

**HARPENDEN RURAL PARISH COUNCIL
HERTFORDSHIRE**

Minutes of a meeting of a Meeting of the Parish Council held in the Janet Campbell Room, St Mary's Church, Kinsbourne Green on Monday 23 January 2023 starting at 6.30pm

Present: Parish Councillors Barrett (Chairman), Holder, Randall and Sheffield.

Also in attendance: District Councillor Ed Moore. Andrew Reading (Parish Clerk)

1. Apology for absence

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Mrs Ayres.

The Clerk said that he had been notified just prior to the meeting that Mrs Ayres had recently been admitted to hospital. The Parish Council wished Councillor Ayres a speedy recovery.

2. Declarations of Interest

No interests were declared

3. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 23 October 2022 were approved.

4. Matters Arising

(a) Minute 4 - Matters arising

Councillor Randall said that an offer for a number of parcels of common land used as frontages on the south side of The Common had been made by residents to the landowner. However, this offer had not been accepted. Given the statutory restrictions on the use of common land, it was hard to see that the matter could progress any further.

5. Triangle of Common Land

The Clerk said that the Parish Council had rented a triangle of Common land since 1973 for a peppercorn rent and had planted various trees on the land that same year. It was unclear why the Parish Council had entered into a tenancy agreement as the Parish Council minutes prior to 1979 were missing. Efforts were being made to track down the missing minutes, but there was no expectation of success.

The trees were now fifty years old and as outlined in the tree condition Report from Elders Consultancy considered at the last meeting, a number of those trees required work. Costings obtained from Browns landscaping since the last meeting had been emailed to the Parish Council in November 2022, with work on trees adjacent to The Common estimated to cost £3000 plus VAT. The Clerk recirculated the cost estimate at the meeting.

Subsequent to the last meeting, the Parish Council had agreed by email to undertake the most urgent work at a cost of £588, and this work had now been completed. The remaining works were recommended for completion by April 2024, subject to a further tree report being undertaken in April 2023.

The Parish Council accepted that the remaining tree works outlined would need to be undertaken and that provision for the entire potential costs had to be made. However, the possibility of grants towards the cost should be explored and Councillor Moore said that Veolia might be able to assist. It was also agreed that Harpenden Town Council be contacted to see what they did about trees in their ownership. The Clerk said that he would arrange for three quotes for the tree work once the Parish Council had taken the final decision to proceed.

6. Schedule of cheques for payment and review of expenditure v budget

The Clerk said that as at January 2023, projected expenditure to 31 March 2023 was about £200 over budget, due to the urgent tree work being carried out and the Local Government salary award being higher than anticipated when the budget was prepared. Even so, projected expenditure was only about £100 more than projected income.

The main issue remained the outstanding VAT refund due to the Government Gateway password not working and the near impossibility of resolving the matter by telephone. A paper claim had been submitted in mid-November 2022 but to date, no money had been received.

The following cheques were approved for payment.

	Cheque	Description	£
(i)	100728	Townsend Nursery grass cuts (final Barclays cheque)	112.80
(ii)	300001	Browns Landscape Solutions	588.00
(iii)	300002	Townsend Nursery grass cuts (note possible replacement for cheque 100728 which has gone missing following the switch to Unity Trust Bank)	112.80
(iv)	300003	Clerk salary October to December 2022	538.56
(v)	300004	HMRC tax on salary	359.20
(vi)	300005	A Reading reimbursement of expenses. Primarily LCN hosting costs 2023-25 and ink cartridges	269.48
(vii)	300006	St Nicholas PCC Room hire 23 January 2023	20.00

7. Budget 2023/24 and approval of Parish precept 2023/24

The Clerk said that he had prepared the draft budget for 2023/24 on the basis that the entire cost of the recommended tree works (see minute 5) came from current expenditure. However, that meant total budgeted expenditure of £13,076 and a doubling of the 2022/23 precept. The other significant new item of expenditure was replacement of the Parish Council laptop, which was seven years old and at risk of failing. The Clerk said that as per the current financial year, he had allowed for additional hours as thirteen a month was insufficient to carry out the role of Parish Clerk. Finally, the budget assumed an uncontested Parish election in May 2023.

The Parish Council noted that reserves had been building up slowly in recent years and totalled £7,500 as at 31 March 2022. As this money was set aside for one off and unexpected expenditure, it made sense to draw on some of that money during the forthcoming year for the proposed tree work. Following discussion, it was agreed that half the tree work costs should be taken from reserves and the remainder by an increase in the precept. If some grant money was subsequently obtained, then this could be used to build up reserves and/or limit any precept increase in 2024.

