

MEPPERSHALL PARISH

MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL PARISH MEETING

HELD AT MEPPERSHALL VILLAGE HALL ON MONDAY 29TH APRIL 2024

PRESENT: **Chairman:** J Parsons
Clerk: A Marabese
Others: 13 members of the public.

The Chairman declared the meeting open at 7:10pm.

1. WELCOME

The Chairman thanked all those present for attending the meeting and apologised for the late start. As there were people in attendance who had not attended the meeting previously, he took the opportunity to highlight that this was not a Parish Council meeting but a meeting of registered electors (including councillors who are registered electors), called an Annual Parish Meeting. The purpose of the meetings is to enable the registered electors to discuss parish affairs and to pass resolutions thereon. This meeting is also an opportunity for the Parish Council (and higher tiers of local government) and community group leaders to explain their activities over the last year. Anyone may attend but only registered electors in the parish may speak and vote. Any registered elector may ask questions of the Council. These will usually be answered by the Chairman or by the Parish Clerk or a designated Councillor. An elector may also make suggestions and comment on parish issues and propose resolutions. Resolutions relating to allotments are legally binding, but all others are persuasive only, but will be considered by the Parish Council at their subsequent meetings. Finally, a request was made to be brief and respectful.

2. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Parish Councillors Thompson and Avrili and Mr P Smith.

3. ADOPTION OF MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS PARISH MEETING HELD ON 24th April 2023

The minutes of the meeting held on 24th April 2023 were reviewed.

Proposed Mr. A Pain / Seconded Cllr. W Addy. Resolved to approved and adopt the minutes of the Annual Parish meeting held on 24th April 2023. Carried.

The Chairman was asked to sign them as a true record of proceedings.

4. REPORT FROM THE CHAIRMAN OF THE PARISH COUNCIL – Cllr John Parsons

During the last year it has been my honour to serve as Chairman of Meppershall Parish Council. I would like to begin my report to you by thanking the previous Chairman, John Thompson. for his dedication and hard work on your behalf during his period of office. The same thanks are, of course due to the other Councillors who have continued their efforts for the benefit of the village and its inhabitants.

The Council has held 10 meetings during the year, here at the Village Hall. As always, the information relating to those meetings is available on the website. The Council have been pleased to have regular attendees from the public and will always welcome anyone with the interests of the village at heart to our meetings.

The Council have continued to work on your behalf, as follows.

Planning - This continues to be a significant task. As you are aware, the Parish Council is not the Planning Authority but is a Statutory Consultee and as such we continue to try to provide

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local views and advice to CBC. Sadly, our advice is not always heeded and the pressure for new sites from developers is relentless. As reported last year the Local Plan for Central Bedfordshire Council is in place and is proving useful in formulating our responses to planning applications. Needless to say, time rolls on and CBC Officers are already working on the next iteration of the Plan. We would like to encourage everybody to join us in responding to consultations whenever they occur.

Our own Neighbourhood Plan has needed additional input in response to changes in National Guidance but is now ready for review by an independent assessor prior to, hopefully, approval by referendum of the parish.

Following on from planning matters reported last year, the development now known as Emery Croft has been completed and occupied and the development at 59 Shefford Road is close to completion. The Council would like to take this opportunity to welcome all our new residents, wherever they have chosen to make their new home. In connection with these developments, we are looking forward to their completion, when it is hoped CBC will be able to action their promised repairs to Shefford Road, which we can all agree has been in a parlous state for far too long. The proposal to build at 100 High Street has again been refused at appeal and the application relating to 7 Shefford Road has not yet been determined, after seemingly endless delays. The latest application received relates to a further site in Shefford Road. The Council have objected to this proposal. At this point may I remind parishioners that they have the opportunity to object (or support) applications in their own right and that by doing so they can add real weight to the responses of the Council.

Procedures, Consultations and Legal - I am pleased to report that the Council has a full complement of Councillors after successfully recruiting among residents. The Council is a mix of long standing and newer parishioners, which is as it should be. In the way of things, we shall undoubtedly need new faces in the future, so if anyone has an interest in helping to run our village, please watch out for requests for assistance.

Our Clerk has continued to work tirelessly on behalf of the village, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank her on your behalf. Our councillors have also worked hard, some efforts have been successful, and others are sadly best described as work in progress.

Finance - When considering the costs of providing services to the village, it was felt necessary to request a small increase in the Precept for the year 2024-5. For the usual exemplar Band D property, the increase will be from £64.43 for the past year to £73.00 for the next financial year.

As in the past the Council has continued to provide support to organisations such as the Wanderbus and the Meppershall Messenger. As always, we try and be mindful of the benefits to the village of the groups we support with public money and as such we were pleased to be able to help this year with provision for our youngest residents with the startup of the new toddler group, Munchkins.

