

SHOREHAM

Parish Clerk:

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COUNCIL

MINUTES of a MEETING of SHOREHAM PARISH COUNCIL

Remotely via Zoom 3rd March 2021 from 7:30pm

Present: Jonathan Histed (in the Chair)
M Cockburn, A Hibbins, B Jeffery, N Powell and M Sheward

Also Present: 33 members of the public

County Councillor Roger Gough
District Councillor John Edwards-Winser
District Councillor Irene Roy

Clerk: Sarah Moon

A member of the public publicly thanked KC for salting and gritting the roads during the cold weather and also to all those local residents who helped grip the footpaths and pavements.

1. Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Hubble.
2. There were no disclosures of interest.
3. The minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 3rd February 2021 (copies previously distributed) were agreed and the Clerk was authorised to sign them on behalf of the Chairman.
4. **District/County Councillor Reports**

County Councillor Roger Gough

A225 : Kent Highways officer, Whitney Gwillim, has a plan in place regarding the A225 speed limit reduction and Shoreham Parish Council should be receiving something within a fortnight after it has been cleared internally. A reply in regard to the HIP (Highways Improvement Plan) should be received around the same time. They are also looking at carrying out a pedestrian survey to provide background for the traffic island. District Councillor John Edwards-Winser requested that this be carried out once the children have returned to school. District Councillor Irene Roy enquired as to whether there would be any funding available for the project and County Councillor Roger Gough confirmed that he would check.

Pot holes : The annual pot hole blitz started today. A budget of £10 million has been allocated.

District Councillor's Report

District Councillor John Edwards-Winser reported that throughout the pandemic, Sevenoaks District Council have distributed around £33 million to approximately 8000 businesses. He also implored residents to 'please bear with us' regarding disruptions to the waste collection as SDC are very pushed at the moment. Several members of the Parish Council and members of the public stated that Shoreham had not been affected by this disruption and the refuse collectors were doing a great job.

5. Chairman's Report

There was no Chairman's report as everything is covered in item 7.

6. Clerk's Report

- The new website is live although yet to be launched due to the amount of content required to be migrated.
- The lights in the car park have been fixed.

7. Walnut Tree Trust

Recent developments in regard to the Walnut Tree Trust were discussed and an update given following an informal meeting recently held between members of the Parish Council and the trustees of the Walnut Tree Trust.

The objectives of the discussion were:

- To read out a statement on behalf of the Walnut Tree Trustees;
- To give context to events leading up to current developments;
- To update members of the public on an informal meeting held between members of the Parish Council and the trustees of the Walnut Tree Trust;
- To gauge public opinion in terms of future plans.

The Chair stated that no resolutions would be made at the meeting but, if there were a sense that actions were required to be taken, then an EGM could be called at 3 days' notice and resolutions made at that time. Anyone, who did not have the opportunity to speak at the PC meeting, could email the Clerk over the next few days and their comments would be included as motions at the EGM.

The Chair read out the following statement on behalf of the trustees, stating that it was a great shame that none of them were able to attend in person.

Statement

'WALNUT TREE TRUST – REVIEW

1. The primary aim of the Trust, when established, was to preserve the fabric of the buildings for use as a social club. The club was closed after WWII and in the '60s the trustees decided to offer the cottages for rent to village residents. Subsequent trustees have been committed to providing low cost housing.
2. The costs of upkeep of such old, listed buildings has risen in a way the original trustees could never have imagined. When the current trustees decided it was necessary to undertake substantial renovation of the buildings they were quoted a substantial sum, which was well beyond their resources. It was decided to sell the cottages – whose fabric is now protected by their listed building status – on a long lease while retaining the ownership of the grassed frontage. With the proceeds they planned to build three new dwellings at the southern end of the site which would allow the Trust to continue to provide three low-cost dwellings for village residents.

3. This plan met with substantial opposition. In a meeting with the Parish Council in Autumn 2019 they made it very clear to us that they would strenuously oppose the proposed construction of new homes. They offered help, but also stated forcefully, with only one dissenting voice, that they saw the cottages as being unsuitable for low rent housing and that in their opinion we should not seek to continue to make the provision of such tenancies our aim. That being the case there was no way we could hope to work together.
4. After much discussion we decided to approach an independent Housing Trust whose sole aim is to provide good quality low cost housing in rural villages, to see whether they would consider the Walnut Tree cottages suitable. This would ensure the good preservation of the fabric of the buildings, while the Walnut Tree Trust would retain nomination rights for the tenancies. Their initial response was very favourable but disappointingly, after survey, they felt that number 29 was too much to take on.
5. Negotiations are not completed with regard to the Housing Trust taking on numbers 31 and 33 on a long lease with the WTT retaining the freehold of the properties. The Housing Trust would wish to take vacant possession of the cottages in order to undertake a complete renovation of them. At the moment the intention is to sell number 29 on a long lease, with the WTT retaining the freehold.
6. At a meeting with the Parish Council on 26 February they stated that they believed it would be possible for the Trust to renovate the cottages while continuing to use them for low cost housing, and that they would be prepared to assist with this. This change of attitude introduces a new perspective, with the possibility of working together. We continue to consider our options and hope to come to a decision within a few weeks’.

