**BENHALL AND STERNFIELD PARISH COUNCIL**

**Minutes of the Meeting held on Monday 27 January 2025 at the Ex-Servicemen’s Club, Benhall**

**Councillors present**: Bev Barclay (Chair), Riven Brace (Vice Chair), Chris Durrant, Charlotte Fox, Paul Nicholson, Sue Nicholson, David Secret, and Alan Woods

**In attendance**: Katherine Abbott (Parish Clerk), Cllr Tom Daly (District Councillor) and Cllr Andrew Reid (County Councillor).

**Open Forum**: There were ten members of the public present. The Chair invited them to present questions or issues for the Council’s consideration.

(a) Overgrown and inaccessible footpath

A gentleman complained that it was necessary for pedestrians to walk in the road because of the overgrown footpath adjacent to the Railway Farm Shop and Benhall Cottage. The Chairman advised that the Clerk had written twice to the Farm Shop to remind its tenants of their responsibility to ensure the footpath was safe to use and that this item was scheduled on the agenda at item 5. Cllr Reid (SCC) said that landowners and tenants who did not comply with polite requests could be referred to the County Council who had additional enforcement powers. It was agreed that the Clerk contact the two properties once more to seek their cooperation before referring the matter to the County Council.

(b) School Lane

In response to a query, Cllr S Nicholson reported that an update on the schedule was within the insert for the edition of *Ebb and Flow* being distributed that week.

**1 Reports from the District and County Councillors**

Cllr Reid (SCC) had submitted a written report prior to the meeting and this he summarised.

* Suffolk Regiment’s archives would now be housed at West Suffolk House and available to view by appointment.
* Suffolk’s Rural Services Grant (£3m) designed to support rural communities in Suffolk will be cut by the Government next year.
* Suffolk’s Economic Strategy, also known as a Local Growth Plan, has been developed by the Suffolk Business Board in collaboration with businesses, partners and stakeholders across the county.
* Local Councils jointly challenging National Grid and the government on energy projects, demanding fairness for their communities and environment.
* Proposals to create a unitary authority and a combined authority under an elected mayor.

Councillor Secret asked if the proposed Devolution would impact the support given to existing Parish Council. Cllr Reid replied that as the existing authorities ‘wound down’ this would be a significant risk. This would remain a risk as District Councils were dissolved. Councillor Fox said it was imperative that vigilance remained on all the various energy projects and that the level of detailed scrutiny was maintained. Cllr Reid said that there remained many unknown elements of the proposal, and that no consultation was being conducted.

Cllr Daly (ESC) reported on the various energy projects as summarised in his written update. Regarding National Grid (Sealink) specifically, Cllr Daly stated that the Inspectorate was being urged not to accept the submission as it was considered unfit for examination due to being incomplete and having a lack of detail.

The Parish Council expressed concerns that two key energy projects Officers were leaving ESC. Cllr Daly said that recruitment was underway.

The Chairman thanked Cllr Reid and Cllr Daly for attending the meeting.

**2 Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Stebbings and approved.

**3 Declarations of Interest for items on the agenda**

There were no declarations of interest.

**4 Minutes of the Meetings held on 25 November 2024 and 6 January 2025**

Both sets of Minutes were approved without amendment as true records.

**5 Matters arising**

(i) Training to support the mental health of residents

Councillor Fox updated the meeting on the training she had undertaken with MIND to help people struggling as a result of the combined impact of the NSIPs.

(ii) Footpath diversion at Hill Farm

Councillor S Nicholson stated that she would draft a letter to Hill Farm to seek permanency of the diversion and submit that to the Rights of Way lead at SCC.

(iii) Trial of new style email addresses

The three Councillors who had been using the new style of email address since November reported that they found it much easier to use as it separated Council business from their personal emails. It was agreed that the three Councillors would assist other Councillors who wished to make a similar change, on request, but that this would be on a voluntary basis.

(iv) Site visit to Fen Meadow

The Parish Council was very frustrated by the lack of action on this issue from SZC. The Clerk was asked to make further contact to resolve this.

(v) Potential increase in water run-off

Councillor Fox said that concerns remained about the potential and combined adverse impacts of water run-off from SZC-related construction, the installation of converter stations and inadequate attenuation ponds. Please see item 12.

(vi) Overgrown hedgerow

See notes of the Open Forum above

(vii) Shotts Meadow outline planning application

The consultation on the revised access had ended in December. SCC Highways had not yet offered a response or an alternative proposal. Councillor S Nicholson was seeking an update from the Planning Officer.

(viii) “Beware children” sign

Councillor Stebbings was not present, but it was noted that the sign had been re-erected. It was overgrown, however.

(ix) Possibility of grant funding for The Wadd

Councillor Brace reported that the cost of replacing the boardwalk in its entirety was excessive and proposed that it be replaced or repaired piecemeal as and when required. The draft budget, to be considered later in the meeting, contained funds for The Wadd.

(x) Water testing

It was agreed to contribute £30 to the Alde and Ore Association towards the costs of its sampling and analysis of water quality. This to be reviewed in one year.

