



MINUTES

Meeting: PARISH COUNCIL

Date: 6th January 2025

Time: 7.35PM

Venue: PARISH HALL, THORNWOOD COMMON

PRESENT:

Councillors (10) Cllr Buckley (Chairman), Cllr Spearman, Cllr Irvine, Cllr Blanks, Cllr Clegg
Cllr Tyler, Cllr Mrs Jackman, Cllr Mrs Etherington, Cllr Ms Wood, Cllr Kinnear

Officers in Attendance (1)

Adriana Jones – Principal Finance Officer (meeting Clerk)

Members of the Public (2) – inc EFDC Cllr Burrows

Members of the Press (1)

C24.132 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (1)

Apologies from Cllr Mrs Hawkins.

C24.133 OTHER ABSENCES (3)

Cllr Stroud, Cllr Bedford and Cllr Born.

C24.134 MINUTES

Councillors **AGREED** the Minutes of the Parish Council Meeting held on 2nd December 2024, and **RATIFIED** the minutes of the Finance and General Purposes Committee dated 16th December 2024.

C24.135 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr Spearman declared an interest in the Local Plan.

C24.136 QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

There was one member of the public present, and it was agreed she could address council under the relevant agenda item.

C24.137 REPORT OF THE CLERK

Councillors noted that the Clerk was currently unwell, however had been active on all the normal general matters over the festive season. The meeting Clerk advised that she had been made aware the prior day of a number of leaks in the Parish Hall, although none of them seemed serious enough to affect hall hirings. These included the main front doors (where there was a broken seal albeit this wasn't where the water was coming in from), the main windows in the kitchen, and the vents in the main hall. The Councils handyman had been into the hall void earlier in the day and had suggested the Council needed a roofer to investigate and establish exactly what the problem was and what works were needed. As such the Clerk had tried a number of local roofers without success, and had subsequently contacted a number of Councillors to see if they had any recommendations for contractors. A number had been put forward, two of which had already been contacted regarding the matter. Councillors noted that it was unclear at this stage exactly what the problem was, and if it was an easy fix or more serious works were needed. Cllr Tyler stated that the roof is designed so that water runs off, however as we had had snow over the past few days, this snow probably sat on the roof before melting and possibly seeping in to any crevices rather than simply running away. It was also suggested that perhaps the gutters were blocked and this should be looked at too. Cllr Mrs Etherington stated that it should be somebody qualified to complete the

works, and not just a handyman as this may not be covered by the Councils insurance. It was **AGREED** the initial investigative works should take place to establish what the problems were, and this then should come back to full Council for consideration.

C24.138 REPORTS & MEMBERS REPORTS

- a) **Chairman's Report** – No report
- b) **Vice Chairman's Report** – No report
- c) **District & County Councillors Reports** – EFDC Cllr Burrows advised Council of the recent white paper on devolution, suggesting that all Councillors should have a read of the document as it will affect most districts across the country with many moving to unitary authorities. It also affects Town and Parish Councils. Cllr Tyler asked if it was likely that Parish and Town Councils would disappear, to which Cllr Burrows stated that the paper suggests they have an important role to play in devolution. The meeting Clerk advised that both the Clerk and herself and read the document thoroughly, and were aware of the potential impact of these changes, and that this would be an item on the February agenda, and probably every agenda for the next two years. Cllr Blanks stated that given EFDC's recent changes in terms of amalgamating certain functions with other councils such as Colchester, perhaps they had already pre-empted such a change.
- d) **Parish Councillors Reports** – Cllr Clegg advised that CSW had been very active along Upland Road, with many vehicles doing well over the 36MPH threshold, with over 27% of drivers speeding during the morning checks. On average, 15% of drivers are speeding overall. Once the budget and precept has been agreed, consideration will be given to where the possible VAS signs should be located on both Upland Road and Weald Bridge Road.
- e) **Queens Hall Charity Report** – Cllr Ms Wood advised that following the installation of wooden posts to try and stop quad bikers from driving over the Memorial Playing Field and churning up the grass, somebody had now removed these and shoved them in the bushes. This was extremely disappointing. Cllr Ms Wood advised she would liaise with the contractor again to see if it is possible to concrete them in. There would also be signs placed on them stating the hall and field had CCTV in operation, and that the wooden posts are to stop the quad bikes. The question was raised as to if the path could be narrowed, however Cllr Ms Wood stated that this would not be possible as there were so many gaps the hedgerows, and to narrow the formal pathway could affect any field users who had disabilities and needed a wheelchair. Cllr Ms Wood confirmed that the office at the Queens Hall would be vacated at the end of January.
- f) **Highways** – The meeting Clerk advised that the Chairman had provided her with information regarding some highways works in the Parish over the coming two months, and these had been posted onto social media.

