

NOCTON PARISH COUNCIL

Minutes of the Meeting of the meeting of Nocton Parish Council held at 7.00 p.m. on Tuesday, 8th February, 2022 in The Nocton Hub.

PRESENT: Councillor Mike Clarke (Acting Chair)
Councillors Ian Goldsworthy, Mike Kaye, George McDonnell and MaryAnn Williams

Also present: District Councillor Amelia Bailey *

(* - present for part of the meeting only)

Approx. 30 members of the public were also in attendance

1. ACTING CHAIR'S WELCOME TO THE MEETING

The Acting Chair welcomed councillors and members of the public to the meeting. He reminded all those present that the meeting was being recorded*.

(* it was subsequently found that the recording equipment had failed)

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Graham Kempster and his reason was accepted.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

4. QUESTIONS UNDER STANDING ORDER 1(e)

No questions had been received.

5. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 9 NOVEMBER, 2021

MOVED by Councillor George McDonnell; SECONDED by Councillor Mike Kaye and RESOLVED that the minutes of the meetings held on 11 and 25 January, 2022 be agreed as a correct record of the proceedings.

The minutes were then signed by the Acting Chair.

6. PARISH COUNCIL STATEMENT INTO THE FORMER CLERK (MS RUTH KEILLAR)

On behalf of the Parish Council, the Acting Chair read out a statement of apology to its former Clerk, Ms Ruth Keillar, regarding the investigation into a number of allegations against her and which had previously been the subject of an investigation. The Acting Chair also confirmed that he had also sent a letter of apology to Ms Keillar.

A copy of the Statement is attached as an Appendix to these Minutes.

A resident, Mr Ralph Timms, referred to his complaint to the Information Commissioner's Office following the Parish Council's refusal to action a Freedom of Information request linked to this matter. He asked that if he could be given a copy of the Statement and the detail of the private and confidential minute of the Extraordinary Meeting of the Parish Council held on 26 April 2021, he would be prepared to withdraw his complaint. The Acting Chair said that the Statement would be made available publicly (as part of the minutes of this meeting) and that he would review the content of the confidential minute to ascertain if it was able to be released.

7. RESPONSE TO THE VILLAGE PETITION

On behalf of the Parish Council, the Acting Chair read out the following Statement regarding the petition from residents:

"In September, we received a petition from the village which contained a significant number of signatures expressing a lack of confidence in the Parish Council whilst it was being advised by its (then) Parish Clerk. The Parish Council did make comments about the petition at the meeting on 9 November 2021. The Parish Council is also mindful that it has not yet been able to respond formally to the petition, but following recent events, it is now able to do so.

At the time the petition was submitted, the Parish Council was already aware of an increasing number of issues about the advice it was receiving from its Clerk and was taking action to address these concerns. Unfortunately, for reasons of confidentiality, the Parish Council was unable at the time to say more about these matters or its action then under consideration.

Of course, we are all now aware, our former Clerk, Mr S Baxter, resigned from the Parish Council's employment and to that extent the terms of the petition are no longer relevant. Having said that, however, I would like to confirm that the Parish Council is fully committed to rebuilding the trust and confidence of the local community and looked forward to engaging with residents in a more open and transparent way. We appreciate the effort and time those residents took to organise the petition in order that we could be made aware of the strength of feeling in the village about this matter."

8. DISTRICT COUNCILLOR REPORT

Councillor Amelia Bailey gave a report on a number of matters of interest to the village, including:

8.1 Nocton Hall and former RAF Hospital Site

She had recently spoken to Planning Officers at NKDC about the current position regarding this site. Unfortunately, there was little she could report as there had been no contact with LEDA Properties over its possible development proposals for some considerable time. She had, however, been advised, somewhat oddly, that there was no requirement for the owner to inform the Planning Authority of any sale and had suggested that the Parish Council may wish to check with the Land Registry whether any such sale had, in fact, taken place.

