



**Speldhurst
Parish Council**

*Working for the
whole community*

Local Government for Langton Green, Speldhurst, Ashurst and Old Groombridge

MINUTES OF THE COUNCIL'S OPEN MEETING

HELD ON MONDAY 11th OCTOBER 2010 AT 7.30pm

IN LANGTON GREEN VILLAGE HALL

PRESENT: Cllr. Mrs Lynn Jeffreys - Chairman, together with ELEVEN Councillors, and 52 parishioners.

The following papers were available to those present: Financial; Parish Office and Highways information.

- 1. Apologies for Absence** – Cllr Mrs Paulson-Ellis, Cllr John Davies
- 2. Census – Holly Goring of TWBC and Nicky Field of Office of National Statistics.**

Cllr. Mrs Jeffreys introduced Holly Goring who gave a short presentation about the 2011 census. She explained that it is 10 years since the last one and they have been carried out every 10 years for over a century (with the exception of WWII). It enabled the government to collate information which it uses to help determine the financial support it makes available for local authorities to plan and fund services. She also explained that there were a number of short term jobs available.

3. Chairman's Report

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys opened the evening by welcoming everyone and explaining that the meeting was a move by the Council to improve openness and consultation and that the primary objective was to give residents the opportunity to raise issues which the Council should address in the year to come.

She said that all committees were represented and if anyone had questions regarding Planning issues, Local Needs Housing, Environment and Footpaths for example then the Chairmen of the committees would be pleased to do so.

She said that the Council had put out a lot of information, particularly on Finance, and went on to describe how, in the past, the Council had used what was left over at the end of the financial year as their reserves and how it was now adopting the strongly recommended modern practice of establishing ring-fenced general reserves in line with National Association of Local Councils (NALC) guidance. She said that the contingency was different, and this money would be used for unexpected maintenance jobs and grants that came after the precept had been decided and therefore the general reserves would not be touched. She emphasised that the information is always available because the clerk produces the figures on a monthly basis and this has always been the case.

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys spoke about the letter that had been published in the Langton Life magazine that asked questions about the Council's finances, drew conclusions about spending and made demands. She reiterated that if the writers had approached the clerk he would have

been able to answer most of their questions, they would have found that their conclusions were often wrong and that their demands were already met.

She went on to clarify the over spend in administration in the previous financial year by explaining that the budget process is done in November by the Finance Committee in close cooperation with the clerk, who is the responsible financial officer. In November 2008 the committee relied on the previous clerk's projected costs, and it was not until the following spring that they were asked to consider extra hours, separate broadband payments and an improved office allowance. The timing meant that costs would exceed budget and then the previous clerk resigned in the summer of 2009 which meant that the Council had to advertise the job, had to run two phone lines for a time and overtime to the new clerk while he learned the procedures. The payment of an additional £3,000 was due to the clerk finding a cheaper insurance policy but as a result had to be paid before the expiry of the old one.

She then clarified the suggestion in the letter that the Parish Council office was the main reason for the extra funds in the precept. The Council was planning to borrow the money from the Public Works Loan Board and that, depending on the term, the impact on the precept was going to be minimal at about £6,500 per year, less if it was borrowed over a longer period.

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys then responded to the demands for more transparency. She emphasised that every decision is made in public and that all of the Council's meetings are held in public and these are advertised on the notice boards and website. She added that the minutes are on the website along with other information and that the village magazines are also used. She said that the Council was looking to improve and that a regular newsletter and a new website were the first steps in that process.

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys then invited questions from the public:

John Burrough lived on The Green, Langton Green and was concerned about safety issues on the land outside the Old Watson Hall. The building project had over run and the builders were continually parking on their land, but he was more concerned that the area was not safe because cars were using the area to avoid oncoming traffic. He asked what the progress was with building something to make the land safer.

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys replied that the Council had been working on having some protective islands installed but had to have the work approved by Kent Highways Services (KHS) because it abutted the road. They had asked for proper drawings which would include drains and kerbing. The first quote received for these drawings had been £20,000 and the Council was looking at alternatives. She said that the Council shared his concern and would be looking to resolve the issue as soon as possible.

Simon Norton from Groombridge asked why the village was bereft of any proper signage and warning signs (that other local villages seemed to have) because the traffic was travelling through the village too fast. Why wasn't there a 40mph buffer to slow the traffic down?

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys said that KCC Councillor John Davies had agreed to fund an ISS warning sign which would give it priority, however it was not known exactly when it would be installed, but hopefully within two months. She also said that it had been made clear at a recent meeting between the clerk and KHS that unless there was a quantifiable record of personal injury that KHS would not be taking action.

Julian Stretch of Langton Green asked questions about the presentation of the financial information and in particular the grants.

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys explained that the grants were what the Council paid out and not received. She explained that the Parish Council has to maintain its assets but also has a responsibility for other areas that are maintained by Trusts and the pavilion at Speldhurst was an example of this. She explained that the accounts are audited every year and that these records are on the website and notice boards annually.

Mr Stretch asked if next year income could be shown as well as expenditure. Cllr Mrs Jeffreys said that this would be the case.

