

PRESENT – Councillors Geraldine Shepherd, Chair, (GS), Annabella Scott (AS), Colin Baber (CB) and Parish Clerk John Shepherd (JS)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE – Cllr John Hatherell, Cllr Simon Wilson and District Cllr Jim Parsons
2. TO RECEIVE DECLARATIONS OF PECUNIARY INTEREST IN CONNECTION WITH AGENDA ITEMS AS SHOWN AND NOT ALREADY STATED ON REGISTER OF INTERESTS – None.
3. TO ADOPT THE MINUTES OF THE PARISH COUNCIL MEETING HELD ON 9TH SEPTEMBER 2015 – Read and APPROVED subject to the correction of the spelling of Mrs Sophy Fitzpatrick in Agenda Item 7.
Proposed: AS, Seconded: CB – Agreed unanimously.

4. MATTERS ARISING

a. Parking

The continuing problem of parking in Westonbirt Village Street and one-way system was again discussed. This had significantly improved since the temporary closure of the footpath leading into the Arboretum at the junction with the A433 and the opening of the free car parks located on the road-side of the Arboretum Visitor Centre.

The planting of the verges along Easton Grey Road and Whitehouse Lane was again discussed. Notwithstanding the email from Highways advising that the problem could be managed partially by license but reiterating that some of the planting would have to be removed, there was no visible evidence that this had been done. Councillors were concerned that there might be a traffic accident at the junction between Easton Grey Road and Whitehouse Lane as a result of the worsened visibility caused by the planting of the verges. If there is such a traffic accident as result of the worsened visibility, Westonbirt with Lasborough Parish Council will hold GCC, Highways and the landowner responsible.

GS agreed to write to GCC and Highways expressing the council's position.

b. Update on PC Website

JS advised that he had continued development of the minimalist website and had added section for publishing official notices. He had also added an "Alerts" section for the notification of events affecting parishioners in the near future, such as road closures, changes to the re-cycling collections at Christmas, etc. AS particularly liked the inclusion of the Alerts section as she felt this would encourage parishioners to look at the site and that this feature should be retained in any future developments.

c. Planning Applications

GS advised that no application had been received from the owners of Elmlease Farm; however, the application previously submitted at Lasborough Manor had been passed.

d. Potential changes to arrangements for concerts at Westonbirt Arboretum in 2016

GS confirmed that she had spoken to the Arboretum and expressed their concerns about the traffic plan and the difficulty of concert-goers getting back to their cars in the dark. The new Director was Andrew Smith.

e. Proposal for adoption of the BT telephone box in The Street, Westonbirt

JS reported that, on the instructions of GS, he had submitted the necessary application to BT to initiate the adoption process for the telephone box. BT had accepted the application and advised there had to be a consultation period initiated by the district council and it would not be known if the box could be adopted until about the end of January 2016. They did not require a signed formal agreement at this stage and, if the adoption were to be able to go ahead, they would send us the appropriate form of agreement for signature by the Chair of the Parish Council.

GS explained the situation regarding the Village Hall Fund and that the income from the investments could be spent for the benefit of the parishioners. She felt that could well include funding the defibrillator and contributing to costs relating to the upkeep of the telephone box. It was planned to hold the Village Hall AGM early in 2016, hopefully in January.

5. TO CONFIRM DECISION TO ADOPT THE BT TELEPHONE BOX IN THE STREET, WESTONBIRT AND AUTHORISE THE CHAIR TO SIGN THE AGREEMENT FOR ITS SALE AND PURCHASE ON BEHALF OF THE PARISH COUNCIL

The decision to adopt the BT Telephone Box in The Street, Westonbirt was CONFIRMED and the Chair was AUTHORISED to sign the agreement for the sale and purchase of the BT Telephone Box in The Street, Westonbirt on behalf of the Parish Council.

Proposed: AS, Seconded: CB – Agreed unanimously.

6. TO CONSIDER FUTURE OF PC WEBSITE

JS explained that he had developed the simple website at minimal cost because the government had placed the requirement of complying with the mandatory Transparency Code on councils with insufficient notice to enable them to budget for it in the current year's precept. The difficulty that this had caused for councils has now been appreciated and the government is making available funds to cover the costs by small councils of meeting the requirements of the Code.