**6 Request for a contribution to the running costs of the *Ebb and Flow* community newsletter**

The Editor of the *Ebb and Flow* community newsletter had written to all Parish Councils within the Benefice to seek a financial contribution towards running costs. It was unanimously resolved to contribute £100 under Section 137 of the Local Government Act 1972. Section 137 provided Parish Councils with the discretionary power to spend a limited amount of money for purposes for which they had no other specific statutory power and which addressed community needs.

**7 Open Space Play Fund – Discussion of possible uses of the available funds**

The Responsible Finance Officer (RFO) reported on available funds for play or sports projects available from East Suffolk Council and specifically ear-marked for Benhall and Sternfield. The RFO also referenced the eligibility criteria for applications to release the funds.

Following discussion, it was proposed, seconded and resolved by unanimous vote that Councillor Durrant, as parish representative for the village green, would investigate new or replacement items and report back to the Council.

**8 80th anniversary of VE Day – Commemoration on 8 May 2025**

Councillor Woods sought the Parish Council’s views on how Benhall and Sternfield might wish to celebrate this event.

The Responsible Finance Officer stated that the draft budget, for discussion at item 9, contained a proposed £120 towards the lighting of the beacon.

It was agreed that Councillor Woods would investigate this further, including the costs for the following: a script for the event, a flag (VE Day specific or a Union Flag being mindful that VJ Day would also be commemorated later in 2025), bunting (VE Day specific or Union Flag), and the cost of an aerial photograph of villagers forming the letters V and E, and a suitable song. Councillor Woods to report back to the Council in March.

**9 To formally approve a budget for the 2025/6 Financial Year**

The Responsible Finance Officer presented her previously circulated draft budget and invited questions or comments.

Due to financial constraints, the Parish Council agreed that it would only be able to fund one change of panels for the telephone kiosk in the coming year. An amount of £200 was presented in the draft budget for this purpose and agreed. It was also agreed that, if possible, alternative sources of funds for this would be identified.

The draft budget was proposed, seconded and by unanimous vote it was resolved that the annual budget, as submitted, be approved.

**10 To formally approve the Parish Council’s Precept Demand for 2025/6**

The Parish Council, at its meeting on 27 November 2024, had made an indicative decision to set its Precept Demand for the coming financial year at £10,000.

Having now approved its annual budget, this indicative decision was proposed, seconded and by majority vote (8:1) it was resolved to ratify the earlier decision, and the Precept was approved for £10,000.

**11 Responsible Finance Officer’s report on financial activity, reconciliation etc**

The RFO reported on the current balances of the Council’s bank and building society accounts as well as income and expenditure since the last meeting in November. The reconciliation was submitted and signed by Councillor Fox. The RFOs report was noted.

**12 Energy Projects update**

Councillor Fox provided a comprehensive report on meetings she had attended on behalf of the Council. In summary, there remained concerns about altered water flows close to the SZC site; the trial of water abstractions (post-freezing) at the reservoir at Hill Farm and local water source; the cumulative impact and the need for DSSNZ and Ofgem to come to East Suffolk to see firsthand what it will look like when the SPR and National Grid projects were added; the adverse impact on the mental health and wellbeing of residents; and the effect on the East Suffolk environment and the need to protect a small number of endangered species.

The Chairman thanked Councillor Fox for her work in this regard.

**13 Reports from Parish representatives**

(a) Planning

Councillor S Nicholson stated that the extension of Shotts Meadow by 41 properties had not progressed further. ESC Planning Department was awaiting a revised response from SCC Highways Department.

(b) The Wadd

Councillor Brace reported that a large willow had snapped. It did not pose a risk as it was not within a walkable location. He therefore proposed that it be left in situ.

(c) Village Green

Councillor Durrant said that a safety inspection of the play equipment was scheduled for March.

(d) Trees

Councillor Brace said that there was a need to maintain a watchful eye on the orchard.

(e) Cemetery

Councillor P Nicholson said that the formal handover of Burial Administrator duties had taken place on 28 January. He stated that a review of costs and income over the last five years would be undertaken by March 2025 and the results brought to the Council.

(f) Newsletter

Councillor S Nicholson said she was trying to ensure that the Servicemen’s Club got a ‘value for money’ feature each month on one of its activities.

(g) Emergency Planning

Councillor Stebbings had reported that, due to other commitments, no further progress had been made towards the creation of a Plan; however, there were proposals in place to move this forward.

(h) Benhall Servicemen’s Club

Councillor Stebbings had stated that the Club’s committee and stewards had reported a very busy period since the end of January with various events and the Christmas period being well attended. Due to supplier’s costs, the Club would be reviewing its drinks prices in February with minor rises likely. The Club continued to look for fresh and new ideas of events to put on for the villages.

(i) Neighbourhood Watch

Councillor Durrant said that he would like to relaunch the Neighbourhood Watch Scheme. It was agreed that an item be placed in the newsletter insert, the website and on Facebook seeking interest in resurrecting the Scheme.

**14 Correspondence**

The Parish Council had received correspondence from several residents regarding the narrow strip of Village Green which ran from Green Lane opposite Oak Cottage and alongside the boundary of the Old Dairy house and garden. They had raised several concerns and had suggested a possible solution. Councillor Durrant had taken photographs, and these had been sent with an explanatory note to Fenn Wright for comment.

The Clerk was asked to confirm the dates of meetings of the Parish Council in 2025. These are: 17 March 19 May 21 July 22 September 24 November

The meeting concluded at 8.50pm