Finally, the clerk reported that starting in April 2024, the District Council planned to split parish council precepts in two parts, with half being paid in April and the remainder in September. This might cause some difficulty for Harpenden Rural where the majority of planned expenditure took place in the first part of the financial year.

It was RESOLVED that

(i) the Council's precept for 2023/24 be set at £9,926 and that the draft budget as circulated be approved

(ii) Parish Council reserves be used to meet 50% of the proposed tree works

8. Appointment of Auditor

The Clerk said that Alex Sage had indicated that he would be willing to undertake the audit of the 2022/23 accounts once again.

It was RESOLVED that Alex Sage be appointed to audit the 2022/23 Accounts.

9. Community Governance Review

The Clerk said that the District Council had published its final proposals on the Community Governance Review and that as expected, no changes had been made to the boundaries of Harpenden Rural Parish. The Chairman reported that Colney Heath Parish had been significantly affected resulting in the loss of 50% of their precept.

10. Update on fly tipping

Councillor Moore gave an update on the problem of fly tipping in the District. In the last few weeks there had been a flurry of illegal tips, in the Parish, particularly in Kennel Lane. Cannabis fly tipping was particularly difficult to stop as the culprits tended to cover vehicle registration plates or use false numberplates.

There were two dedicated cameras in Kennel Lane and 'no fly tipping' signs would be erected at both ends of the Lane when the weather improved. More action was now being taken by the District Council in conjunction with the local Police Crime Team to chase offenders to pay fixed penalty notices. A new general Enforcement Officer was starting in February 2023.

11. St Albans District Council Local Plan

Councillor Moore said that Councillor Wren had planned to update the Parish Council at the meeting, but had been required at short notice to attend a District Council meeting as a substitute. However, a written report would be sent to the Parish Clerk for distribution.

12. Risk Register 2022

The Clerk said that the updated Risk Register as circulated was similar to that agreed last year. The two most notable changes were a switch to Internet banking to avoid the problem of suppliers no longer accepting cheques, and the preparation of a Reserves Policy.

It was RESOLVED that the Risk Assessment Policy 2022/23 be approved

13. Planning Applications and Decisions to 10 January 2023

The Parish Council considered the schedule of planning applications and decisions from October 2022 to January 2023. It was agreed that no representations would be made on any application. The dismissal of a planning appeal at land adjacent to Stanbridge, Kinsbourne Green Lane was noted.

14. SADALC meeting - 9 January 2022

The Chairman reported on the meeting of the St Albans and District Association of Parish Councils held on 9 January 2023.

The Parish Council discussed the need to have volunteers clearing rubbish on the Common and Councillor Sheffield agreed to take this forward with a view to seeking volunteers.

15. Reserves Policy

The Clerk said that he had prepared a reserves policy as previously agreed. Going forward, reserves would be considered each year as part of the annual budget process.

It was RESOLVED that the Parish Council reserves policy as circulated be approved and be added to the Parish Council's website.

16. Internet Bank Update

The Clerk said that the process of switching bank from Barclays to Unity Trust had been problematical with the initial passwords provided to all signatories being faulty. A delay in sending out replacement passwords meant that the payees set up online had been deleted and cheques had had to be issued in order to make urgent payments. The response from Unity Trust to a formal complaint had been disappointing. However, three Parish Councillors now had internet banking access and the Clerk said that going forward he would ask Councillors Randall and Sheffield to approve payees and make payments.

17. Parish Council elections 2023

The Clerk said that the District Council would require receipt of nominations by Tuesday 4 April 2023. Nomination papers would be circulated at the next meeting for completion. It was noted that traditionally elections at Harpenden Rural Parish Council had been uncontested.

18. Work at Kinsbourne House

The Parish Council noted that contractors working on this property had caused part of the Common land in front of the property to be churned up. However, it was expected that the land would be reinstated once the works were finished. It was agreed to monitor the situation.

19. Meadows Activity

Councillor Moore raised the subject of rewilding in the context of Kinsbourne Common and that Nick Sheriff was the person to contact.

20. Date of next meeting

It was agreed that the next meeting of the Parish Council be held on Monday 27 March 2023

There being no other business the meeting ended at 8.17 pm

Clerk to the Council

Chairman