C24.139 FINANCIAL REPORTS

- a) Councillors **NOTED** that the monthly cheque list for December would be sent out in the coming weeks.
- b) Members noted that the CCLA investment report for December showed interest received of £605.32.

C24.140 BUDGET / PRECEPT 2025/2026

Councillors were reminded that on 16th December 2024, the Finance and General Purposes Committee met to consider both the budget and precept for 2025/2026. At the time of the meeting, the Tax Base

figure had not been received from EFDC, and as such the Committee was unable to fully calculate an accurate cost per Band D property. At the meeting, it was agreed to put forward a recommendation to full Council to raise the precept by 4%, mainly as a result of the expected significant increase in street lighting electricity costs and the Governments decision to raise Employers NI contributions. At the meeting, a 4% increase was thought to be around £244,240 (based on the 24/25 Tax Base figure as this was all the committee had to go on).

Councillors noted that the Tax Base figure for 2025/2026 had now been received and was 2,619.50, a drop on the 2024/2025 Tax base which was 2,627.80. This means that a 4% increase would result in a precept request of £243,469 (a deficit of £4,679 in the budget for 2025/2026 which would need to come from either earmarked or general reserves). This equates to an annual increase of £3.56 for a Band D property (£92.65) – an increase of approximately 6p per week for the Parish Council element of the Council Tax. Should Council wish to stick with the £244,240 figure provisionally agreed, this would equate to an increase of approximately 4.4%, leaving a deficit of £3,743 in the budget which again would need to come out from either earmarked or general reserves.

Cllr Blanks asked if provision had been included in the budget for the possible works to the roof of the village hall, to which the meeting Clerk advised it had not been as we had only been made aware of this issue the prior day, however the Council held a Village Hall Structural Earmarked Reserve for such eventualities. As at this stage it was unclear how much work may be needed, it was difficult to assess if the Earmarked reserve held sufficient funds. Cllr Blanks **PROPOSED** the Council should precept £244,240, which equates to a 4.44% increase in the precept. This was **SECONDED** by Cllr Ms Wood. A vote was taken, the result of which was as follows:

9 – For

1 – Against

It was therefore **AGREED** that the precept for 2025/2026 should be £244,240, an increase of 4.44%, equating to a Band D property paying £93.01 per year out of the Council Tax towards the parish council, and increase of £0.24p per month.

C24.141 APPOINTMENT OF INTERNAL AUDITOR 2025/2026

The Parish Councils long standing Internal Auditor has now retired, albeit they will complete the final internal audit for 2024/2025 in May of 2025. As such, the Council will need to appoint another internal auditor. The availability of decent quality auditors who understand the requirements of Parish Council audits are few and far between. The Council **AGREED** the appointment of Heelis & Lodge Independent Internal Audit Services as this Councils Internal Auditor for the 2025/2026 financial year. The cost for an Interim and year end inspection of the accounts is £510.

