

**STOKENHAM PARISH COUNCIL
MINUTES OF THE MEETING
HELD ON 20TH FEBRUARY 2025
IN STOKENHAM PARISH HALL**

PRESENT:**COUNCILLORS:****GAIL ADDISON****PAULA DOUST****KIM GREENING****TIM LYNN****LIZ ROBINSON****PIERS SPENCE (Chairman)****JULIAN BRAZIL (District and County Councillor)****JONATHAN ANSELL****ADRIAN GOODMAN****CHRIS HART****RICHARD PAIN****CHARLES ROGERS****Also in attendance:****Clerk – Mrs G. Claydon****APOLOGIES:****COUNCILLORS: NONE****1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillors were invited to declare any disclosable interests, including the nature and extent of such interests they had in any items to be considered at this meeting. They were also reminded to consider whether in the light of recent activities any items within their Register of Interests should be updated. It was advised that any unforeseen request for a Dispensation would be considered by the Clerk at this point only if there was no way a councillor would have been aware of such before the meeting. None.

2. MINUTES

The Minutes of full council meeting dated 16th January 2025 were considered before being approved by all present and duly signed as a true and correct record.

3. OPEN FORUM

Charlie Wilson of Florence Cottages, Torcross, was present to reiterate his concerns about traffic speeding through the village. When he had raised the matter previously he had been invited by Cllr Brazil to attend a HATOC (Highways and Traffic Orders Committee) meeting at County Hall. Subsequent to this meeting a Speed Compliance Action Review Forum (SCARF) check was set up in Torcross, although villagers claimed not to have been aware of any recording or cameras. Further to the SCARF review there had been no progress or feedback and Mr Wilson was wondering where to take the matter from here. He knew this was not a matter over which Parish Council had jurisdiction but was requesting their support and wanted to feel he was being listened to. He wasn't looking for a 20mph limit or VAS (visually activated sign), but felt that better signage might be effective in preventing what he felt was the inevitability, sooner or later, of a serious accident.

Cllr Addison had observed the visit of a speed camera, noting that it had made a difference to traffic speed. Mr Wilson pointed out that, parked by the chapel and clearly visible, it was observed by approaching motorists who immediately slowed down, making the visit useless for the purpose of measuring usual speeds. Various potential solutions were discussed, from painted road markings to square speed humps, rumble strips, and chicanes, all of which had disadvantages and significant cost implications.

Cllr Rogers arrived at the meeting.

Cllr Brazil was asked for his opinion and he noted West Charleton had put in a pinch-point, but this was in a highly vulnerable location, adjacent to the school and with houses on both sides of the road, unlike the situation in most of Torcross. County Highways' response to his query was that the SCARF they carried out did not confirm that speeding was an issue so they would not approve any spend on traffic calming or activated signs. The Chairman asked whether it might be possible to argue that the previous SCARF was inconclusive and ask for a re-run, with parish council notified when it was present to ensure it was done properly. Mr Wilson said that he would appreciate any help at all, even down to a change in the colour of the highway or painted roundels. Cllr Greening voiced concern at the hazards at Torcross, increased during holiday season, with children everywhere, campervans and large trucks parked in the layby meaning pedestrians needed to walk out into the road. Poor visibility from the promenade to the car park meant that neither motorists nor pedestrians had a clear view. Cllr Brazil noted that no village in his area did not have its speeding issues and this showed there was no one-size-fits-all solution.

Charlie Wilson left the meeting.**DISTRICT AND COUNTY COUNCILLOR'S REPORT**

Cllr Brazil advised the County Hall budget was to rise by 5%; they had had an appalling financial settlement from central government, as had all councils in Devon. SEND was overspent and it was hard to know whose figures were correct. The safety valve on the debt was supposed to take it down to £14 million but it had gone up to £44 million, with nothing left to take from reserves because they were already scraping the barrel.

District council budget had risen by 3% as they didn't have commitments like children's services, highways etc. However they did have cost pressures and were very disappointed Government had not compensated them for the increase in their employer's national insurance bill, which cost them £300,000. Prices had gone up with inflation so they would be putting car park charges up from 1st April and implementing a scheme for local residents to purchase a cheaper rate across South Hams. District wanted to invest in towns by replicating Totnes market and bringing people in.

Local Government reorganisation had taken up time but achieved little to date. It was his belief that unitaries would go broke within a year and He was not in favour of the proposed changes as they were going to be expensive – perhaps in the region of £50 million – with the cost of redundancies, rewriting of software, etc but it was a question of choosing the least-worst option. His preferred option was a gradual approach, making savings in a measured way by joining up organically for efficiencies, and he was currently trying to persuade other Devon leaders to join West Devon and South Hams in this initiative. Plymouth Unitary wanted to grab all developable land along the A38 for expansion into the South Hams; South Hams wanted to keep the same opportunities; and Cornwall took a nationalist stance! Torbay thinking was more measured but would depend on the electors. Exeter's proposals had been kicked out as they were trying the same as Plymouth and picking and choosing what they wanted. His worry was there would be a Greater Plymouth and Exeter leaving behind a meandering rural Devon Authority.

