

BARCOMBE PARISH COUNCIL

Minutes of the Annual meeting of Electors held at the Sports Pavilion, Barcombe, at 18.30 on May 5th 2021

Present: Cllrs Arbenz, Cornwell, Holman, Loughlin, Marler, Mills, Skan, Stewart. Cllr Linington, and three members of the public.

1. Welcome by the Chairman of the Parish Council

2. Apologies: Cllr Smith, Cllr Pack

3. Signature of the Minutes of the last meeting, Wednesday 15th May 2019: Agreed

4. Chairman's report, May 2019 – May 2021

It's been a difficult year for the Parish Council to try to function, Zoom has worked although I think it has hampered discussion. I am not going to look backwards - you have all been present and know what's happened and what has or has not worked. Thanks to Cllr Mill's suggestion, meeting reports have been in the Barcombe News as well as on the notice board and the website. I think the Parish Council has been as open as it can.

For the future – most issues are under control. Aside from the important ongoing playground and pavilion projects development in Barcombe will, quite rightly, be a major issue. The character of the village is at stake. As you know some people want more houses – others none. Some sites are seen as acceptable by some – others are not.

My notes about housing, over the last few months and in my report at the AGM in May 2019, have been detailed but we are still in a strange place with an absent local plan and variable housing numbers being considered.

Regardless of what I said in the 2019 Annual Meeting there are two issues that keep re-appearing on Facebook and in general conversations and I think I should give you brief statements on them here as I am the probably the only one with all the information. The summary provided here will help the Parish Council if they are questioned in future.

1/ Why does Barcombe not have a neighbourhood plan?

Proposed development sites arise through private discussions between the District Council (who have an obligation to build houses) and landowners (who want to convert earth into cash). In Barcombe's case this came as a complete surprise. The Lewes District Council's 2014 Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) hit us with 6 potential sites for development, colour coded Green, Amber or Red.

Our understanding at the time was that Barcombe was a special hilltop village with a full planning boundary and there was no room for new houses. We protested and Lewes District Council (LDC) casually explained that they have moved the planning boundary – the planning boundary is only a suggestion they said!

We presented the situation to the village in the Barcombe Housing Survey in 2015. Following that, the Parish Council considered preparing a Neighbourhood Plan. Three local people (councillors and residents) attended seminars, workshops, presentations and discussions as well as seeking consultancy advice.

This group met several times with the LDC Planning Department and found in the small print that a Village Neighbourhood Plan would always be subordinate to a District Council Local Plan and could never override it.

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Advice showed that it takes 2-3 years to create a Neighbourhood Plan. In 2015 we were told that the Lewes District Local Plan would be signed off in 2016, which included the “Barcombe Green Sites”. As we could not beat that deadline – it was pointless to continue.

2/ The Parish Council should have a housing need survey.

Two years after abandoning the idea of a Neighbourhood Plan we figured that if we have no control over sites and numbers we would try to influence size, style, materials, sustainability, sensitivity and sympathy to the surrounding houses and maintaining wildlife habitat.

A working group was set up chaired by Alex MacGillivray with myself and, initially, 12 others – very ably helped by Nick Gant and his university team.

In 2018 we held an open meeting in the village hall to explain the concept and asked questions about what villagers wanted. Discussion included examples of Sussex made building materials and maps of the area, We asked for information on ponds, woods, safe walkways, play areas, favourite trees, best walks etc. Approximately 150 local people turned up.

The Working Group compressed the information from the open day into a Design Statement and proudly presented this to Lewes District Council Planners. They rejected the lot. Their attitude was that these points were covered in their Local Plan and was based on the guidance from the government under the National Planning Policy Framework Document (NPPF).

In fairness this is true, the NPPF is a very important document and does indeed include statements covering issues such as:

- Including 2/3 bedroom houses for first time buyers
- accommodation for people to downsize
- affordability housing
- sustainability
- density
- car parking
- flooding
- environment.

I would suggest some members of the Parish Council read the NPPF and the “out of date” LDC Local Plan Part which apparently still carries some weight in assessing an application.

Combined, they are the instruction manual to developers and give ammunition to Parish Councils to challenge development with a logical argument, just as we did with our negative comments on the Rydon/Hillside application when we quoted NPPF policies in Section 12 and 15, and LDC policies DM25 and DM27.

However, just because it didn't work years ago, does not mean the Parish Council can't have another go.

But and this is a big but:

The Queens Speech, next week, is expected to include the government's new planning bill.

In the government's words:

“ to level up communities in the Midlands and the North with London, to overhaul rules that slow down and obstruct housebuilding and force all councils in England to dedicate land for either development or preservation.

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This Bill will be aimed at finally delivering 300,000 houses per year.”

If I understand it correctly, as well as a Development Zone and a Preservation Zone there will be a third, which will be the contentious middle zone of the three.

This Bill will govern development for years to come. It should have been stress tested already and with the government majority could become law quite quickly. I don't know how this will work and what effect it will have on the reforming Lewes District Plan and whether Zoning overrides neighbourhood plans. If existing plans include sites that could now be classified as a “preservation zone” I would assume that they will be struck out.

The definition of these Zones will be published somewhere and when they should become active. I have no idea if Parish Councils will be given some input, or whether sites are allocated to Zones as the applications come in.

Maybe Cllr Linington can shed some light on this.

If the rules are understandable and clear, it may be an opportunity to assess and Zone the areas of land put forward around Barcombe and send it to the planners.

Equally I have no idea if this will spur landowners on to put in applications fast, in case their site gets classified as a non-development Zone.

Finally - I would suggest that the Parish Council continues to meet developers and ask them to present their plans. Challenge them, we owe it to the village to get an accurate story. It is now time for a new Parish Council team to have another look at the way things have been and change as they see fit.

5. Finance report

Accounts circulated pre-meeting.

6. Report of the District Councillor, Cllr Linington

A different report this year. It has been a strange year but I would like to reflect on how amazingly the village came together during a difficult time. Just one example is how the Good Neighbours Scheme as well as supporting villagers in need provided a silver lining in giving individuals the opportunity to meet new people.

As Councillor I have been working on normal concerns e.g. benefits, waste, but also with a lot of time spent on planning both individual applications and the three major sites which came up during the year.

Hillside – currently withdrawn,

Bridgelands – the necessary papers were not available for the reserved matters meeting so not progressing currently,

Land North of High Street - currently refused by committee but developers are asking to go back to committee to address individual points. It is likely that this application may go to appeal.

Cllr Linington will continue to fight where sites are inappropriate or the houses planned are unsuitable.

Question re: new planning zones? Have there been discussions about whether it will override local planning.

Cllr Linington: The middle ground ones will go through the normal processes but we don't yet know how things will operate with the other two zones in future. It is likely that there will be a local zoning consultation the results of which will precede individual applications.

Question: Is The Lewes Local Plan is still the policies that the council operates under, has it less weight than an in-date Local Plan.

Cllr Linington: It still provides guidance. Lewes District Council and the Councilors are still looking at ways to strengthen the planning process in the interim.

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Question: House numbers, under the existing Local Plan outside the national park the figure is 275 per year. The original number was 500 which is not feasible due to geographical constraints this was later reduced to 345.

Cllr Linington: The current figure is approximately 600 but the same process as above can be carried out to bring target down to a more reasonable figure. This requires evidence and confirmation that all possible sites have been reviewed.

7. Report of the County Councillor, Cllr Shepherd

Apologies were recorded for Cllr Shepherd.

8. Report from the Parish Council's representative to Sports Hall Management Committee

The Sports Hall remains in a robust financial position and is well maintained. There has obviously been reduced income in 2020 due to COVID. The unused block showers have been converted into storage for the school. The next action will be to renovate the remaining two showers, quotes are being gathered for this to be done.

9. Updates from local organisations

Therri Lahood - Barcombe Community Wildlife Group

Barcombe Community wildlife group work together to ensure that as our village grows the wildlife and surrounding nature is protected and supported for the future.

I started Barcombe Community Wildlife Group in July 2020. We are a group of 100+ Barcombe residents who want to protect the richness and diversity of Barcombe's wildlife corridor and other special natural places where wildlife thrives in and around our lovely village. The Barcombe Wildlife Corridor follows the path of the former Bluebell Railway and is sanctuary to our beloved nightingales and other endangered wildlife such as snakes, lizards, great crested newts, bats and dormice.

When I first envisaged the group it was as a practical, very much hands on group, we were looking into how we could compliment and align with other existing Barcombe groups and considering tasks and ideas we felt we might like to explore further such as a hedgehog friendly village, bat walks, wildlife walks and wildlife seed swaps. We were also keen to quietly support local landowners in maintaining their wildlife rich areas and to build links with the school to encourage the participation of children and young people, who are increasingly interested in environmental issues.

Our most important task was to set up a system to record endangered species and we were extremely lucky when Simon Linington joined our group to organise a monthly endangered species recording project to map Barcombe's special nature spaces. This is huge for us because if we don't know where these species are, we cannot support their habitat and protect them. Our sightings are also sent to external organisations for validation and are then added to national databases. Annual reports on this project will be made to the Parish Council and will also be made available to other groups and individuals on request and online.

During this year's lockdown we had the great excitement of the arrival of the White throated sparrow, "a once in a lifetime event", all the way from Canada to Barcombe. We thank Simon Linington and other members of our group for stepping up to liaise with the national and local birder groups and community to prevent a "twitch". When restrictions were eased members of our group spent some lovely sunny days at WAB with the many quietly, respectful birders who visited our village to provide a reassuring presence to our local community. We also made a great effort to ensure the local community and the Parish Council were kept well informed. The birders donated a total of £292 to WAB and the community will be consulted on how this will be spent.

During the next 12 months we hope to be picking up all of the lockdown stalled projects and welcome ideas on new ones.

Finally, a huge thank you to Pippa Evans for being so brilliant and creating our Facebook page as a place for us to share information and keep each other updated, over lockdown it has become so much more than that.

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Ollie Pendered – Community Energy South

The target of the first stage of the project was to find out the impact of moving the village to net carbon zero and develop a route to transitioning the village to there. The plan will be used to lobby the government for funding support and mechanisms. We are working with local energy suppliers to see how they can help.

There will be another webinar soon and a community energy day at the end of June 2021 when COVID restrictions are lifted. Community Energy South will be inviting installers and specialists to the June event and we would like the Parish Council members attend.

The benefits of the work to date; 200 heat assessments have been carried out, four local people have been employed and it is hoped the energy champion posts will be funded for several years. Once the plan has been completed it can be shared widely.

Residents will be invited to join Board or become members of the community project. Ollie took the opportunity to thank the Church, Lewes District Council, the Diocese, and the Parish Council for their support.

Questions or enquiries can be sent to communiheat@ovesco.co.uk at any time.

10. Question Time

Cllr Marler was asked to expand on the planning issues raised in Barcombe News;

Question: What happens with the current status of the Lewes Local Plan, if it is a free for all with the potential for 200 houses how would the Parish cope. The Parish Council was asked who is discussing the situation and with whom.

Dr McGilvray provided some further information on the proposed Planning Zones. SSALC has a working party looking at this to ensure National Park is protected. He recommended Parish Council feed into this discussion group. The Parish Council will watch the situation closely and act on Dr McGilvray's suggestion and connect with the group.

Question: The Uckfield - Lewes railway link has re-surfaced. It will be necessary to reflect on the impact on the villages that it passes through.

The Parish Council invited Roger Blake, RailFuture, to a Parish Council meeting in 2020 and he gave a very good update. He is willing to attend again when there is further information to share.

Question: Can the Parish encourage discussion on planning issues? The Parish Council will continue to argue against sites which residents and the Parish Council consider inappropriate. The Parish Council don't currently know what influence they will have but will continue to discuss applications openly and meet developers and neighbours.

Dr McGilvray highlighted the value of indicating the impact of the potential new houses e.g., car journeys, school numbers as well as looking at the houses and their immediate surroundings.

It was agreed that it would be useful to establish a new relationships with the highways team and perhaps have a meeting with the Hamsey Parish Council.

Anne Livesey said that the most important issue to the village is planning and proposed development. Does the Parish Council feel that they can tackle the planning issue in a structured way? She felt that by gathering information and asking challenging questions a group could influence Lewes District Council and the planning process. She asked that the councillors commit to taking this approach.

The Parish Council are willing to review the role they play to enable this discussion but will require support from the wider community.

Question: Cllr Linington questioned the value of meeting with developers, feeling that there was a risk the meetings could be viewed as supportive of a proposed development.

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The Parish Council feel it is valuable to hear first hand from the developers. The developers are always told in writing before the meeting that the councillors will not comment on the proposal. Comments are only made in writing following a formal planning application being made to Lewes District Council.

The meeting closed at approximately 8pm.