

Minutes of Annual Parish Meeting held on Monday 7th April 2014 at the Village Hall, Memorial Lane, Bletsoe**Present:**

13 members of the public together with Cllrs Ann Gibbons (chairman), Mary Laws, Paul Caves, Edward Bean, Alison Field-Foster and the Clerk were in attendance.

1. Welcome and Chairman's Report

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked them for attending. Thanks were given to Mike Gibbons and Alison Bean for serving the refreshments. Cllr Gibbons spoke regarding the sad loss of Mr David Martin. David was a wise and very active parish councillor for a number of years and made a huge contribution to the village in all kinds of ways. He will be hugely missed by the residents of Bletsoe.

Some of the things which have happened during the course of the past year:

The RAE-NDP group which was set up with Thurleigh is no longer considering an NDP for a shared area. The group unanimously changed its focus and now meets regularly to share knowledge and experience of setting up the Neighbourhood Development Plan. Our own Bletsoe group continues and we have received £6000 funding towards the work which will take place this year to produce a plan. The Bletsoe group aim to consult the whole village during the course of this year. If you would like to join this group or you know of someone who might be interested, please see me at the end of this meeting. Currently the group consists of Paul Laws, Jamie Hassall, Paul Caves & Alison Foster.

The Parish Council organised a presentation by a member of the Citizens Advice Bureau on Managing your Energy Supplier which followed the January Tuesday tea shop. This was well attended and very useful. It could be something which we might do more of in the future.

Alison Foster is currently looking into the possibility of having a defibrillator available in the village and we have a new community group in the village – BARCING – Bletsoe Active Recreational Club – which is a merry band of villagers who tidy and help around the village. They have so far cleared the pathway at the start of the Avenue into the village, tidied up the church yard and around the exterior wall, made some difference in the Memorial Garden which is intended to become a wild life area where the children of the village can explore and contribute. A small newt was discovered last week making it the first recognized occupant! There are many common areas in the village which need maintenance and the plan is to work through what we can. The group is open to anyone who has some time and energy to give on the first and third Thursdays of the month. Details can be found on the Bletsoe website.

Alongside BARCING, we owe a debt of gratitude to a number of villagers who already and for some years have given generously of their time and expertise to keep our village in pristine condition. Grass cutting, hedge cutting, general

maintenance and much more.

Thanks to Jonathan Knights for his continued production of the Bletsoe Gazette which keeps villagers informed and entertained.

Thanks to Ian Clifton our Ward Councillor for his regular attendance, for his advice and help at our Parish Council meetings and for his generous financial support through his ward fund which this year has helped us to purchase new picnic tables for the village field. My thanks also to our Parish Clerk Alison Southern who is my right hand woman and does well to keep us all right on procedures!

Currently there are only six councillors and we should have seven. Please contact either myself or the Clerk if you are interested.

This year we joined forces with BRA to contest the appeal on the Waiting for the Sun site. This has helped me, particularly, as Lance has spoken and communicated on behalf of both parties.

Leading on from that I have one final thank you to make and this is the biggest and is thanks on behalf of the village. There are three people who are not councillors who have given an inordinate amount of time, energy and expertise to the recent Inquiry. I cannot begin to tell you how much they have done. My thanks go to Evelyn Baker, David Baker and Lance Feaver who have worked tirelessly on behalf of the whole village. We hope to hold a special meeting in the village when the result is announced and we can have an official village thank you evening.

2. **Minutes of the Annual Parish Meeting held on 20th May 2013**

Copies of the minutes were available for all present. **It was resolved** to approve the minutes as a true record of the meeting.

Clerk

3. **Annual Reports from members of Bletsoe Parish Council**

Planning – Cllr Mary Laws

This year has been a quite year in terms of planning applications. The council had lodged objections to the applications for Wind Turbines in Souldrop and also for the additional illuminated signs for Storage.com. Planning permission was granted for the wind turbines but not the signage. There have been a few small household planning applications which the parish council did not comment on including most recently an application for a large polytunnel on land at the end of the Avenue. We are awaiting the decision of the Secretary of State for the Waiting for the Sun Gypsy and Traveller Site appeal and have held a public question and answer session with representatives from Growing Beds who will shortly be lodging an application for a green waste recycling plant at Coplar Farm. Once we receive the application the parish council will then be able to formally lodge its comments with the Borough Council.

Highways – Cllr Paul Caves.

In previous years I have conducted a yearly inspection with Amey. However, due to financial cut backs this will no longer happen. Any problems regarding potholes on highways should be reported directly to the “pothole hit squad” at Bedford Borough Council. If you have any problems with highways, footpaths please contact myself or the Clerk and we will endeavour to liaise with the Borough to rectify the problems. We are aware of a problem with a street lamp in Bourne End Lane and EoN has visited once but the problem is still ongoing. Similarly we have had complaints about noise pollution from the nearby car storage depot and have been working with the owners to address this matter.

Play Area – Cllr Paul Caves

The Play area is inspected yearly by a Rospa play safety inspector. Last year this highlighted some minor repairs and these have all been completed. I carry out a visual inspection of the play area every fortnight but please do report any problems to myself so we can rectify them as soon as possible.