There are many problems with the council's current IT and communications facilities. The parish laptop computer is now 8 years old, running an obsolescent operating system (Vista) and is slow and becoming progressively unreliable. The council's email facilities are dependent upon the current parish clerk's personal internet account that he has provided free of charge on a pro-bono basis for the past 8 years, prior to becoming parish clerk about 18 months ago. The current website was developed and is maintained on his own personal computer (not the parish council's laptop) using his own licensed copy of Microsoft FrontPage, a product that is no longer supported nor sold by Microsoft. This situation is neither fit for purpose nor sustainable in the long run. The government is now providing an opportunity for the council to apply for funds to obtain a new modern computer and a professionally developed and supported website with email facilities that will serve the needs of the council in the years to come. This would fund a computer costing up to £350, a website up to £500, the setting up of an internet connection (phone line and router) and other ancillary costs, including that of setting up the website and entering the documents. (All figures are ex-VAT, but the VAT can be reclaimed from HMRC.) Parish councils were being encouraged to apply for these grants. AS doubted that £350 would be sufficient to purchase an adequate computer and felt that the council should be prepared to contribute up to an additional £100 from council funds. GS felt that the cost of installing and paying for an additional phone line solely for the parish council would be disproportionate to its benefit and should not be applied for. Both points were agreed and the Parish Clerk was AUTHORISED to submit an application for the necessary funds to cover a replacement laptop, a professionally developed website and the staffing set up costs.

JS to submit Transparency Fund Application.

7. TO REVIEW RECEIPTS AND PAYMENTS FOR THE CURRENT YEAR TO DATE

Councillors reviewed the receipts and payments for the current year to date, as published on the Parish Council website under Accounts 2015/2016.

There were no comments.

8. TO CARRY OUT BANK RECONCILIATION

Bank reconciliation was carried out by the Chair and Councillors. No discrepancies were identified.

9. TO DECIDE ON PRECEPT FOR 2015/2016

GS pointed out that the current precept was very low and that the council had virtually no reserves. It had been pointed out in the previous discussion on the future of the website that the parish laptop was now 8 years old and needed to be replaced and that over the past years the council had benefited from email facilities at no cost to the council. Even if the laptop could be replaced through a grant from the Transparency Fund, no additional monies were being provided for the running costs for the website for next year onwards. She also noted that the stipend paid to the parish clerk was much lower than that recommended nationally and we needed to build up adequate reserves.

JS provided an analysis of the Band D charges paid in the 94 parishes in Gloucestershire that received a precept. Of these Westonbirt with Lasborough was the 14th lowest. GS added that as our precept was so low any meaningful increase would appear as a disproportionately large percentage increase. AS and CB both recognised that a significant increase would be required but felt that this should be spread over two or more years. After further discussion it was RESOLVED that the Parish Precept for 2016/2017 would be £1,820.

Proposed: AS, Seconded: CB – Agreed unanimously.

10. TO CONSIDER ANY PLANNING APPLICATIONS RECEIVED

JS reported that there had been no new planning applications in the parish notified. However, AS referred to a new application in the neighbouring parish of Kingscote, just across the parish boundary in the Lasborough valley. This was for a major restoration of the walled garden at Lasborough Park and incorporated the erection of a very large glass-house measuring 26 metres long, 6 metres wide and 5 metres high. She was concerned at the adverse impact that this might have on the view from the public footpath that overlooked the valley from the east side (footpath NWL 4/2). After discussion, it was agreed that GS would investigate and, if appropriate, would submit comments to CDC as a neighbouring parish.

GS to investigate and, if appropriate, submit comments to CDC.

11. AOB

a. Parish Party

GS said that it was planned to have another Parish Party in 2016. It was hoped to hold this towards the north-west (Lasborough) end of the parish for a change, as all the previous parish parties had been held towards the south-eastern (Westonbirt) end. AS said that unfortunately she was unable to offer a venue in Lasborough as the barns at Lodge Farm were now filled with horses at livery.

b. Consultation on Gloucestershire Local Transport Plan

JS advised that GCC were inviting comments on their draft Local Transport Plan via an online survey. He had put details on the parish notice boards and on the parish website.

12. TO DECIDE THE DATE OF NEXT PARISH COUNCIL MEETING

It was AGREED that the next meeting would be held at Woodlands House at the usual time of 7pm, on Wednesday, 17th February 2016.