

DANEHILL PARISH

Minutes of the Annual Parish Meeting held at Chelwood Gate Village Hall on Tuesday 26 April at 7.30pm.

Present: Parish Cllrs C.C. Critchley (Chairman), M. Mockridge, M. Riminton, H. Montague, M. Garman, S Crabb, A. Garman, T. McHattie
In attendance: Sylvia Martin (Minutes)

Part 1

1. Apologies for absence

C. W. Gooders; Michael & Mary Benson; May Lewis; Jenny Marten

2. Minutes of the Annual Parish Meeting held on 23 April 2015

A member of the audience pointed out that the Minutes were not correct particularly regarding the traffic control on the A22 and A275. Not every point had been made in the Minutes. Minutes should be published on the Council website as soon as possible. The Minutes were approved with 15 in favour, 9 against and 26 abstentions.

3. Matters Arising

None

4. Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2016

The Accounts had been approved and audited.

5. Parish Financial Report

A question was asked regarding expenditure on road projects and the Chairman replied that £10k had been allocated to the A22 and £17.5k on the A275. ESCC had reserved £5.5k for roads in East Sussex. ESCC had allocated 50% to a Match Fund.

Some of the Parish precept had been ring fenced for Community Match Scheme, but a member of the audience pointed out that this had been allocated elsewhere and therefore a request was made for clarification of the amount reserved in the precept for roads in the Parish, and clarification was given.

Finger Posts - It was pointed out that there were no finger posts in some places in the Parish. The Chairman apologised and said that the contractor had been appointed but had been very slow in supplying the remaining finger posts.

Precept - A question was raised regarding the meaning of the word "precept" and the Chairman explained that Danehill PC submitted a sum to Wealden DC which is the Parish expenses for the year and is described as the Parish Precept.

Account auditing - The Chairman pointed out that both internal and external auditors approved the accounts to make sure they are in order. In October the budget is prepared for the coming year which are then approved by the Councillors at their January meeting, then forwarded on to Wealden DC.

Jubilee Green – The Parish Council had supported further access to Jubilee Green for recreational purposes. Work had stopped including the pathways.

Burial Ground in Danehill – a work programme has been in place to extend Area 4 and head towards the A275 which had become very overgrown. Resources had been allocated and spent for the burial ground of £29k to enable the work to progress. £7k of outstanding work was still to be completed. It was pointed out that the accounts do not show a transfer from the burial reserves, only expenditure on the cemetery, however this is shown under "Reserves" on Page 2.

Fletching Fund – the Chairman explained that the interest from this Fund (which is a legacy from an ancient fund when Danehill Parish was part of Fletching Parish) is available to Danehill Parish.

Total Funds – account for £168k with £70k spent on bare minimum to run the Parish. Therefore additional payments are made for projects in the Parish. Littlejohn do the final audit of the accounts.

Tree Warden – is responsible for looking after and inspect the trees in the Parish for public safety. The Tree Warden is only responsible for trees on public grounds owned by the Parish Council.

Fixed Assets – these include Jubilee Green, Danehill Recreation Ground, bus shelters and all valued by the Parish insurance company. Public footpaths are owned by ESCC. It was pointed out that the footpath by the School needs attention and the Chairman explained that ESCC had been informed and they have set a date for work on this footpath.

Part 2

A talk was given by Mr Keith Stevens, Chairman of East Sussex Association of Local Councils and Wealden District Association of Local Councils on “Understanding the impact on a Parish of Localism and Devolution”. Mr Stevens pointed out that County, District and Parishes were running out of funds. The Parish minutes belong to the Clerk. Anything the Clerk sends out to the Parish Councillors who have a precept less than £25K should be on the website.

Appointment of Public Chair for the Open Forum – Cllr Roy Galley was approved and appointed by the meeting. The following subjects were discussed:

Precept Increase; Nursery at Chelwood Gate; Community Warden; Solar Farm; Community Support Grant;

Precept – it was pointed out that there had been a precept increase of £100k since 2010. 90% in the last three years and the precept was 20% higher in 2016 than 2015.