Buses – Cllr Edward Bean

Bletsoe is served by a weekly service to St Neots and a regular bus service number 28 via Thurleigh, Ravensden and onto Bedford (St Peter’s Street). This runs 3 x daily and I have been negotiating a better start time for this service. The good news is that the service will now depart Bletsoe at 7:45am arriving in Bedford at 8:10am making this a useful service for those people working in Bedford. The problem is that at the moment there is no return service for commuters and although we had suggested a re-route via Brickhill to pick up additional passengers this has been turned down. I will continue to liaise on behalf of the residents of Bletsoe to find a solution for a later service back to Bletsoe.

Broadband – Cllr Edward Bean

Currently the broadband service in Bletsoe is extremely slow. BT is rolling out fibre across rural areas of the Borough and Sharnbrook and probably Felmersham will receive an upgrade to fibre. At the moment Bletsoe will not receive an upgrade to fibre which is very frustrating especially as the fibre will run along the A6 at the bottom of The Avenue. Please write to your local MP Alastair Burt who is working hard on behalf of local residents to ensure Bletsoe receives the upgrade if needs.

Draft year end figures – Cllr Alison Field-Foster

Cllr Foster reported on this year’s spending and current levels of earmarked reserves. The council had spent a total of £20,562 throughout the year with a total income of £24,507. This includes an initial grant of £5400 for the Neighbourhood Development Plan for Bletsoe, a £900 donation from BRA towards legal fees and £1000 ward funding which was spent on picnic tables for the village hall. The spend on legal fees relating to the Gypsy and Traveller Site appeal was £9645 (Nett) and this was why it had been necessary to retain the Precept level at £13,080.

Members of the public were then invited to ask questions on any of these reports.

Broadband

What is the issue with Bletsoe receiving Fibre?

Demographics – it is simply down to costs and the larger parishes gain over the smaller parishes. The cost of the cabinet will be met by British Telecom and residents need to apply pressure on BT to deliver. It was reported that a company called “Red Roar” had visited a property in Bletsoe. They have said that they can improve broadband speeds – if on testing they cannot provide a faster service than BT they will simply remove their equipment. The cost for this service is £250 to fit and a monthly charge of around £20-40 depending on the speed required.

Would fibre mean ground works outside individual properties in Bletsoe?

No the fibre is taken to a new cabinet at the bottom of The Avenue and then this is linked to the existing copper supply. The Fibre speeds up the process from the exchange to the bottom of Bletsoe and customers continue on their existing supply with hopefully increased speeds.

Buses

Does the parish know how many residents use the buses in Bletsoe?

The figures were not available from the Borough when we met last year. This is something that the parish council will be requesting and if necessary a Freedom of Information request can be submitted to obtain this. Other suggestions have been the possibility of a free taxi service for the return journey to Bletsoe.

Precept

This is very high compared to neighbouring parishes can the parish council explain why this is?

Residents will be aware that the parish council felt it was important to have the best possible legal representation it could afford at the Waiting for the Sun planning appeal. The Legal Fees were slightly less than anticipated but this was only because we had some excellent unpaid volunteers with legal/planning expertise who represented us for part of the appeal. It was decided to retain the Precept at its previous level (this is the only source of income the parish council could use) in order to ensure there are sufficient reserves to fight this appeal which ultimately is for the benefit of the whole of the parish.

4. Update on Waiting for the Sun planning appeal

The temporary permission for the site had expired in 2012 and a decision is due to be made in July 2014 this is approximately 7 years after the original planning application was submitted. The enquiry lasted 13 days and we retained the services of a Barrister for 3 days. If we had employed the Barrister for the whole period the legal fees would have been closer to £20K compared to the £9.5K incurred. The Secretary of State and not the planning inspector will have the final decision. This is extremely unusual and if found

in our favour then an enforcement notice will be applied to return the site back to agricultural land. The Borough's submission was very strong and work has started at Meadow Lane and a needs assessment has been done all of which support the case for the site at Bletsoe to be refused. We remain hopeful that the planning decision will be to refuse permission and thanks should go to the North Beds Villages who have all applied pressure on the Borough to ensure Meadow Lane is delivered to provide the necessary pitches required by law. The Borough have secured funding for Meadow Lane from Bellway Homes who are responsible for the Cardington Hangars housing development and it is hoped that the site will be completed by February 2015. Another positive development has been that the planning inspector's decision for Roxton has been overturned by the Secretary of State. The application for the site at Stagsden will now be subject to a public inquiry but no dates have been set yet.

Assuming the application is refused could there be another appeal? It is unlikely that the applicant would wish to take this case to the Human Rights Court of Appeal which would incur huge legal fees. The applicant could submit different planning applications but these would all be refused by the Borough.

The Chairman thanked Lance for his report and also Cllr Field-Foster for her assistance and hard work liaising with local MP Alastair Burt to ensure that the decision was called in by the Secretary of State.

5. **Open Session**

The Town Close charity – when would the council be electing members? The chairman responded that currently there was a vacancy due to the loss of Mr David Martin but this would be addressed at the Annual Meeting of the Parish Council in May.

There were no further questions from members of the public.

The Chairman thanked everyone for attending and the meeting finished at 8:45pm.

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Approved by Chairman 20 April 2015