

BENHALL AND STERNFIELD PARISH COUNCIL

Minutes of the Meeting held on Monday 20 July 2026 at the Ex-Servicemen's Club, Benhall

Councillors present: Bev Barclay (Chair), Coral Duncan, Chris Durrant, Charlotte Fox, Paul Nicholson, Sue Nicholson, Julie Parmenter and Mark Stebbings.

Also present: Cllr Julia Ewart (SCC), Katherine Abbott (Clerk/Responsible Finance Officer)

Open Forum: At the request of the Chair, Cllr S Nicholson provided a short summary of the history and basis for the South Saxmundham Garden Neighbourhood (SSGN) project which had arisen from the last Local Plan over some ten years. The Local Plan was a Government-required 'blue print' that identified potential building land. Once such land was included in the Local Plan there was an "assumption in favour" that approval was granted, in principle, and so a challenge to the SSGN project would not be easy. The project had been subject to a Full Examination by the Planning Inspectorate and as a result of the Parish Council's input at that stage some changes had been made to the proposals. For example, and following discussions with Saxmundham Town Council, the original proposal for half of the employment area to be within Benhall, a small rural village, and half in Saxmundham and this had resulted in the boundaries being altered so that it sat solely with Saxmundham. However, the physical presence of a significant development in close proximity to Benhall and Sternfield remained nevertheless. Consultation on the SSGN had been underway since 2021 and had been detailed in the insert to the newsletter; it had now reached the planning application stage and the Parish Council would be submitting detailed comments and representations. Members of the public were encouraged to also submit their individual representations as numbers do make a difference and, to date, only two residents had commented. The Parish Council's final response would be placed on its website.

The Chair invited members of the public in attendance to present questions or issues for the Council's consideration.

A member of the public referenced the intervening period since the formation of the last Local Plan and that this had seen the development of Sizewell C, proposals for Sea Link and an increasing cumulative impact on a narrow geographical area. Cllr S Nicholson said that over-turning proposals in the Local Plan needed to be based on finding holes in the application and referred to the significant concerns raised by Anglian Water and Suffolk Highways in this regard.

Another member of the public asked if the Parish Council was in support of the project within the Local Plan. Cllr S Nicholson said it was not possible for the Parish Council to say it did not support the Local Plan *per se* but it could state that it did not support certain elements. The member of the public asked what residents could add to the process. Cllr S Nicholson advised residents to look at the Anglian Water and Suffolk Highways objections, as well as those of Heritage England regarding the need to protect St Mary's Church.

A member of the public highlighted the need to protect arable farmland. Cllr S Nicholson said the Parish Council had stressed the need to protect food production and security.

Cllr Fox said that, ideally, the Local Plan would be considered alongside the multiple Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs) but, unfortunately, the Local Plan was being considered in isolation.

With reference to the recent Examination Stage for the Sea Link NSIP, Councillor Fox said the Parish Council had been informed by representatives of National Grid that a very significant number of the 6,000 representations submitted by residents had been dismissed as being “emotive and unfounded” and/or based on a “template approach”. Residents wishing to submit a representation on the SSGN project were advised to make it clear it was their individual view.

Cllr Fox said that she had participated actively in the Examination Stage of the Sea Link project but felt there was now a need to be more proactive to try and get all the NSIPs, and the Local Plan (current and future) considered collectively and not individually.

1 Apologies for absence

There were no apologies for absence.