C24.142 NEW BUS STOPS – HIGH ROAD NORTH WEALD

Councillors noted that the Clerk had been contacted by Essex County Council Passenger Transport Infrastructure Team, advising that ECC Local Passenger Transport have been asked by the local bus operator to provide an additional pair of bus stops on High Road North Weald, as there are no physical bus stops between the stops known as The Talbot and Skips Corner which is a distance of approximately 1400m. This far exceeds the recommended distance in urban areas of 400m. The proposal is to install a pair of new bus stops near to the junction with Black Horse Lane consisting of a pole, flag and timetable frame. They are not at this stage considering a shelter for the stops. The works would be programmed for the financial year 2024/25 and they would welcome the Parish Councils comments on this matter as soon as possible. Cllr Irvine asked if these would be electric smart timetables, to which the meeting

Clerk advised they would not be, albeit this was still something this Council would be pursuing with developers. Councillors were happy with the proposal to install these additional bus stops, however the Chairman raised a query regarding the suggestion that the distance between the Talbot and Skips corner was 1,400m, suggesting he thought it was more like 800m. In addition Cllr Ms Wood expressed concern about the proposed location in and around Skips Corner, stating that consideration should be given to the proximity of the new bus stop going southbound when taking into account the location of the bus stop near School Green Lane (going northbound) in that this area was on a bend and if the bus stops were not positioned correctly it could be dangerous with vehicles overtaking. It was **AGREED** the Clerk would respond detailing these points.

C24.143 ESSEX COUNTY COUNCIL – LOVE YOUR BUS

Councillors noted that ECC had launched a new ‘**Love Your Bus Grant Fund**’. This initiative will provide Parish and Town Councils with the opportunity to secure grants of up to £50,000 for projects aimed at increasing bus patronage and enhancing local services. The objective of the fund would be to enable Parish and Town Councils to invest in measures which would increase patronage on the bus service or services which serve their communities, projects that:

- Increase passenger numbers.
- Improve service frequency and coverage.
- Attract new users through community engagement and marketing.

This will allow Parish and Town Councils to propose initiatives such as increasing service frequency, running early morning or late-night services, and extending routes to connect underserved areas to key destinations such as hospitals or schools. These are just a few examples of what the funding can be used for. Collaborative applications between neighbouring councils will be encouraged to maximise impact across communities. The Love Your Bus grant funding initiative would enable Parish and Town Councils in Essex to bid for funding to support and grow your local bus routes. This initiative is part of the Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP), a plan that Essex County Council (ECC) is committed to delivering. The fund would be designed to support community-led action to enable the growth of key local bus services throughout 2025/2026. The proposal is to create a £500,000 grant fund from the BSIP+ funding allocated to ECC by the Department for Transport (DfT). The maximum award would be £50,000 per project. The funding is revenue funding only. Any suitable measures would be considered, including but not limited to:

- Attract new passengers: Improve information through marketing, leaflets, timetables and maps, and/or community-led engagement events.
- Service enhancements: Increase bus service frequency during peak hours, introduce late-night or early-morning services, and/or create new route extensions to connect underserved areas to key destinations.
- Community engagement and promotions: Targeted marketing campaigns, community-led engagement events, and/or school and community group partnerships.
- Passenger experience improvements: Improved passenger information (provide information on bus routes and schedules using maps, leaflets, posters, and/or other accessible formats).

The Chairman invited the member of the public to address the Council. The member of public advised she was a resident of Hastingwood, and that historically there used to be a bus service on a Monday which took residents to and from Epping, and on a Thursday doing the same to and from Harlow. There were many residents in Hastingwood who were unable to drive, and would benefit from a similar service, suggesting that perhaps one of the current routes (for example Potter Street) could be diverted to go down Harlow Common, Mill Street, Hastingwood Road, and then back on to its normal route. Councillors fully supported this idea.

Cllr Mrs Etherington advised that there was also a clear disparity between where you live in the village and whether or not you have to pay for your children to get the bus to school, stating that the cut off point was around the Library in North Weald, and that this didn't seem fair. Cllr Clegg advised this was the same for Thornwood, where residents had been fighting to address this for over 18 months. Cllr Tyler advised that there did use to be a bus which took you to Tesco, and that perhaps ECC should have liaised with the major supermarkets.

