggested of the big Wicksteed wheel with a "Witches Hat" rotating and climbing cone and the replacing the wooden tree house adventure 6

structure, as the present one is showing its age, with a modern version with extra facilities such as slides, walkways with safe, modern challenges for the children incorporated.

Crime in Bethersden is reported by the PCSO'S as low. Recently there has been a spate of disturbances and damages where the PCSO's and Community Warden have had a word with some young people, and it now seems to have settled down again.

The Parish Council, the Community Warden, the PCSO's and the KCC youth Officer are inviting the young people to a meeting on 15<sup>th</sup> April 2019 at 5pm at the Village Hall to ask them to express their wishes and aspirations. It may be an opportunity to revive the Parish Youth Council that existed a few years ago until Ashford Borough austerity cuts closed it down. Anyone who would like to assist this enterprise please let me, Kathy Carter or the Clerk know.

The Surgery boundaries of the various local Doctors surgeries have been revised.

The proposed Bus shelter near the Dene is awaiting its planning application and a slot in the KCC bus shelter grant scheme.

The Churchyard burial ground has been extended and will be funded by S106 monies from Courtlands. We are again very grateful to the generosity of Tim Stubbs who has further supported the community with his gift of the burial land.

The Parish has a Neighbourhood Watch co-ordinator but, following the introduction of Data Protection Regulations, a lot of members failed to confirm that they wished to continue receiving notifications and they were removed from the circulation list. Anyone wishing to be included in these contact transmissions or requesting further information please let me know.

The "Nextdoor" web site is proving to be a popular community facility..

Finally, may I thank the Clerk for his wisdom, resilience and fortitude without whom I could not have resisted the persistent attacks and the serious risk that the Parish Council would have collapsed and become dysfunctional.

To Nerys Withington for help prompt attention to posting and maintaining information on the Community Website.

To my fellow Parish Council members who have suffered such unnecessary stress but nevertheless continued their support.

As you can see, after three years of near paralysis we are now able to move forward and achieve the progress you expect of your parish council.

I thank you all, and the residents of the parish of Bethersden, for your patience and understanding over the last three turbulent years and let us all hope a more peaceful and productive period now approaches

### **Cllr C Simkins (KCC)**

There has been much talk by politicians, particularly those in government that economic austerity is ending. It is now widely recognized that the local government sector has been one of the main casualties of austerity, by virtue of a considerable reduction in the allocation of funds to local authorities over the last seven years. This has caused financial distress in a number of shire councils with Northamptonshire effectively going bankrupt. I am glad to say that this is not the case in Kent where financial stringency has kept us afloat. Towards the end of last year central government finally

accepted the severity of the problem by putting in excess of £1 billion into the local government sector through various channels such as winter funding and pothole monies. This provided KCC with an additional £20m which helped solve this year's funding gap.

For the sixth year in succession KCC has had to make significant savings and the whole organisation has risen to the challenge of finding another £73m to fund rising spending pressures. We have therefore managed to balance the budget whilst continuing to preserve front line services. In addition to delivering statutory services we continue to deliver the following non statutory services.

£6.2m to subsidised bus services

£2.3m to economic development

£7.1m for Housing support for the most vulnerable

£6.5m for Community wardens, arts, culture and country parks

£9.8m for children in need of family support

£8.1m for the Young Persons travel pass.

KCC has also made its largest ever investment in Highways, rising from £70m last year to £89m in the current year and to £95.7m next year. This does not include the £28m recently received from the Department of Transport for Highway improvements. We have to acknowledge that these benefits do not come without a cost and regrettably it has been necessary to raise Council tax by 3% plus the additional 2% for the adult social levy.

One of the casualties of the necessary cuts in expenditure has been a reduction of 25% in Members Grants to £15000 but I shall do my best to continue to distribute this equally amongst the 10 Parishes in my area.

That is a snapshot of where KCC is placed and I trust that it shows a genuine desire by the County Council to manage its finances prudently and to continue to provide a wide range of statutory and non statutory services across the Kent community.

### **Cllr A Pickering (ABC)**

It has been a good year for ABC:

- We were runners up as the Best Council in the UK
- Winners of the UK wide Staff Engagement Award - this is against commercial and industrial businesses
- Once again we have the lowest Council Tax in Kent and one of the lowest in the UK, that makes us in the lowest 20% of Shire districts in England. We intend to stay like that.

We are fully self-funded.

- Our Borough has been identified as the best location for businesses in Kent, with NETFLIX coming to Ashford, that is a major event.

This is why we have the lowest unemployment in the region and we are consistently lower than the UK averages.

- We are the best recycling Council in Kent with a recycling rate of 60% and last year we were the 27th best Council in the UK, having come from one from one of the worse. Nearly 45% of our waste is incinerated providing power with less than 1% going to landfill.
- Ashford Town Centre is being revitalised, there has been a significant increase in footfall. There is a new cinema, new restaurants, new brewery amongst other things. The Gov has been using Ashford as a prime example of regeneration of a town centre. With all of our innovation we have attracted several hundred millions of inward investment.

Finally, let me remind you that on the 2<sup>nd</sup> May are the Borough Council elections and I shall be standing again. For the past 2 years I have been the Portfolio Holder for Human Resources and Customer Services and sitting on the Cabinet.

Our Ward has changed a bit, we still have 2 Borough Councillors, but Pluckley is no longer part of Weald Central, it is replaced by Great Chart with Chilmington. Please remember to vote.

- The Local Plan is now in place and this will ensure the Rural communities like ours will no longer be plagued by speculative builders 'a la' Gladmans of this world.

- In recent years 47% of council houses in Kent were built in the Borough.

Planning has been an issue for many years and thankfully this is now being rectified. The department is being reorganised with lines of responsibility changing and hopefully speed up decision making on planning applications

The Designer Outlet is growing at a good pace to increase its size by 50% and with every intention to trade up in terms of quality shops. It should be ready for later this year. It also means many more jobs for our community.

Enforcement is always an emotive area, I am pleased to say that we do and have successfully prosecuted fly tippers when we can catch them – but as you know, they tend to do it when no one is looking....

Also on the enforcement front, the Council has spent significant sums in the High Court addressing the mess of illegal caravans in Hatchenden, High Halden. Thankfully, we won the case and the area is being tidied up. 2 of the people have absconded and will be arrested when caught and jailed.

Recently we ran a wonderful Snow Dogs trail in Ashford town – a great success. Amazingly, not one was vandalized. The sale of them raised £142K for Pilgrims Hospice.

### **Recreation Ground**

The meeting agreed that it would be a good idea to organize a meeting at the recreation ground one Saturday morning with interested parties to discuss ideas for rejuvenating the children`s play equipment.

### **Mark McBrian**

He expressed how he was disappointed at the continuing behavior of certain Councillors, and the lack of respect shown to the Council Chairman and Parish Clerk.

### **Parish Clerk**

**12<sup>th</sup> April 2019**