2 Declarations of Interest for items on the agenda

With reference to the discussions under Open Forum, above, and item 13 on the agenda, six Councillors (Cllr Barclay, Cllr Durrant, Cllr Parmenter, Cllr P Nicholson, Cllr S Nicholson, Cllr Stebbings) declared Pecuniary Interests related to safety concerns for Anglian Water’s use of the narrow, single tracked Aldecar Lane for access to the sewage works. The Clerk recorded these declarations for completeness and transparency, but it remained fully appropriate for six of the total eight parish councillors to be able to continue to take part in a matter which significantly affected the community and the public interest in allowing discussion of the item and ultimate decision making. Therefore, the six Councillors named did not withdraw from the discussion or the meeting for these items

3 Reports by District and County Councillors

The County Councillor was present, her written report to the Parish Council would follow. Cllr Ewart stated that it was her intention to have a proactive approach to her role and, in this regard, she had asked the Cabinet Member for Planning to visit the area to see the practical implications for residents of living with the impact of the NSIPs. Cllr Ewart expressed her concerns at the volume of traffic through the villages as a direct result of the cumulative impact of the NSIPs and was doing her best to raise the issue and have it addressed. She emphasised that the aim of all should be to avoid accidents in the first place and not wait until they were occurring. Cllr Ewart said that £430 had been ring-fenced for use by the villages (see item 5(i)).

The District Councillor was not present but had provided Councillors with a written report.

4 Minutes of the Meeting held on 18 May 2026

The Minutes were approved without amendment.

5 Matters arising

(i) Grit/salt bin

Cllr Parmenter referred to the grit bin near the school which had been damaged, potentially by a reversing bus, and was now no longer usable for the storage of grit/salt. A possible relocation of two other existing bins had been considered but, following a query from a resident, this had been revisited and Cllr Parmenter proposed that a new bin be purchased and placed next to the shed at the pre-school; the other two existing bins to remain as currently sited. This was seconded and unanimously agreed. It was further agreed that the £430 which Cllr Ewart had highlighted as available to the villages be contributed for this purpose. **(ACTION: Cllr Parmenter)**

(ii) Fido bin

Cllr Duncan reported that she hoped to have a stall at the Dog Show in September to raise funds to purchase an additional bin which, with the addition of the required license fee, would cost c£1100. The Clerk reminded the meeting that a survey of the proposed location for a new bin was still awaited by East Suffolk Services Ltd and before any purchase was possible. **(ACTION: Cllr Duncan)**

(iii) Neighbourhood Watch

Further to the queries raised at the May meeting, Cllr Durrant stated that whilst incidents reported to Neighbourhood Watch were passed on to other agencies, as appropriate, this was sometimes slow and he recommended that 999/101 was used as well. Cllr Durrant stated that statistics did show that a Neighbourhood Watch scheme reduced the number of incidents by around 20%. He would be placing noticeable boards around the two villages and also asked if the Club could display a poster and hold a number of leaflets, window stickers etc.

(iv) Cemetery – Grass cutting and wildflower area

Cllr P Nicholson referred to his earlier proposal to leave an area at the cemetery to house wildflowers and native species of plants, e.g. primroses. He also proposed that the cemetery be mowed less frequently; pathways would be mown between the rows and to enable access to the graves but other areas would not be kept very short, as now. It was proposed that the wildflowers and purchase of indigenous species of bulbs etc be funded from the savings made by less mowing; in addition, the Clerk had confirmed that CIL funds could also be utilised and that the Adnams Community Trust Grant might also be explored. Cllr Durrant raised concerns at the proposal to mow less frequently and suggested that the Parish Council would receive complaints. He added that if the proposal was approved, he would not be willing to continue to further manage the contract. It was agreed that Cllr Nicholson would seek the views of residents on the proposals via an item in the next insert to the *Ebb and Flow* and via a notice on the cemetery gates. The results to be brought back to the next meeting together with indicative costings, plan to indicate the proposed area for wildflowers, future management of the contract and all other details for decision. **(ACTION: Cllr P Nicholson)**

(v) Gov.uk emails

Cllr Fox reported that she had found the gov.uk email to work well and that it was easy to set-up, with support to do so available if needed, and use. It was agreed that Cllr S Nicholson would move to gov.uk next and the Clerk was asked to arrange this. **(ACTION: Clerk)**