The Meeting Clerk advised that there was only 5 weeks until the end of the consultation, stating that in addition the Parish Council would have to do all the necessary work to secure the funding, such as liaising with the bus companies, obtaining evidence of community support, and creating the bid itself. This obviously presented a resource issue given the limited amount of time. The meeting Clerk suggested that a short online survey could be completing asking residents to put forward any ideas or proposals. Cllr Irvine asked if a full leaflet drop could be conducted, however the meeting Clerk expressed concern that there simply would not be enough time to do this, as well as liaising with bus companies and putting the bid together. Cllr Ms Wood suggested a small working group could be set up to support the office staff with this project. This was **AGREED**, with Cllrs Ms Wood, Cllr Kinnear, Cllr Mrs Etherington and Cllr Tyler agreeing to sit on the working group. The local resident advised she would be happy to deliver some leaflets in and around Hastingwood. It was **AGREED** to complete an online survey, and start the ball rolling to try and get a bid underway, initially specifically regarding provision for Hastingwood residents and to address the issue of children going to school from both North Weald and Thornwood. In addition, it was also **AGREED** to contact ECC advising that the time limit for Parish and Town Councils to complete all this work was too short, and ask if possible for an extension.

C24.144 NORTH WEALD MARKET TRAFFIC – MEETING WITH MARKET OPERATOR

The Parish Council held a Meeting via Zoom on Tuesday 17th December with Gary Saunders, the Market Operator. Cllrs Alan Buckley, Andy Tyler, Paula Etherington, Dawn Kinnear, Colin Kinnear and the Clerk were present. Various concerns were discussed including the fact that even though various arrangements had been put in place for Church Lane and the immediate surrounding roads, there were still problems with traffic along the A414, Rayley Lane roundabout and the roundabout at the Talbot Harvester. Also the traffic problems definitely seemed to be happening at certain peak times such as around 7.00-9.00am and around 12-2.00pm. General concerns included whether it was the marshalling of the traffic in to and out of the Airfield, or simply the volume and numbers of vehicles entering at the same time. Concern was also expressed that traffic was queuing at the Hastingwood Interchange and also the problems associated with traffic lights along the Thornwood Road outside the new developments.

Gary Saunders, the Market Operator, said that he visits the market most weekends and does attend the 'pinch points' to see for himself any perceived problems. He stated that he felt there had been a problem over the last couple of weeks but feels that these problems will reduce after Christmas as not as many people will be visiting the market. He also will be in talks with EFDC about the future of the size of the market and car parking. It was suggested to Mr Saunders that he should speak to Darren Goody, EFDC, to see if some of the old parking plans as used to be implemented for the Fighter Meets could be reinstated, where there were many vehicles that parked at the airfield on these events - far more than those for the market. Mr Saunders advised he would be contacting Darren and would copy the Parish Council into the email that he would be sending. It was agreed that Gary would contact the Parish Council before the Market picked up again in the Spring/Summer.

The Chairman provided a verbal update, stating that what puzzles him is that everybody is fully aware of the what the problems are, however this only seems to be an issue for the market, and not any other large functions held at the airfield, so perhaps something could be learned from this. The Chairman also

stated that it seemed as though EFDC had left this to Mr Saunders to deal with, and had washed their hands of it. Cllr Tyler agreed, stating that if EFDC were receiving money from leasing the land for the market, then they needed to be involved in addressing the problem, as it seemed as though Mr Saunders had his hands tied. Cllr Tyler expressed his concern that there could be a fatality as result of emergency vehicles being unable to access residents' homes when the market is on, and that this issue wasn't just one of inconvenience, but one of safety. Cllr Ms Wood advised that during the online meeting they expressed to Mr Saunders what the problems were, and how it affected local residents, as well as suggesting other options including opening up another gate. Due to the poor weather recently there have not been any issues, but we cannot simply wait until the spring when things get bad again. It was **AGREED** that the Clerk should contact Mr Saunders asking if he had now had the opportunity to speak to Dareen Goodey, and that all District and County Councillors as well as Dareen Goodey should be copied into the email. It was essential the Parish Council continued to put the pressure on. Cllr Mrs Jackman suggested the chief executive of ECC should also be copied in.

Meeting closed 8.32:

Signed

Date