Context

The Chair explained that the Trust was set up in 1932 with an updated schedule being put in place in 1966. The main aim of the trust is to maintain the Walnut Tree Buildings (3 cottage plus outbuildings) and the grass frontage. Having achieved this, any remaining profits should be distributed to the village of Shoreham. The objective of the Trust has never been to provide low cost housing.

Three or four years ago, the current trustees felt that they could no longer afford to maintain the buildings long term and should sell off the houses. They argued this point with the Charities Commission as it was contrary to the objectives of the trust. Eventually, having spent a substantial amount of money, the Charities Commission agreed to change their schedule. The Trust has now become an ICO (Incorporated Charitable Organisation), which ensures the protection of the trustees from individual liability. In the new schedule, there is no mention of the cottages and the Trust is now able to dispose of them, should they wish to do so. All trustees live in Shoreham. They are volunteers and have always had the best of motives in what they have done. That said, some poor decisions have been made in the past so now it is time to see what can be done to secure the future of the buildings and that tenants, who occupy them.

There is a great level of public interest in regards to any future plans for the buildings. The tenants clearly have an interest as they are currently risking eviction. The village as a whole also has an interest as the original objectives of the trust were to preserve the buildings and to distribute money to village causes.

Contrary to the beliefs of some, the trust has never been mandated to provide affordable housing. That said, rents have, for a prolonged period of time, remained very low in comparison to market rates and have also been significantly lower than the LHA (Local Housing Allowance). As a result, the income received by the trust has been insufficient to enable the properties to be properly maintained and they have fallen into a certain level of disrepair.

With all this in mind, an informal meeting between the trustees and the Parish council was held in November 2019. At the meeting, the Council learned of the trustees' plans to sell the old cottages privately and to build new dwellings adjacent to them. It was clear that planning permission would never have been granted for this. The Parish Council asked the Trustees to reconsider these plans and offered help in the form of building, surveying and engineering experience as well as practical assistance in helping to find grants to bring the old buildings into a good state of repair. All offers of help were turned down although the trustees eventually decided to halt plans to sell the cottages and confirmed that they would not be seeking to build any new dwellings on the curtilage. A year or so afterwards, the Trust applied for planning permission to convert the barn into a four bedroom house but this has since been withdrawn. During this time, several complaints were submitted to the Charities Commission, both by individuals and by the Parish Council but they were very reluctant to get involved.

Meeting between Parish Council and Trustees 23rd February 2021

A few weeks ago the trustees wrote to the tenants of the Walnut Tree Cottages giving them notice to vacate in October 2021. The tenants were unhappy and began to try and glean support from the village via social media. The trustees were taken aback that the tenants were unhappy and requested a meeting with the Parish Council to clarify 'inaccuracies' and to outline their plans.

The meeting was held via Zoom and lasted around one and a half hours. All trustees were present as were six members of the Parish Council plus the PC Clerk. The trustees confirmed their plans as follows:

- To obtain planning consent for the barn and to sell it;
- To sell number 29 privately;
- To transfer numbers 30 and 31 to a Housing Association;
- To give any cash realised from the sale of 29 to village causes.

The Parish Council's view was

- That the buildings should not be sold;
- That the buildings should be maintained;
- That the tenants should be retained.

The Parish Council stated that it did not believe that the trustees' plans were in line with those of the village and reminded the trustees of the resolutions taken at the 2019 PC meeting as well as the petition, which achieved over 400 signatures in opposition to the plans.

The trustees stated that they had no alternative as the amount of work required to bring the properties up to current standards amounted to around £200,000. They were however, unable to give specific examples of exact repairs/renovations required other than the fire proofing of party walls. An itemised schedule of works was promised to be forwarded to the Clerk.

Following the meeting, the Clerk requested documents from the trustees in order to be informed for this meeting. Copies of the last 6 years accounts have been provided although the trustees have refused to share minutes or the schedule of works. The trustees also declined to attend a PC meeting to public talk about their plans.

Public Opinion

When asked to indicate whether they agreed with the trustees' plans for the cottages, no member of the public raised their hand. Conversely, all (who had their cameras on) raised their hand to indicate they disagreed with the proposals.

- One resident, who lives very close to the cottages, described the distress that their friends and neighbours were suffering. She stated that the communication between the trustees and the tenants had been terrible as was their unwillingness to share information.
- Another resident expressed bafflement towards the plans. She indicated her willingness to do anything to help conserve the buildings and feels a huge amount of sympathy for the people who live there.
- One of the tenants reported how much she loved living in the cottages and how she has spent money making the property look nice as it was fairly unliveable when she moved in. She stressed that she is committed to looking after the cottage and helping to maintain and preserve it.
- Another tenant explained how he had offered to make improvements at his own cost but was refused permission. During the 15 years that he has lived there, the lack of maintenance has been appalling. The same applies to the barn and other outbuildings. The barn was at one point rented by the shop but this arrangement stopped when its roof started to leak. This was not repaired and now there are two huge holes.
- One member of the Parish Council pointed out that having looked at the accounts provided by the trustees, around £90,000 had been spent on professional fees over the past six years. In contrast, just £40,000 had been spent on maintaining the properties.