8.2 District Councillor Surgery

With effect from 1 March, she would be holding a confidential monthly surgery (by appointment) for residents in Tilly's Tea Shop, Metherringham.

8.3 Country Market

A Country Market in the car park of the Star and Garter PH in Metherringham was being held between 9.00 a.m. and 2.00 p.m. on 7 May which, if successful, would be repeated in future months and extended to other villages.

Finally, Councillor Bailey made reference to the growing incidence of vulnerable young people, particularly those with autism, being targeted by persons with potential terrorist associations and urged parents of any such children to be particularly vigilant.

9. REPORT FROM THE ACTING CLERK (COUNCILLOR MIKE CLARKE)

9.1 Schedule of Payments made and Income received

A Schedule of payments made and income received for the period 1 November 2021 to 31 January 2022 was noted.

9.2 Parish Council Bank Accounts

The Acting Chair confirmed that the Parish Council now had full access to its bank accounts and was able to process all payments, etc as normal.

9.3 Resignation of Former Parish Clerk (Mr S. Baxter)

The Acting Chair gave a brief update on the current position regarding the return of the Parish Council's equipment, records and data, some items of which had not yet been received. He confirmed that efforts were continuing to secure its prompt return but that if these were not successful within an acceptable timescale, the Parish Council would not hesitate to resort to more robust action.

9.4 Parish Council Website

It was noted with appreciation that a resident was currently assisting the Parish Council in uploading and removing documents from its current website.

It would, however, also be necessary to ensure that the website was subject to a thorough review and update in order to meet the current regulations. If no voluntary help was forthcoming to do this, the Parish Council would be left with no alternative but to seek professional support.

9.5 Advert for New Parish Clerk

It was noted that one application for this post had been received and with a closing date of 28 February it was hoped that more would be submitted.

9.6 Opus Energy

The Acting Chair reported that he was still negotiating with Opus Energy for a new contract for the supply of electricity to the street lamp posts.

9.7 Articles for Limespring Hundred

It was noted that Councillor MaryAnn Williams had offered to draft articles on the work of the Parish Council for publication in the Limespring Hundred.

9.8 Street Lamp Safety Inspection

The Parish Council had been advised that the safety inspection of the 26 lamp posts for which it was responsible was long overdue (through no fault of the Parish Council) and that the Acting Chair had been able to negotiate a reduced inspection fee of £20 per post. He would also ask that the decision taken some years ago for each alternate street lamp to be switched off after mid-night as an energy saving measure was still the case.

MOVED by Councillor Ian Goldsworthy; SECONDED by Councillor Mike Kaye and RESOLVED that each street lamp post be subjected to a safety inspection at a total cost of £520.

9.9 Agency for the Valuation Office – Nocton Hub Rating Review

The Acting Chair reported that thanks to the foresight of the former Parish Clerk, Ms Ruth Keillar, in submitting the necessary documentation on the rating situation of Nocton Hub to the Valuation Officer before she left the Council's employ, no further action was required on the matter.

9.10 The following correspondence was noted:

Confirmation from NKDC that the Parish Council had been given a Litter Grant of £173.67.

Confirmation from Maher Millard that its account for building Nocton Hub had been closed with no further monies being owed by the Parish Council.

Request for use of the Village Green for the "Picnic on the Green" event between 1.00 p.m. and 5.00 p.m. on 5 June 2022 as part of the Platinum Jubilee celebrations. The Parish Council unanimously agreed its use for this purpose.

10. NOCTON 200 CLUB

It was noted that the grants to Nocton Primary School and "Renew @NoctonHub" as agreed at the meeting on 9 November, 2022 had now been paid. There remained, however, a problem in locating the projector and screen for the Gardening Club which had been ordered by the former Parish Clerk, Mr Baxter, but which could not be delivered. Action was, however, in hand to resolve the matter.