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Environment and Leisure - It has been our pleasure this year to see the facilities on Centenary Field fully in use. The remedial works to the surfaces were completed successfully and the weather played its part by enabling the grass to grow properly. The football pitch is being used regularly by teams from Shefford Saints, including players from the village. An area for more casual players has been provided with goal posts which hopefully will make it more useful. On a less happy note, the facilities provided for the village are still being abused by unthinking people and this causes the Clerk and other councillors much work and grief. As an example, a decision has been taken not to replace trees at various locations around the village due to persistent damage. We also continue to have problems with a small number of unthinking dog owners although in some respects, actions by our Clerk and councillors is resulting in some improvement. As a counter to the negative, our Litter Picks have made a positive difference, but it would save everybody a lot of work if everybody took their waste home!

We reported last year that our Community and Environment Officer, Mrs Thorne was making a great impact. Unfortunately for personal reasons, Mrs. Thorne has been unable to continue but we were delighted that she was able to continue to support us with her work at the Allotments. The Council has temporarily contracted out some of the environmental work and is seeking an agreement for a regular weekly contract with an experienced operative.

Highways - It is probably fair to say that a large proportion of the problems with the quality of the village roads is down to the building works. Hopefully some of the worse can be addressed before long.

The vehicle activated signs were set up eventually. It remains though that the problem of speeding is a consequence of a lack of care and consideration when driving. Let's hope we see an improvement.

Anti-Social Behaviour - Regretfully I cannot finish this report without noting that this problem has not gone away. The Clerk has spent much time this year dealing with the consequences of criminal activities and together with the Village Hall Trustees the Council is planning to enhance the CCTV facilities at the Hall, which unfortunately is acting as a magnet to wrongdoers. It would help if all parishioners, if they see activity of this kind, could report it to the police, anonymously if necessary and assist us in efforts to counter the problem. It is a regrettable fact of life that if things are not reported, they may officially be deemed to be not actionable.

In conclusion may I thank the Clerk and Councillors for their support during this year. The Council will continue to act for the benefit of the village and its residents and as I've said before please get involved, it's your village too!

5. **WARD COUNCILLORS' REPORTS – Cllr Blake Stephenson**

I cannot believe it is a year since the elections took place. I would like to thank my predecessors for their assistance in helping me settle into my role. Thanks also to parish councillors for their warm welcome.

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Since my election I have served as Vice Chair of the Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee and am a member of the Police and Crime Advisory Panel. Parish Council meetings are an invaluable source of information to feed back into both these areas.

We look forward to the completion of developments on Shefford Road so that the road can be re-surfaced. Both the Clerk and I press CBC weekly.

Regarding Planning, the Chairman has already mentioned many developments however I would like to highlight the Greenwoods development that is not within this Parish. This proposed development of circa 5000 homes brought together many local parish councils and community groups to oppose the planning application. Although the application was not granted it is likely to re-appear in another format in the future.

The Central Bedfordshire Council budget now includes a budget of £10million for capital expenditure on healthcare, after my intervention. Unfortunately, the collection of garden waste is now an additional charge for residents. There have been lots of teething problems and please do contact me if you have issues with it. Two major project for CBC in the coming years will be Schools For the Future and Schools Transport.

Finally, the Ward Councillor grant supported the Gnomes last year. For the current financial year I hope to be able to assist other Meppershall community based organisations.

6. REPORTS FROM OTHER GROUPS AND ASSOCIATIONS

a. Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) – Mr John English

INTRODUCTION

Good evening and thank you for giving CPRE the opportunity to address you this evening. For those who have not met me before I am John English, a Trustee, and a Planning Volunteer with the role of leading the Central Bedfordshire Planning Team.

CPRE Bedfordshire's team have grown since the last AGM to 12 volunteers of which 8 are assigned to Central Bedfordshire. Three of our new volunteers have degree qualifications in Planning thus upskilling our resource pool. We are supported by two part-time staff located in our Bedford Office, Lois Director of CPRE Bedfordshire and Shelley our Digital Marketing Officer.

We have recently migrated to a Charity Incorporated Organisation which is a more sustainable legal structure, whilst remaining an independent charity but affiliated with the nation charity, CPRE. This combination of local knowledge and national influence makes us very effective.

Our mission is to enhance, promote and protect the Bedfordshire countryside, and the ability of local communities to enjoy and value the natural world. To achieve our mission, we work with a range of organisations and communities in Bedfordshire.

