



The Cirl Bunting is the UK's rarest farmland bird. The entire breeding population is found between Exeter and Plymouth.

Coffinswell Parish Council

Serving the Communities of
Coffinswell & Dacombe

MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL PARISH MEETING TUESDAY 18th APRIL 2023 7PM AT ST BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH

Present: Cllr N Orchard (Chair), Cllr S Avery, Cllr A Brent, Cllr S Spokes, Cllr C Bell
In attendance: Cllr A Dewhirst, Mrs L Moore (Clerk)
Ten members of the public

1. The Chairman to open the meeting and received apologies:

The Chairman opened the meeting at 7:26 pm.
There were no apologies for absence.

The County Councillor's Report was read by Cllr Dewhirst and is available to view on website.

2. The Chairman's Annual Report

Personnel

I'd like to begin this report with a review of the personnel changes that we've seen in the past year, as there have been a number of significant comings and goings. In our first meeting of the year last May, Alex Parkes was re-elected as Chair of the Council and I was elected Vice Chair, with Cllrs Ashley Brent, Stephen Avery and Vince Flower as our fellow councillors. Unfortunately, in early June Alex was taken ill and he understandably decided to stand down from the Council, so I was then elected Chair at the June meeting, with Cllr Stephen Avery elected Vice Chair.

In September our Clerk Juliette Thompson resigned in order to take up a full-time role as clerk to Kingskerswell Council, although she very helpfully agreed to continue as our clerk until we found a new clerk. Also, in September we co-opted Sally Spokes to the Council to replace Cllr Alex Parkes. We were fortunate to recruit Lucie-Anne Moore to be our new Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer at the beginning of November, but in December Cllr Vince Flower decided to stand down, so we then had to start the co-option process again, and I'm pleased to say that Cyrena Bell agreed to be co-opted at the last meeting in March.

I'm pleased to say that our request to Teignbridge to allow us to increase the number of councillors from 5 to 6 was approved in the autumn, but we are not allowed to recruit the additional councillor until the forthcoming elections on 4 May, when the next 4-year council cycle begins. In the recent call for nominations for these elections there were only 4 candidates nominated, those people being Stephen Avery, Cyrena Bell, Michael Atkinson and myself. Since there were fewer nominations than seats available those 4 people have been duly elected to the council from 5 May 2023. We will therefore still be short of two councillors from 5 May, so we will need to start the co-option process again on that date.

So, as you can see, the year has been one of stops and starts which has rather hampered the smooth operation of council business. This has not been helped by a number of newcomers, myself included, who have had to pick up the reins without a great deal of experience in the ways of parish council operations, so I can only apologise for the lack of progress on a number of fronts during the

last year. I hope that we're all learning fast, and that normal service will be resumed once we're back to full strength in May.

So many thanks to Alex, Vince and Juliette for all your hard work on the council, your wisdom and knowledge of the village and its people will be sorely missed. And many thanks also to my fellow councillors for your invaluable service, help and advice during the past year. Finally on the topic of people, I'd like to thank our Devon County Councillor Alistair Dewhurst for his tireless work on behalf of the parish and the wider community, and to our District Councillor Mike Haines. We are very grateful for the support that Mike has given us over the years of his tenure, and recognising that he is standing down at the May elections we would like to thank him especially, and wish him a peaceful and happy retirement.

Finance

Having dealt with the people I'll move on to the topic of money. The good news is that we have kept our spending below the original budget, so this has enabled us to get the level of our reserve up to about 12 months of revenue spend, which is the recommended level and a significantly better position than we were in a year or so ago. The less good news is that we achieved the surplus by failing to spend much on a number of budget items. In other words, with all the changes in personnel, we've not actually got a lot done this year. I'm optimistic that we can get back on track again next year and expect our spending to return to its normal level.

As a consequence the Parish Council decided that we could not justify increasing our precept request for the 2023-2024 financial year. At a time when inflation is around 10% and a lot of people are struggling, and both Teignbridge and Devon Councils are facing severe budget deficits, we hope this shows a willingness to help, albeit in a very small way.

Support to the church - This year was the first year that we have been unable to give the church an annual maintenance grant of £450, as we've been advised that this is now deemed to be illegal. In order to try and compensate for this in a legal way the Council decided that it would be appropriate to fund the hire of the church for parish functions. A budget was therefore set aside to pay for anyone who wanted to use the church for a meeting or other event. We probably didn't advertise this adequately, but so far there has been little take up of this facility, but with the revival of the Social Committee during the last year we hope that there will be more use made of this fund next year. I think everyone by now knows what a precarious position the church finances are in and I hope that the two meetings held recently can lead to some good ideas for future funding.

CIL fund - Some of the CIL fund money was spent this year on a new electric strimmer and long handled hedge trimmer, as we are looking to move from our petrol-powered strimmers to becoming all-electric in due course. We are about to add to the kit with a standard size hedge trimmer shortly. Following this purchase we will still have over £5,000 in the CIL fund so we'll be looking for ideas on ways to spend this during the next year. Suggestions so far are for an additional defibrillator to be located in Dacombe, and replacements for some of the dilapidated benches. Once the new council is up and running in May we'll get this kick started again.