6 Thriving Communities Investment Fund

The Clerk referred to this Fund which had recently been established by East Suffolk Council and to the two suggestions for its use, subject to meeting the qualifying criteria [East Suffolk Thriving Places Investment Fund | East Suffolk Council](#)

- Restore or replace the children's climbing apparatus on Benhall Green
- Replace the rotten sections of the boardwalk at The Wadd, to pay for contractor to manage the cutting of The Wadd (item 15(b) refers) and the management of its trees

It was noted that another incident of vandalism had taken place at the play area. It was agreed that a draft application to the Fund would be prepared and, subject to it being confirmed as possible under the qualifying criteria, funds for both projects would be sought. If this was not possible, the Clerk to identify other possible sources for the play area plans. The draft application to be discussed by the Parish Council and next steps agreed.
(ACTION: Clerk)

7 Sea Link Community Fund

The Parish Council considered its response to National Grid's consultation on items which might be funded and which reflected local needs [Community Fund survey](#). The consultation was also open to all residents to respond by the deadline of 5 August. Sea Link would be establishing a workshop for the affected parish and town councils, potentially towards the end of August, in order to agree how best to utilise the £1.6m (provided in two parts) to best effect.

The agenda was re-ordered at this point, but the minutes reflect the order on the agenda for ease.

8 Internal Audit report 2025/6

The Responsible Finance Officer referred to the recent detailed internal audit of the Parish Council's financial reporting and governance arrangements. The Council had received a very positive report with the only recommendation being that the transition to gov.uk emails continue. The Parish Council received and noted the report.

9 Statement of financial activity in Quarter 1 for review and reconciliation

The Responsible Finance Officer had provided Councillors with the latest version of the Cashbook which provided details of all spend, income and balances. This was reviewed and reconciled. In summary income in the first quarter had been £6719.01 (of which £1000 was restricted) and expenditure had been £4424.84 (£2831.84 (unrestricted) and £1593 (restricted being CIL)). The CIL balance was £11,474.75 (of which £2300 was currently committed) and the balance of the building society account was £20,627.08 (of which £6358.98 was restricted (CIL)).

10 Proposal for saving in Payroll costs for consideration and formal decision

The Responsible Finance Officer advised that the Council paid SALC £108 per annum for a payroll service for its one member of staff. It was anticipated that this would increase in 2027. The RFO proposed that the Council did not renew its arrangement with SALC and instead utilise a free service, used by other PCs. This was unanimously agreed and the Clerk was asked to put this in place as soon as possible. **(ACTION: RFO)**

11 Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)

- **Available balance (Responsible Finance Officer)** Item 9 refers
- **Suggestions for spend (All Councillors)**
Cllr Duncan suggested that, if the application to the Thriving Communities investment Fund (item 6) was unsuccessful, the replacement of the boardwalk at the Wadd be considered. This was agreed.

12 National Significant Infrastructure (Energy) Projects (NSIPs)

Councillor Fox reported and updated on the period since the PC meeting held on 23 March. In summary, her main headlines were that the Sea Link Development Consent Order examinations were completed on 5 May. The Examining Authority must complete the examination of the application within six months. A Targeted Consultation by Lion Link that referenced the access route to the Saxmundham converter stations site over Benhall Railway Bridge; some of the Parish Council had met with representatives of Sea Link on 13 July (see item 13) (James Buckley (Sea Link Project Manager), Sandra Waddell (Community Relations) and one other member of the community fund team and had discussed the Bridge.

Cllr Fox read out to the meeting a recent email she had sent to Jenny Riddell- Carpenter MP. She asked if there was a wish by residents to hold a public meeting on the targeted consultation including the proposed changes to the Railway Bridge element before the deadline for a response of 5 August. It was agreed that a public meeting would be arranged. (Clerk's note: This was held on 29 July and attended by approximately 30 members of the community.)