With regard to the Defibrillator Project at Nocton Park, it was noted that since the agreed grant had not been processed by the former Clerk, the community had resorted to continuing with its fund-raising activities and sufficient funding had now been obtained and an order placed for the necessary equipment, etc. As part of the discussion on this item, the Parish Council asked Mr Steve Reid (a resident and paramedic with East Lincolnshire Ambulance Service and responsible for the maintenance, etc of all defibrillators in the region) to give a brief presentation to those present on various issues relating to the use and maintenance of this vital equipment. It was noted that the defibrillator attached to the Hub was in need of a new casing, batteries and pads and the necessary orders had been placed although the maintenance costs involved were considerable. A discussion would, therefore, be required to consider this matter going forward. At some point, it would also be necessary to replace

the defibrillator at The Hub with one which could also be used on children, particularly given the proximity of Nocton School.

In the meantime, the Parish Council agreed that Mr Read continue to be responsible for the defibrillator at the Hub (as he would be for the one at Nocton Park). The acting Chair thanked him for his presentation and for the extremely valuable work he was doing in this regard on behalf of the community.

Finally, Councillor Ian Goldsworthy reported that he had very recently been handed an application from the WI for a sound system for the Events Hall which would be of assistance for its members with hearing impairment and also available for other groups and users of the building. It was noted that Hub Management Working Group was currently looking into the provision of an Induction Loop for the use in the Hub and so it was important for a co-ordinated approach to avoid any possibility of a duplication of provision. It was, however, generally accepted that some form of sound system for all users of the building would be advantageous and this may represent a potential way forward by meeting all needs by a single solution.

It was agreed, therefore, that the application be considered at the meeting but in the meantime the views of the 200 Club Promotor and HMG also be sought.

11. NOCTON HUB MANAGEMENT GROUP

11.1 Review of Hub Hire Charges

Immediately prior to the start of the meeting, Councillor George McDonnell had circulated a brief note of a proposal by the HMG to increase the Events Hall hire charges with effect from 1 March. It was, however, agreed to defer consideration of this matter to the next meeting pending further and more detailed information from the HMG, including comparable rates of nearby halls, existing charges, proposals for the Lounge Area and a generally more informed justification for any increase. The Parish Council was concerned that any increase did not affect the marketability of the building and the loss of new and existing custom. It was also conscious of the fact that at the last meeting it had agreed what it considered to be a balanced budget based on existing levels of charges and occupancy/use.

The HMG was also asked to work towards the small Meeting Room being a brought back into early use for the purpose originally intended so that it was available for hirers and thus generating additional income.

11.2 Hub Toilets: Plumber Call Out

It was noted that the Disabled Toilet was blocked and that the Hub Manager and the Acting Chair had worked with contractors to investigate the problems. The Acting Chair was meeting the contractor (AJET) on site the following morning and would report the outcome to the next meeting of the Parish Council.

12. PLANNING ISSUES

It was noted that there were no planning issues requiring the Parish Council's attention.

13. LAND BEHIND NOCTON HUB

Councillor Mike Kaye highlighted a number of issues arising from the recent sale of the land behind Nocton Hub, including the implications for access should, as was expected, there be a planning application for a development thereon. The Parish Council agreed to keep the matter under close review.

Arising from the change of ownership, it was agreed to contact the new owner to ascertain whether they, rather than the former owner, should now receive the annual fee of £100 (provision for which is included in the budget) to secure the continued use of the strip of land previously used as the builder's compound and which runs behind the houses in Main Street to the south of The Hub. Councillor Kaye agreed to undertake this task.

14. FOOTPATH ALONG WELLHEAD LANE

In the absence of both Councillor Graham Kempster and the petition organiser, it was agreed to defer consideration of this matter to the next meeting when, it was hoped, both persons would be able to attend. The Acting Chair said that, in the meantime, he would consider how the number of signatories could be increased.