The agenda item on Rateable Value was brought forward and discussed at this point.

Cllr Lynn expressed concern that District had paid to reinstate the Beesands boulders/gabions when this should have been left until later in the spring after the storm season had passed. If another storm came in the meantime it would all have been a waste of taxpayers' money. Councillors wanted to know who authorised that that sort of expenditure so quickly without parish even knowing. Cllr Brazil explained there was a budget for coastal erosion and the officers had delegated authority.

No planning applications for Stokenham parish had been received since 9th January and Councillors asked whether there was any reason for this unusual absence. The new National Planning Policy Framework was arriving so how this would affect planning applications was unknown.

Cllr Brazil left the meeting.

4. PLANNING & PLANNING MATTERS

The following applications were considered and comments forwarded to District planning:

- None received.

PLANNING CORRESPONDENCE

- Nothing further.

5. CO OPTION

No applications had been received.

6. TORCROSS SPEEDING

Following the update provided in Open Forum and discussion thereafter it was AGREED that Parish Council would write to County to advise their concern over traffic speeds in Torcross and request a further SCARF as according to local reports a large number of drivers had been caught by a random police speed check.

7. PARISH TREE PLANTING

Chillington Community Association wished more apple trees to be planted at Helmers playing field. Following the site visit it was AGREED to purchase trees up to £150 and proceed with such planting, strictly to area identified, to avoid disturbing drainage.

8. GRANT

A grant to Chillington Community Association for works to install LED lighting at the north west gate, the hall flood lights and main entrance light at a cost of £629.85 was AGREED.

It was advised the earth to the lefthand side of the hall door needed to be shovelled into the bank to stop future flooding. Cllr Hart advised that the volunteers were aware and did this when necessary.

9. DISABLED ACCESS PICNIC TABLE

Installation of a picnic table provided by National Landscapes to encourage accessibility for the disabled was discussed and it was AGREED that council volunteers would attend 10a.m. Saturday to place the table for wheelchair access.

10. BANK ACCOUNT

The switch of bank accounts to Unity Trust Bank for parish council banking to access improved interest rates and investment for the community as debated at the January meeting was AGREED following February monthly payments.

11. COMMEMMORATIVE BENCH

A bench previously proposed had not gone ahead due to awaiting information boards from District but changes were AGREED to provide one at Start Point overlooking the view of old Hallsands village at a revised cost of £269.

12. MAINTENANCE

The following was AGREED;

- (a) the amount of County grant for highway cuts against the actual cost for works not exceeding £1300 – AGREED for this outlay and would review later in the year if more cuts were required.
- (b) the area coverage and regularity of cuts to inform any decision for a contribution towards open area grass cutting in Stokenham – No discussion appeared to have taken place with regard to leaving a greater area for wildlife and nor regarding costs. Parish had obtained a quote for a reduced figure-of-eight cutting layout around the play area, orchard, and with paths to both pedestrian gates. Parish council wished a less forbidding and reduced cuts regime with swathes left long together with formal participation on the green committee for them to consider contributing. Cllr Greening was asked to make contact and discuss.

13. RATEABLE VALUE

A verbal report was delivered outlining the mechanism whereby dwellings that are significantly improved or enlarged become liable to re-rating to a higher council tax band. In the first instance, re-rating only takes place when there is a “significant event,” such when the house is sold, or a new long-term lease is signed, or when there is a general re-rating of all properties. The Valuation Office Agency (VOA), who are responsible for the rating system, rely on information provided by the local planning authority and/or building control to kickstart the process. When such information is received, the council tax record for that property is marked with an improvement indicator. At the next significant event, the presence of the improvement indicator acts as a prompt for an inspection, following which the dwelling is re-rated to a higher band. An explanation was provided on how to access council tax records by postcode from the gov.uk website.

Following questions raised by councillors at an earlier meeting, a spot-check had been carried out of properties in the parish that had recently undergone significant improvement and/or enlargement. This revealed that, in a large number of cases, no improvement indicator had been placed on the dwelling’s council tax record, and that the ruling council tax band was clearly inappropriate for the altered status of the property. This appeared to indicate a wholesale failure of the system which gave rise to inequities in the tax-raising regime.