Nursery – concern was expressed at the expenditure of c£140k on a possible new building at the rear of Chelwood Gate VH. There should be a consultation on the Nursery proposals before further costs spent.

Community Warden – this would entail a cost of £2.65 per month to each parishioner. There were some 3 or 4 burglaries per month in the parish. The Chairman pointed out that the responsibilities of the Community Warden would be shared between four nearby parishes, but the meeting agreed that there was not call for a Community Warden for Danehill Parish, despite the fact that the Community Warden acts as the Assistant Clerk.

Solar Farm – it was pointed out that this would involve a parish expenditure of £2.75m which would be the cost of connecting to the National Grid. But the Chairman explained that the project had been withdrawn and there would be no costs during 2016. Although this would reduce the precept for 20 years for parishioners it was pointed out that feeding tariffs were being reduced by the Government. £5k had been spent on a parish feasibility study.

Community Support Grant – it was pointed out that this item was in the 2015/16 accounts, totalling only £7k of 'payments' made to date.

Consultation – the audience requested considerable more consultation from the Council and asked the Council to listen to the parishioners concerns.

Resignation – Cllr Critchley was asked to resign by 40 votes in favour of his resignation, 23 votes against and 6 abstentions out of 110 parishioners present. Cllr Critchley read out the following statement:

Chairman's Statement to Parish AGM 26th April 2016

I would like to make a short statement.

I have been chairman of DPC since 2011. In that time there has been a considerable shift in the funding and responsibilities of local government. I, my fellow councillors and the parish Clerk have done our best to respond to these changes while keeping the interests of the whole parish paramount. Our sole intention has been to interpret the changes, make appropriate plans to safeguard community services & values and then to make decisions to implement those plans.

As a council we have a responsibility: That is, the ability to respond to challenges in a changing world. And I believe we have done our best to exercise our abilities to respond and make the best choices on behalf of the community.

As with any body of government we recognise that not all our choices are going to be universally popular and that there is going to be a degree of opposition. However, we also recognise that a shortage of candidates for the PC at the last election meant that this council was appointed, not elected. While this does not affect our legal status or ability to act, it does leave us open to the criticism of a democratic deficit in the current arrangements.

From the start, I and my fellow councillors decided that we would be proactive in finding solutions to community matters such as provisions for children and young people, community relations and long term funding for parish initiatives. This has meant that we have extended the scope and reach of what has been traditionally undertaken by a PC. All along we have sought to communicate with parishioners, making working documents and financial reports available on our website and by informing every household in the parish of our plans by letter and The Parishioner newsletter. Given the resources we have I believe we have done the best we could with this and we have set the PC on a path of openness which I hope will continue.

And so this brings us to tonight's AGM. We have an appointed council with a need to respond to the government's localism and devolution agenda and this has caused the kind of misunderstandings and mis-communications that we have seen this evening.

It is clear from recent developments and from tonight's conversation that there is a substantial division in our community. There has been accusation and name-calling. There has been personal and collective abuse. And there has been widespread communication of unsubstantiated allegations and uninformed opinions.

I believe it is now time to begin the process of healing. Although we are only one year into a four-year term and could carry on, I believe it is a good time to give everybody in the parish another chance to contribute and put their suggestions in action. Having consulted with my fellow Councillors, I believe that the best way to facilitate a fully democratically, mandated PC is for this council to resign and trigger an election.

Councillors, is this a unanimous decision supported by us all?

I therefore declare that this PC has resigned and an election will ensue. The election will be conducted by Wealden District Council on our behalf. I will tomorrow formally notify them of my decision and the process will begin. Anyone of voting age in the parish may stand for election, including current councillors, and a new PC will be formed to take on the challenge.

I remain proud of the achievements of this PC and I stand by all decisions that we have made.

Thank you.