15. REFURBISHMENT OF NOCTON VILLAGE SIGN

Councillor MaryAnn Williams said that she was making arrangements to collect the sign from Councillor Neil Faulkner and would take this to Mr Jim Eagle who had kindly offered to see if it could be refurbished.

16. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

MOVED by by Councillor George McDonnell; SECONDED by Councillor Ian Goldsworthy and RESOLVED that the press and members of the public be excluded from the meeting

during the consideration of the following item because of the confidential nature of the business to be transacted.

17. RESIGNATION OF FORMER CLERK, MR SIMON BAXTER

The Parish Council considered a number of issues associated with the resignation of its previous Parish Clerk and the action to be taken to ensure the prompt return of all its equipment, records and data. It also considered a number of other matters which had come to light during the recent inspection of those documents, etc which had been returned and how these might be dealt with.

The detailed proposals relating to the above-mentioned matters are confidential and are recorded separately in a minute which will not be available for publication but which will, nevertheless, be kept as an official record should it be required for formal disclosure at some point in the future.

As part of this discussion, it was unanimously agreed to:

- 17.1 Appoint Mr Geoff Hall to prepare an analysis of the Parish Council's bank accounts for the current financial year, to log invoices and income received from the paper records currently in its possession and identify any missing invoices in the event that these cannot be recovered. This process will need to be completed as part of the preparation for the internal audit of 2021/22. It was agreed to place on record appreciation of Mr Hall's generous offer to undertake this essential work at no cost to the Parish Council. Councillor Goldsworthy undertook to liaise with him regarding the supply of the necessary paperwork, etc
- 17.2 Appoint Councillors Mike Clarke, Ian Goldsworthy and Mike Kaye to the Panel to interview applicants for the post of Parish Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer and to make a recommendation to the Parish Council of the preferred candidate.
- 17.3 Ask all applicants to complete a formal Application Form rather than relying solely on a CV.
- 17.4 Review the Terms of Reference of the Hub Management Group to ensure that they are more suited to the needs of the Group and to help improve both its effectiveness and accountability to the Parish Council.

STATEMENT BY NOCTON PARISH COUNCIL

INVESTIGATION INTO THE FORMER PARISH CLERK, MS RUTH KEILLAR

I wish to make the following statement on behalf of Nocton Parish Council.

As many residents will know, in April 2021 the Parish Council began an investigation into Ruth Keillar, its former Parish Clerk, having been alerted by our then Clerk (and Ms Keillar's immediate successor) to a number of alleged financial and other irregularities. At the time, we were firmly and unambiguously advised by our Clerk that the Parish Council was legally prevented from asking Ms Keillar for an explanation of the allegations but rather it should refer the matter direct to the Police for investigation. We now realise this advice was flawed but in so doing, we acted in good faith and on the advice of our Clerk. Although we were subsequently made aware by the Police that they had found no evidence of any wrongdoing on the part of Ms Keillar and were taking no further action in the matter, we were further advised by our Clerk that we should, nevertheless, continue with our own investigation and to seek advice on other options open to us.

However, having carefully reviewed this whole matter in the light of recent events and new information, we now consider that whilst it was clearly incumbent on the Parish Council as guardian of public money to properly investigate such matters, the initial advice we received was flawed and the subsequent action we took was clearly inappropriate in the circumstances.

The Parish Council wishes, therefore, to offer a sincere apology to Ms Keillar and very much regrets the effect which its action has had on both her and her family. In the circumstances, we wish to make it entirely clear that during her employment as the Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer to Nocton Parish Council she was not, to the very best of our knowledge, involved in any financial or other wrongdoing. We are pleased, therefore, to finally put the record straight and hopefully to draw a line under what we know has been a very unpleasant matter for her.

The Parish Council has already sent a letter of apology to Ms Keillar prior to this meeting and she is aware that I am making this public statement.

Councillor Mike Clarke
Acting Chair of Nocton Parish Council

8 February 2022