Having listened to members of the public the Chair requested that anyone who did not get the opportunity to speak should write to the Clerk. All ideas/opinions collated would be considered and potentially converted into resolutions at an EGM.

Other actions, which could be taken without requiring resolutions, included:

- Imploring the trustees to work with the PC to find an alternative solution;
- To approach all members individually and ask them to reconsider;
- To speak to Laura Trott MP (meeting scheduled to Friday);
- Seek legal advice (this would be a last resort and can hopefully be avoided).

The Chair confirmed that he would firstly write to the trustees asking them to halt any transfer. Residents should write to the Clerk with their views and ideas for agenda items. If this shows an appetite for certain actions to be taken then an EGM will be called in the very near future. This would be necessary for example if any actions involved expenditure or the seeking of legal advice.

A motion was passed to extend the meeting past 10.00pm.

8. Working Party Updates

- a) Due to the lack of time, the working party updates were agreed to be deferred until the next meeting.

9. Correspondence/Information

- a) An application for financial assistance has been received from the Sevenoaks Volunteers Transport Group (last year a grant of £50 was given).
RESOLVED to award a grant of £50.
- b) An application for a grant for the sum of £1125 has been received by the Shoreham & Otford Cricket Club to help pay for repairs necessary to be made to an area of the ground damaged by heavy footfall this year.

The George offered to pay £600 of the cost. The Parish Council RESOLVED to award the rest as long as the definitive public right of way of the footpath is neither altered nor impeded.

- c) A letter has been received from the West Kent Badger Group asking if we can write to KCC requesting that wildlife warning signs be erected in Filston Lane and Shacklands Road. Due to time constraints, it was agreed to defer this item to the next meeting.
- d) Issue 1 – 2021 of the Allotment & Leisure Gardner has been received.

10. **Financial Matters**

Accounts/Payments: The schedule of payments as shown in Appendix A was approved.

11. Dates of next meetings (all starting at 7:30pm unless otherwise stated)

- a) Planning (if required) and Amenities and Services Meeting – Wednesday 17th March 2021
- b) Planning (if required) and Parish Council Meeting – Wednesday 7th April 2021
- c) Planning (if required) – Wednesday 21st April 2021

The meeting closed at 10.22pm

Appendix A – Schedule of Payments

2 March 2021 (2020-2021)

Shoreham Parish Council
PAYMENTS LIST

Voucher Code	Date	Minute	Bank	Cheque No	Description	Supplier	VAT Type	Net	VAT	Total
227	04/03/2021		NetWest current acco		Street lighting	PSR Lighting and Signs Ltd	S	446.05	89.21	535.26
231	04/03/2021		NetWest current acco		Website	Hugo Fox	S	29.99	6.00	35.99
222	04/03/2021		NetWest current acco		Lengthsman wages	N McDonnell	X	34.88	0.00	34.88
221	04/03/2021		NetWest current acco		Clerk's salary	Sarah Moon	X	1,061.03	0.00	1,061.03
232	04/03/2021		NetWest current acco		Office telephone	O2	S	10.65	2.13	12.78
238	04/03/2021		NetWest current acco		Subscription	Zoom	S	11.99	2.40	14.39
224	04/03/2021		NetWest current acco		PAYE & NI	HM Revenue & Customs	X	63.73	0.00	63.73
223	04/03/2021		NetWest current acco		Lengthsman wages	Mrs A Hollands-Parsons	X	261.60	0.00	261.60
233	04/03/2021		NetWest current acco		Broadband	Sarah Moon	X	10.00	0.00	10.00
234	04/03/2021		NetWest current acco		Office Allowance	Sarah Moon	X	30.00	0.00	30.00
230	04/03/2021		NetWest current acco		Grant	Shoreham PCC	X	1,000.00	0.00	1,000.00
228	04/03/2021		NetWest current acco		Hall hire	Shoreham Village Hall	X	54.00	0.00	54.00
225	04/03/2021		NetWest current acco		Printing Shoreham Post	Silver Pines Services	X	35.70	0.00	35.70
229	04/03/2021		NetWest current acco		Professional fees	Churchill & Churchill	X	250.00	0.00	250.00
235	04/03/2021		NetWest current acco		Water charges	Castle Water	X	34.17	0.00	34.17
237	04/03/2021		NetWest current acco		Water charges	Castle Water	X	3.00	0.00	3.00
236	04/03/2021		NetWest current acco		Electricity	EDF Energy	X	92.00	0.00	92.00
Total								3,428.79	99.74	3,528.53