13 Updates from external meetings

- **Sizewell C Southern Transport Forum on 3 June** (Cllr Fox) There was nothing new of note to report. The next meeting was on 2 September.
- **South Saxmundham Garden Neighbourhood on 9 June** (Cllr S Nicholson) The Parish Council's draft response to the targeted consultation was read to the meeting. It was suggested and agreed that the cumulative impact of this and the various NSIPs be added to the draft (see Open Forum).
- **Meeting with representatives of National Grid on 13 July** (Cllr Fox) (see item 12)

14 Draft Volunteer Policy for consideration

The Parish Council had previously used volunteers to help with various projects and also proposed, under the Community Emergency Plan and the Biodiversity Group, to try and recruit additional volunteers. The Clerk had drafted a Volunteer Policy so there was clarity

and consistency in the use of volunteers for Councillors and the volunteers themselves, as well as ensuring good governance and aspects of insurance were correct and in place.

The draft Policy was reviewed and considered. Cllr Durrant raised several concerns around the addition of aspects of governance and stated that he would prefer a more pragmatic approach, similar to that already in use. This was noted.

The Policy was approved by a majority.

15 Reports from Parish representatives

Planning plus Cycle, Walk, Wheel and Ride Project

Cllr S Nicholson reported that Cllr Ewart was helping to unblock the delay in the installation of the modal bollards by the Highways Department; it was hoped this would be completed by the end of the Summer.

The Wadd

Cllr Duncan said the three areas of the Wadd had recently been cut by Sizewell C contractors at the request of the Parish Council and at no cost. It was hoped this arrangement could be repeated annually with SZC. The wet meadow cuttings had been requested as green donor hay to restore and diversify Wild Benhall/Fen Meadow. This common process enabled seed-rich hay from a healthy meadow to be immediately spread over another site low in plant variety. A specialised all terrain harvester was used to ensure minimal damage to the ground. A botanical survey had also been conducted by the Suffolk Wildlife Trust and the results reflected a well maintained, rich and diverse wildlife site: the details would be shared on the Council's website and within the next newsletter.

Village Green and play area

Councillor Durrant said the damage from the recent incident of vandalism at the play area had been repaired by two local volunteers. The volunteers were thanked very much.

Trees and Orchard

An old tree had fallen in Kiln Lane and was being used for wood.

A resident raised concerns at the instability of a very large pine close to power lines in Benhall. The Clerk was asked to look into this.

Cemetery

See item 5(iv).

Newsletter

Cllr S Nicholson asked Councillors to continue to contribute items of interest from their areas.

Emergency Plan

Cllr Parmenter said a high-level version of the Plan would be made available on the Council's website. This would remain a living document subject to updates but it needed to be accessible to residents in the event of an incident. Cllr Parmenter had recently attended training on the running of an emergency centre.

Ex-Servicemen's Club

The Club had applied for grant funds from the Sizewell C Community Fund.

The results of the recent survey had been at around 30% and many useful comments and suggestions had been received.

Welcome letter

Councillor Duncan reported that there had been no new residents to the villages.

Improving habitats and wild spaces etc.

A local ecologist had offered to survey the villages for bats and this had been undertaken at four sites: The Wadd, The Lodge, St Mary Magdelene Churchyard and Glebe Farm. The results would be shared on the Council's website and in the newsletter.

Cllr Duncan continued to monitor the results of water sampling tests undertaken by the Alde and Ore Association in order to identify fluctuations in water quality or negligent actions etc.

16 Information paper on hours and costs

A small number of Councillors had provided records of the number of hours worked on behalf of the Council and any travel costs incurred (albeit expenses were not paid to Councillors). The Clerk had collated these and provided the data as an information item. The Chairman said the contents of the paper were noted and thanked all the Councillors for their hard work and commitment for which she was very grateful.

17 Correspondence

There were no additional items of correspondence not covered within the agenda or these minutes.

18 Urgent items

There were no items of urgency requiring discussion.

The meeting concluded at 9.38pm.