P3 funding – we again received funding this year from Devon County Council's Parish Paths Partnership scheme, aka P3, most of which was a contribution to the cost of the electric strimmer and it's (huge!) battery. Work on keeping the footpaths clear and neat and tidy has been a little less this year, mainly due to the fact that most of the qualified strimmers are either too old and unfit (no names) or working very hard on their proper jobs. I'm pleased to say that Tim Rumball became our latest official strimmer last year, but so far we've failed to give him much to do. I intend to get a little more organised with this in the coming year, and hope that the paths will become more passable again shortly. If anyone else would like to do the strimmer course and join the team then you would be very welcome. Thanks go mainly to Sheenagh for her efforts to keep the worst of the brambles and other hedge incursions at bay this year, particularly on Footpath 4.

Meetings

In 2021-2022 the Council decided to increase the number of meetings held to almost one per month in order to deal with the expected workload. While this helped with meeting some deadlines, particularly the requirement to respond to planning applications, it was felt that the number of meetings was rather more than strictly necessary, so for 2022-2023 we decided to revert to bi-monthly meetings, and I think this has worked fairly well, so we'll be continuing with that format this year. This will help reduce the workload on our clerk Lucie, particularly as she drives over from

Tavistock for each meeting. The only problem with reducing the number of meetings is that sometimes we need to respond to a planning application before the next meeting. We are dealing with this on a case-by-case basis, depending on whether we think there is likely to be any significant debate on the application. For non-controversial applications we'll discuss it informally between councillors and respond accordingly. For other applications we'll try and get an agreement from Teignbridge to delay our response to the next meeting, but if that's not possible then we'll have to hold an extra meeting, as we have done today.

Planning

One of the main functions of the Parish Council is of course to review planning applications and respond to Teignbridge with the views of the Parish. While the Parish Council has no statutory powers regarding planning, we would hope that Teignbridge takes our views fully into account when making their decisions. It appears that we are not alone in our view that this is not always the case, and so earlier this year I attended a meeting at Doddiscombeleigh where representatives from about 30 Teignbridge parishes met to discuss the relationship with TDC. It was agreed that we should be acting more as a group, so representations have been made to TDC in an effort to improve the situation. Another meeting is due to be held in Bishopsteignton in May.

Regarding planning applications made this year, the most significant one has been the application for a solar farm. This was always going to be a controversial subject, and we expected some level of objection to siting such a large industrial construction in our uniquely beautiful valley. However, the Council needed to balance the downside of loss of visual amenity with the benefits of providing low-carbon renewable energy. These benefits apply not just to the land owners, but also to the parish and the wider community. The Parish Council therefore decided that, although the solar panels would be visible from a few locations in the parish, from most places they would not be visible, so the Council decided to support the application. We did however ask that the application go to committee rather than being a delegated decision, but so far no date has yet been given for a committee hearing, and it is by no means certain that TDC will approve the application.

Strategic Plan

Our previous Chair Alex Parkes put a lot of effort into creating a strategic plan for the parish, and this is published on the Council's website. I shall have to apologise to Alex and the parish that this has received very little attention since Alex retired from the council, as my focus has mostly been on dealing with the various personnel changes and in dealing with a number of planning issues. If I'm re-elected as Chair at the Annual Meeting in May then I'll be paying that more attention during the coming year. Once we're up to full strength with 6 councillors then we'll be able to review the ownership of the various elements of the plan and start to move them forward again.

Thanks

So many people contribute to the parish and its life. I'd like to thank everyone that helps to keep our parish going, and keeping it looking as good as it does, and making it such a nice place to live. This includes our farmers who manage the landscape, cut all the hedges, remove fallen and diseased trees, and when they've done that, grow our food.

Thanks to the team that looks after the church. It's the centre of our village and it's been there for over 800 years, so let's do our best not to lose it now.

Thanks to the people who keep the well area looking so good, Sheenagh and Sue for their expert gardening skills, Jed and Roger for bringing and taking away, and Sue is also making the area around the Coffinswell sign on Under Way look nice.

Thanks to Vince Flower and the teams of litter pickers, I think you'll agree that you rarely see much litter on the roads through the parish.

Thanks also to Vince for being our Police Liaison Coordinator until he stepped down, and to Sheenagh for the work that she does as Neighbourhood Watch coordinator.

Thanks to all those, too many to mention, who keep their front gardens and neighbouring verges etc so neat, tidy and beautifully planted. A walk through the village at any time of year is always a horticultural treat.

Thanks to those, mostly the residents of Princess Cottages, who have gallantly taken on the organisation of a number of village social events, and we're now looking forward to the Coronation Celebrations.

Finally, thank you again to my fellow councillors, past and present, and to Alistair and Mike for your work and your wisdom, to Lucie for the great work that she's done in the short time that she's been with us, and I look forward to the next year.

That concludes my report, and I can now open the meeting up to the floor and invite anyone who would like to ask a question or start a debate on any topic to please raise their hand.

3. Informal Public Session:

It was suggested that the benches may need attention or possible replacement. Currently the Defibrillator is in Coffinswell and it was felt that one is required in Dacombe due to the distance and time involved to the existing Defibrillator, together with the suggestion that the Parish Council should arrange for the provision of First Aid training.

A Neighbourhood Plan was suggested by the Chairman and it is hoped that this can be introduced after the Election and the Parish Councillors are fully elected.

The matter of Broadband still appears to be an issue depending upon location within the Parish. Fibre Optic cable has been established through the village but there is still a problem linking with the houses and connection to the Exchange in Kingskerswell. All present agreed communication from "Open Reach" is very poor and frustrating. The Chair asked if anyone does get information on this issue then to please share with the Parish Council.

The meeting ended informally, with groups staying on to chat and enjoy the refreshments provided.

Signed:
Chairman of Coffinswell Parish Council

Dated: