
SWALE RURAL FORUM

MINUTES of the Meeting held at Leysdown Village Hall, Wing Road, Leysdown, Isle of Sheppey, Kent, ME12 4QR on Tuesday, 23 February 2016 from 7.00 - 8.36 pm.

PRESENT: Councillors Mike Baldock, Bobbin, Lloyd Bowen, Duncan Dewar-Whalley, June Garrad, Nicholas Hampshire, Lesley Ingham, Ken Ingleton, Padmini Nissanga, Prescott (Chairman), Ben Stokes and John Wright.

OTHER ORGANISATIONS: Parish Councillor Richard Palmer and Mr Peter Blandon (Council for the Protection of Rural England).

OFFICERS PRESENT: Kellie Mackenzie, Bill Ronan and Emma Wiggins.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors Richard Darby, Parish Cllr Brian Clarke (Bredgar Parish Council), Mr Barlow, Mr Cox, Sylvia Bennett and Brenda Hardman (Leysdown Parish Council).

APOLOGIES: Councillors Tina Booth Bowles and David Simmons, Rollo Parsons and Kevin Attwood (National Farmers Union), Inspector Gavin Wade and Chief Inspector Toney Henley (Kent Police) and Canon Caroline Pinchbeck (Diocese of Canterbury).

515 MINUTES

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 17 November 2015 (Minute Nos. 338 – 345) were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

516 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No interests were declared.

517 PUBLIC SESSION

There were no questions.

518 CHANGE TO THE ORDER OF BUSINESS

The Chairman changed the order of business as minuted.

519 PROVISION OF HOUSING FOR ELDERLY RESIDENTS LIVING IN RURAL AREAS

A Member reported that he had recently met with Swale Borough Council (SBC) housing officers to discuss what the situation was in respect of provision of housing for elderly residents living in rural areas. He stated that housing needs assessments were required within parishes.

The Member raised concern that there was not sufficient housing developments coming forward that offered housing options for elderly people. He considered that the Borough Council should look at two areas in particular that may help address the problem: loss of bungalows as they were converted into two storey houses; and provision of mobile homes for the elderly. He spoke about a planning application in Dunkirk for six mobile homes recently approved by the Planning Committee. He considered mobile homes were an affordable way of providing housing for the elderly in rural areas. The Member stated that

the Borough Council should work closely with Parish Councils to ensure a workable scheme was established to improve the situation.

A Member, also the Cabinet Member for Housing, explained that Action with Communities in Rural Kent offered Housing Needs Surveys and the Council had secured funding for four surveys for parishes within Swale. With regard to the issue of development of properties and mobile homes, he reminded the Member that SBC's Planning Committee decided these.

The Chairman, also a member of the Planning Committee, stated that often it was planning officers who were not in favour of residential mobile homes for the elderly, not the Planning Committee, as had been the case for the Dunkirk application.

Resolved: That Parishes be made aware that four Housing Needs Surveys are available.

520 UPDATE FROM KENT POLICE

The Chairman welcomed PC Preston Frost to the meeting.

PC Frost reported that Chief Inspector Paul Anderson would be taking over from Chief Inspector Tony Henley who was due to retire in April 2016.

PC Frost gave an update on the work of the Rural Task Force and spoke about Operation Salmon which dealt with preventing hare coursing. He spoke about an increase in theft of trailers and petrol strimmers in rural areas.

A Ward Member for Teynham and Lynsted spoke about the tragic car accident on New Year's Day 2016 on the A2 at Teynham in which two people had lost their lives. Councillor Bowen explained that he had been liaising with Kent Police and the local MP who were investigating various options to ensure a long-term solution for traffic safety at the site.

In response to queries from Members, PC Frost stated that they were investigating a vehicle believed to be linked to crime in Lower Halstow. He stated that the rise in crime in the area was mainly night thefts. He did not consider that this was due to lack of street lighting.

A Member raised concern that the Ward Members had not been informed about the gypsy horse-run held in Sheppey East ward. PC Frost stated that the Police had only known about the event at short notice, but would ensure that Ward Members were informed as soon as possible in the future.

PC Frost then showed the Forum the thermal imaging camera which would assist the Police detecting night-time offenders.

The Chairman thanked PC Frost for attending the meeting.

521 PROVISION OF BUS SERVICES IN RURAL AREAS

A Member raised concern that many rural areas would lose bus services as Kent County Council (KCC) reduced their budget by £800,000 this year. He considered that bus operators needed to make bus services more flexible and look at alternatives as loss of these services would have an adverse impact on elderly people who relied on bus services. The Member suggested that five or six Members should form a working group to look at the options available to parishes.

A Member advised that he had awarded £600 p.a. from his Borough Councillor Grant Funding to two parishes in his ward which they used, along with other funding, to operate a bus service every Tuesday which the whole community could use.

Members raised the following points: sympathise but KCC should be the ones to look at alternatives as they are the ones cutting the funding; rural bus services should be marketed better to increase usage; should consider alternative means of travel just as mini-buses, car sharing, and taxis dependant on the demand; funding from parishes, borough councillors and KCC councillors was a measured way to help the situation; should look at providing bus services from villages to local train stations not just town centres.

Councillor Mike Baldock moved the following motion: That a working group be established to look at what is available to Parishes in terms of provision of bus services in rural areas. This was seconded by Councillor June Garrad.

On being put to the vote the motion was agreed.

A Member suggested that the Scrutiny Committee should consider the issue with a view to setting-up a working group.

Recommended: That a working group be established to look at what is available to Parish Councils in terms of provision of bus services in rural areas.

522 ISSUE OF LED STREET/FOOTWAY LIGHTING

The Chairman welcomed Parish Councillor Sarah Jefferys from Graveney with Goodnestone Parish Council to the meeting.

Parish Councillor Jefferys advised that Graveney with Goodnestone Parish Council had replaced some lights in the village from sodium to LED lights and were concerned following feedback from local residents. The concerns raised included: harm to health in particular loss of sleep and potential affects to the sleep hormone melatonin; and damage to wildlife in particular nocturnal animals. She explained that one of the LED lights was causing particular concern to the residents of one property and they had had to install black-out curtains consequently. She asked what experience other parishes had of LED lights.

PC Frost stated that he was aware that there were different styles of LED lighting available, and it could be that the wrong style had been installed. The Parish Councillor considered that KCC should provide guidance for parishes on the correct lighting to install.

The KCC Liaison Officer explained that in terms of roll-out of LED lighting KCC would have followed LED standards and best practice and their contractor would need to follow the correct guidance.

Members of the Forum and also the public present made the following points: the Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC) should provide guidance to parishes on LED lighting; LED was less expensive than sodium lighting; had recently received a complaint from a resident in Iwade about LED lighting; Hartlip had a policy of no street lighting; can not believe that KCC have not undertaken a health impact assessment on the use of LED lights; LED light was more effective than sodium lighting as it could be directed; also screens can be fitted to LED lights if they are having an adverse impact on particular properties and knowledge of experiments undertaken that concluded that white lights drive bats away.

The Chairman agreed that he would raise the issue of providing guidance for parishes on installing LED lights with KALC.

The Chairman also agreed to write to KCC asking whether they had undertaken a health impact survey on the use of LED lights.

Post Meeting Note:

A spokesperson for Kent County Council said:

"Health and environmental impacts of LED lighting were considered during preparation of our contract documents. These are associated with the 'blue colour' spectrum but our research established that while concerns have been identified, the findings are as yet inconclusive. However, in order to address the potential for concern over this colour spectrum we have specified that the new LED lighting is a 'neutral white'. We feel that while slightly less efficient, this colour range provides the best combination of light colour and energy savings."

This information had been forwarded to Parish Councillor Jefferys.

Resolved: That the Chairman raise with the Kent Association of Local Councils the issue of providing guidance for parishes on installing LED lights.

523 RURAL BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

Resolved: That the Rural Round-up be noted.

524 THE FUTURE OF THE SWALE RURAL FORUM

The Head of Economic and Community Services reported that the Council had undertaken a review on how to engage better with the public and to establish the effectiveness of the Council's Local Engagement Forums (LEFs) and Swale Rural Forum. In November 2015 the Council's Policy Development and Review Committee recommended to Cabinet that both the LEFs and Rural Forum should cease in their current form and propose more effective ways to engage. It was considered that the Rural Forum was not fulfilling its role.

The Head of Economic and Community Services explained that the Rural Forum had been set-up to 'rural proof' relevant policy and strategic matters. In the period 2014/15 the Rural Forum made only one recommendation to Cabinet and had been poorly attended by both Parish Councils and members of the public. She stated that Chief Inspector Tony Henley (Kent Police) had advised that it was unlikely that they would be able to support the meetings moving forward due to resources. The proposals to cease the Rural Forum would be considered at the General Purposes Committee meeting on 2 March 2016 and the recommendations from that meeting would be considered by Full Council on 16 March 2016. This could therefore be the last Rural Forum meeting.

The Council had also undertaken a consultation between December 2015 and January 2016 asking how they could better engage with local residents. Feedback showed that few people wanted public meetings to continue and preferred engagement via social media. Proposals for engagement moving forward included meetings on an ad-hoc basis and the use of the website, direct email and social media channels.

In response to a query, the Head of Economic and Community Services reported that her team could still produce the Rural Round-up quarterly and send out to councillors and Parish Clerks via email. The Police quarterly updates could also be included.

The Forum considered the proposals and made the following comments: KALC want the Swale Rural Forum to continue; social media is the right way forward but need to be aware that some people do not have access to a computer; public have made their views known and do not want the meeting; if residents have concerns about particular issues that can also speak to their ward member, parish council and KCC councillor; more public would attend meetings if they could see a purpose or reason for attending; would be a shame to lose the 'inter-face' between parishes and the Borough Council offered by the Rural Forum; the Council definitely need to find an alternative way of engaging with people in rural areas; the Rural Forum has more 'clout' in getting officers from KCC and other agencies to engage with the local community; public do not want to just sit and listen to borough councillors talking; local community want to engage particularly on the regeneration of Sittingbourne and local plan consultation which particular affects rural areas; the forum does have something constructive to add if it is in the right format but unsure what that should be; there is no information from SBC on twitter so perhaps we are not informing the public correctly about the meetings; presentation given at a previous forum meeting about Superfast Broadband enabled Bredgar Parish Council to get fast broadband in the village; other organisations are often reluctant to attend the Forum; all borough councillors should be aware of how to engage with the public; need to include with the Inside Swale booklet how residents can engage with the Council; need to consider whether the Forum is best value for money for taxpayers; the public can also raise issues at the Swale Joint Transportation Board and ask questions at Full Council meetings; and KALC is principally to assist with admin and training not to discuss issues from local authorities, only the rural forum offers this.

The Head of Economic and Community Services advised that ways to engage would be promoted within a future edition of 'Inside Swale'.

In response to a query about publicising the Rural Forum, the Democratic Services Officer explained that the agenda and minutes are published on the Council's website and sent to the members of the Rural Forum and Parish Clerks.

Post Meeting Note:

The link to the agenda and minutes for the meetings are also sent to local press for inclusion in local newspapers. A hard copy of the agenda is also displayed on noticeboards outside Swale House and the district offices on the Isle of Sheppey and Faversham.

Councillor Mike Baldock moved the following motion: That the Swale Rural Forum continue for one year but overhaul the agenda to make it more relevant and ensure it contains items that require rural discussion. This was seconded by Councillor June Garrad.

The motion was put to the vote. As the vote was split the Chairman used his casting vote. The motion was agreed.

Recommended: That the Swale Rural Forum continue for one year but overhaul the agenda to make it more relevant and ensure it contains items that require rural discussion.

The Head of Economic and Community Services agreed to feedback the comments from the Rural Forum to the General Purposes Committee on 2 March 2016.

Chairman

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All Minutes are draft until agreed at the next meeting of the Committee/Panel