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OUR ROLE

CPRE Bedfordshire aims to empower and work in partnership with communities to help shape their neighbourhoods wherever we can. We work with local parishes and community groups to offer advice and guidance on a wide range of planning issues. We are not a substitute for Local Action Groups, instead we support residents with setting up and running their own campaigns and groups in their own name for or against a planning application. On occasions we embed ourselves within a LAG at the invitation of residents i.e.: - Flitwick Local Action Group, Shefford Town Action Group and Stondon's Save Our Village Campaigns.

We also respond to consultations on big infrastructure projects such as the East West Rail, London Luton Airport expansion and more recently Bedford Universal Studios Theme Park.

We provide clear, understandable information in our targeted briefing papers to parish and town councils on major projects and make the communities affected by these projects aware of the implications and how they can respond. Our skilled team provide guidance on campaigning and engagement and help raise awareness of campaigns through a range of marketing channels.

Our planning team is made up of volunteers who have a broad knowledge of local issues and planning. In 2023 we dedicated over 3,000 hours to supporting local communities including Meppershall. In 2023 we worked on several planning applications and an appeal in the parish and provided support when requested.

We know that the countryside and urban greenspaces are important for people's wellbeing, especially in the current situation, and loss of these can have a detrimental impact on communities and individuals. Large developments can put pressure on local infrastructure and services and change the culture of rural communities. With our support, the local community can work to maintain these precious aspects of rural life that benefit all.

Your 2023 grant supported our team of planning volunteers to continue working with communities such as Meppershall to ensure that the community and parish council are aware of any planning issues and have good advice and guidance on how best to respond to these.

As an update

- We have Developed and broaden our skills base of our Planning Team and will continue this trend.
- Recently we launched the Hedgerow Campaign, in the coming months we will be partnering with 5 communities in establishing and renovating local hedgerows.
- With CBC's announcement of generating a New Local Plan we have become a Stakeholder and will contributing to the process as well as advising Town and Parish Councils along the journey to adoption.

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- We continue to campaign against developments within the Green Belt and AONB such as Greenwoods nr Gravenhurst and Shillington.
- Once again in 2023 we ran planning a workshop which was well attended. It is our intention to continue with these and briefings on planning throughout 2024.

We do not make a charge for our planning advice and guidance but as a charity, we are dependent on individual support and other sources of income such as grants to fund our work.

As a campaigning group we do not always fit comfortably in the criteria set by some grant making organisations so fundraising can be a challenge. Like all charities our income has also been affected by inflation and the cost of living but at the same time our workload has not decreased as developers have taken advantage of the situation.

In addition, communities now appreciate the value of the countryside on their doorstep and want to protect it now, more than ever before.

We have worked in your community recently and will continue to offer our support when you need it.

Thank you for your continuing financial support.

b. Wanderbus – Mr Clive Lester - Trustee

Wanderbus is always seeking more passengers from Meppershall residents. We do get all our regular passengers, but we are sure, with all the housing developments, that there are people who would enjoy the social atmosphere we have on our two buses as well as enjoying the destinations we cover.

We need everyone to appreciate that our service is open to all passengers just the same as any other bus service that comes through our village. We offer fixed routes on a weekly, fortnightly and monthly basis throughout Beds, Herts, Bucks and Cambridgeshire. In October 23 we took delivery of our brand-new bus replacing our older one in trying to ensure that we can always maintain our daily weekday services without mechanical issue. Our funding comes mainly from reimbursement for passenger concessionary travel passes from County Councils as well as from cash fares, excursions that we operate on the 4th Thursday of the month, and from private hire income. The greater the passenger numbers, the better our finances to continue operating!

We do have to fundraise periodically and Meppershall PC has always responded positively to requests we make.

Currently we are in a solid financial position fortunately and with pressure on County Councils' budgets, we would not be surprised to be asked to consider if we could be of more help to local village residents in supporting or extending our current services. However, as our total operation is all through volunteers, this would be a challenge.

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So please – we rely on all residents to support us by using our buses.

Timetables and Excursion details are kindly included in the Meppershall Messenger every month. So, take a ride and remember cash fares are ONLY £2.00 each way to all destinations!

c. Meppershall Messenger – Mr Andrew Pain – Advertising & distribution Manager Circulation

In March 2022 we printed 885 copies, in March 2023 we printed 970. For May 2024 we will print 1060 copies. Woodlands Rest is not fully occupied yet, the 9 new Burgess Homes on Shefford Road are not completed and there are still empty homes at The Mow so we expect to print circa 1100 copies by the autumn.

A hard-working team of 34 volunteers make this possible – couldn't happen otherwise. Fortunately, there doesn't appear to be a problem getting replacements for retirees, but volunteers are always welcome!

Online circulation – Messenger Facebook page has 272 followers; posts to this generate approximately 100 views, but posts to Meppershall Noticeboard page get from 600 – 1000 views. Downloads of the magazine from the village website are typically 100 each month.