John Andrew of Speldhurst spoke of the traffic in the village, that it was a congested rat run, often gridlocked, and that there should be a 20 mph speed limit outside the school.

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys said that all speed limits needed enforcing and the police are often too stretched to be able to do this on a consistent basis. KHS have cancelled a speed review of A & B roads so was unlikely to be reviewing C roads. The Council was however pushing for improvements and was considering obtaining funding for an ISS or SID on the Langton Road along with improved signage in Barden Road.

Peter Lee of Langton Green asked about reserves.

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys explained again how the reserves had worked and that they were now ring fenced and held separately in the accounts.

Ian Dates of Langton Green asked if the Council had any intention to add to the reserves in the coming financial year and if the Council would be reducing the precept in the next financial year.

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys said that the Council had sufficient reserves but they would need to set aside some funds for the repair and renewal of its assets. She hoped that there could be a reduction in the precept and work would start next month on calculating it.

Keiron Frankum of Stone Cross spoke of speeding traffic and that the A264 was too narrow for lorries to pass in places and asked if the A road status could be removed.

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys reiterated that enforcement of speeding was a police matter and that there was little chance of having the status removed but the Council would bring the matter to the attention of the new PCSO.

Mrs Kilshaw of The Crown in Groombridge reiterated the need for speed watch enforcement to be done at busy times.

Anthony Gerrard of The Green, Langton Green re-emphasised the point made by his neighbour and that cars were parking on his land and was considering taking action if something was not done soon.

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys said that the Council would try and seek interim measures.

Mike Wheeler of Ashurst wanted to know if there was an Ombudsman for the KHS in this age of the Big Society.

Mrs Page of Langton Green spoke of traffic concerns and signage.

There was a general discussion about the effectiveness of homemade signs.

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys said that the Council had recently agreed to sponsor a project at the Langton Green Primary School for a poster campaign.

Simon Dean of Langton Green asked how often Traffic Wardens visited the village because lorries were often parked along from the bakers making it impossible to get out on to the main road. He asked if the land opposite could be used to provide parking for the shops.

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys replied that the area was privately owned and it was unlikely that this would be allowed.

Jim Stone of Langton Green asked about the hedge and area between Birchetts Avenue and Third Street and who was responsible for its maintenance.

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys said that the Council had decided to maintain the area and that it would be done soon.

Peter Lee spoke of the footpath by the Recreation Ground and that only part of the job of clearing it had been completed.

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys said that the clerk would ensure the rest of the path was maintained

David Howden of Langton Green said that he was concerned with the cancellation of the Countywide speed review and said that the speed of traffic along the Langton Road by Dornden Drive was unacceptable. He also said that night flights in to Gatwick airport was also a problem and he would be attending a meeting about it and would report back to the Parish Council.

Trevor Palmer said only accidents involving personal injury were reported.

Julian Stretch asked about homemade signs and about the accident statistics required and could they be made available.

Emma Jackson of Langton Green said that the Twitten crossing was an improvement but there was no lollipop lady at the school in Langton and therefore no flashing lights to warn the cars. Parents rely on traffic to slow down and this is not always the case. Cllr Mrs Jeffreys said that the Council was in the early stages of looking in to asking for a speed warning indicator and obtaining external funding for it.

David Jukes, Borough Councillor said he would be pleased to try and get Nick Chard to attend a meeting in the future to see the concern in the Parish about highways issues.

John Jeffrey of Langton Green asked why we needed a Parish Office and that it seemed an odd decision under the financial circumstances. Cllr Mrs Jeffreys again explained that the project would be funded by a PWLB loan and would have a negligible effect on the precept. She explained the longer term benefits as laid out in the document provided.

John Burrough of Langton Green asked about Churchyard maintenance grants. Cllr Mrs Jeffrey explained that the Council had powers to contribute to the maintenance of graveyards.

John Jeffrey asked when the Council would be deciding next year's budget. Cllr Mrs Jeffreys replied that the Finance Committee would be meeting in November and reporting to Full Council in December and that all the meetings were held in public and that all of the minutes of those meetings would be on the website.

Tim Arrowsmith of Groombridge said he was prepared to donate an office for two years if the Council would spend the money saved on traffic measures. Cllr Mrs Jeffreys said that there would be sufficient room in the budget for the traffic measures and the office as well.

There was continued debate about the merits of the Office. Cllr Mrs Jeffreys repeated that it was the Council's decision that the benefits of having the two clerks under one roof with the public records stored in one place, along with the availability of being able to hold small committee meetings would create a more efficient Parish Council.

Roger Mallett of Langton Green spoke of the good work that the Council was doing and that he considered the Parish Council was good value for money.

Nick Coffin of Speldhurst also believed that there was benefit in having a Parish Office on a local site.

There were no further questions and Cllr Mrs Jeffreys asked whether there should be further meetings every autumn and there was overwhelming support for this.

She said that the next meeting of the Council was on November 1st and the Finance Committee would be meeting to discuss the precept on November 8th.

The meeting closed at 9.55pm

CHAIRMAN