Cllr Brazil had been asked to investigate this anomaly at District and was told the responsibility to inform the VOA lay with the householder. Councillors seemed incredulous of this explanation. The chairman quoted a passage from the VOA website which stated explicitly that “your local council” would inform them of any changes and asked how this could be reconciled with the answer given. Cllr Brazil responded that there was little incentive for District to expend much effort on this activity: an uplift from Band C to E would only represent a £50 increase in income to the council. Councillors disagreed: Building Control and District Council acted under statute so those present felt they were duty-bound to take all reasonable steps to maximize council income, especially in these straitened times. While District might not stand to gain much, they were not the only beneficiary of council tax. Each property not properly assessed represented a loss of between £500 and £1500 per annum to the public coffers, and it was clear that many properties across the parish and perhaps further afield were not paying their fair share whilst other counties seemed to manage to address this issue.

It was AGREED that Dist. Cllr Brazil would revisit this issue with District officers and report back.

14. REPORTS

- Cllr Robinson – Beeson village was closed and cars were having access problems at a junction due to poor signage.
- Cllr Rogers – Had installed two more self-closing gates on footpaths at Stokenham and Coleridge Cross. Mud had accumulated at a gateway and Darkes farm said they would

clean out by McIntosh's land. They had not, so Cllr Rogers covered this from the drainage budget exposing the drain and ditch but the 9in pipe was totally clogged so he could not clear the County drain. It had been reported.

- Cllr Ansell –The History Group would host a History Day, covering topics such as metal detecting and other things, at Stokenham Parish Hall on 29th March, immediately following karate club.
The usual sewer blockage had occurred in Kellaton and the operative visited but ran out of water for jetting. He was directed to the fire hydrant but was concerned to discovered it had been capped off. It was questioned what would happen if there was a fire and access was needed so the clerk would follow up.
- Cllr Pain – Reported that he had been the target of a scam recently highlighted on BBC News. It involved communication advising that a bailiff was coming out within an hour and suggested a pre-enforcement settlement before going to court with a form from court delivered. Whilst he was alert to this the matter took over 3 hours to resolve and was scary. The alleged debt related to a 2021 phone call offering free advertising that suggested the agreement had not been cancelled. He contacted the police and this was to advise people to be on the lookout and not be harassed as they target everyone.
He reported seeing a pack of hounds hunting on adjacent land and wondered whether the animals were properly under control as they had gone into Dunstone Woods. Those present believed it was likely Britannia Beagles from the naval college at Dartmouth and if there was a question of control they should be approached as the event would have taken place with the landowner's permission.
- Cllr Addison – The Transport Survey been issued through South Hams Community Action. It was on the parish website and councillors were encouraged to forward it to any online distribution groups they were members of. There had been 49 online responses to date. Paper copies were available if required and the survey was open for responses until 30th March.
The recent removal of the last of the trees from the hillside behind the old butchers at Torcross had left the bank bare and potentially unstable, which could undermine the road above as a gap could be seen underneath. This would be reported to Devon County highways. It was noted that part of planning approval was for the wall to be meshed. Someone suggested the trees might have been diseased ash but the tree warden confirmed they were sycamore saplings. Google maps illustrated it had been a green copse area but now all was gone.
- Cllr Hart – He had been advised that a consultation period had started with respect to removing the old red phone box in Chillington.

CLERK'S REPORT

- Transport survey had been received and was available on the parish council website. Groups would be asked to share the survey and advised paper copies would be provided for anyone not able to access the internet. The school had also been passed the survey.
- Endurance Life were asked what financial contribution they made to footpaths and had advised that they gave to Devon County footpaths and South West Coast Path Association. No response had been received as to the enquiry of how much nor where such funds were spent.

15. FINANCE AND CHEQUES

Balances were provided and the below transactions were approved:

Current £1533.04

Savings £127,675.09

Unity Current Account £500.00

Received

Interest – Feb £113.45

Payments:

Unity Bank – Transfer to set up new banking arrangements £500.00

HMRC Feb – Tax & NI £386.89

Wages Feb £1389.49

DCC Feb– Pension £450.74

Charles Rogers – Footpath maintenance along Torcross roadside £596.00

Charles Rogers – Routine drains and ditches cleaning in February £882.00

M.J. Hallett – Annual hedge trimming at Torcross and Chillington Hall £240.00

Claydon – Electricity, photocopy paper and postage £91.25

Greenspace – Maintenance cuts Oct – Dec 24 £355.00

Greenspace – Pressure wash open space area bridge £137.50

Allowances – Annual payment £906.40

16. NEXT MEETING

The next full parish council meeting would be held on 20th March 2025 commencing at 7.30p.m in the Wesley Smith Room, Stokenham Parish Hall.

Meeting finished: 9p.m.

Signed Chairman Dated: 20th March 2024.