Commercials

The renewals rate is disappointing, but this could be considered reasonable in the current market conditions – 46 currently renewed, 7 cancelled. Obviously free social media ads are having an impact on us. As businesses struggle to make a profit and attract customers Facebook advertising looks cheap. This is even though our advertising rates are still held at 2019 prices and our annual cost is similar to the "Villager" monthly rate. Personally, I believe we offer excellent value, with the guarantee of a copy delivered to every home in Meppershall, 10 times a year, being a powerful message. No bundles are found stuffed under hedges or thrown into bins. Our delivery volunteers take it seriously, and it makes a huge difference to the "value proposition" to potential advertisers when selling a space.

BUT – our revenue can be expected to be down approximately £1000 from 2023 although payments are pretty much up to date. Only 2 invoices remain outstanding. Previous years have seen space taken up through the year, so I hope we can return the revenue to where it was.

Impact of cancellations on pages – We have lost the equivalent of 3 colour and $\frac{3}{4}$ B&W. We now have 20 paid-for pages, and we will always try to accommodate MPC notices and village-specific notices such as the upcoming Garage Sale, Charity Ball, MVH notices etc. The Messenger prints in multiples of 4 pages, so one free page of advertising means 4 need to be costed for.

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Our reserves are sufficient to enable the replacement of the printer this year. Currently we are printing approximately 35,000+ Messenger pages per month, plus casual/outside jobs. The printer actually exceeded its designed-for life of 1 million pages in February, and negotiations are under way with our Managed Service agent MIRUS led by Treasurer John Thompson for the purchase of a new printing machine this year. Our 2 electric staplers are becoming temperamental, as is the folding machine, so it's possible we'll need to spend money there too this year.

Community Involvement, promotion of events

We aim to support local events and new businesses with free publicity whenever possible e.g.: The Café, Munchkins, Pub, as well as notices for MPC/MVH volunteers, Litter Picks, Garage Trail Sale, Charity Ball, Village Fair, etc.

Change

The Messenger is more now than the church newsletter it was originally seen as when the first copies were delivered in 1985. We are in our 40th year and much has changed in design, content and style from its original 16 black and white pages to its current form.

The Committee try to make it a village noticeboard and forum as well as a repository for useful information. Contributions and features regularly cover the Church newsletter but also: personal finance, health, gardening, Parish Council minutes, Wanderbus schedule and "specials", the Meppershall Players etc, but residents' one-off contributions have reduced in recent years, and we'd like to see more input from villagers as a whole. I'll cover that later as well...

Future?

It will get tougher to sell space no doubt. As covered in the earlier section, revenue is unlikely to grow, unlike costs, and the difference between them will only increase as village expands as a residential or commuter base without businesses based here; we will be printing ever more copies, using more paper, wearing out equipment faster. We must continue to rely on nearby firms or trades based from home to advertise with us, so please share any leads or ideas for new advertisers with us.

We would love to see more villager-led contributions to increase interest in the Messenger – recipe corner? Competitions? Crosswords? Anything else...?

Thank You

And finally - it's a big thank you to everybody who makes the Messenger happen every month.

The advertisers, of course. The editorial team and committee, the contributors, the production team, the collators and most of all the distribution team who go out in all weathers battling with potholes, uneven footpaths, and downright dangerous letterbox flaps in order to deliver the Messenger to the village.

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Thank you all.... we hope to get a good turnout at the Messenger's own AGM in three weeks on Thursday 23rd May 23rd in Meppershall Village Hall. All welcome.

d. Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group – Mr Andrew Pain – Chair

I am delighted to advise that the Meppershall Neighbourhood Plan has been submitted to Central Bedfordshire Council for External Review and a referendum on adoption.

The Plan aims to preserve the nature of our village and once adopted a neighbourhood plan is the most powerful document when responding to planning applications.

It was also noted that issues with developers often arise as they wish to force badly placed and designed homes in the village. There are never any issue with residents who then occupy those homes and we happily welcome all new residents to the village.

e. Village Hall – Mr Tony Chase - Trustee

The Village Hall is in a strong position at present however we are undergoing many changes. We always welcome enquiries from potential new trustees or volunteers.

f. Meppershall Munchkins – Mrs Melanie Choonos – Chair

Meppershall Munchkins was always a bit of a spur of the moment thing that I had never anticipated doing. Without the funding from the Parish Council and some financial backing from Meppershall Village Hall it would have been an impossible task.

The funding money was well spent on equipment for the group with lots of items sourced second hand and a community keen to donate and help give the group a boost. We now have a great range of toys allowing us to rotate what we have each session keeping everything fresh and engaging for the little ones.

The group has been steadily growing in numbers with a wonderful group of regular Munchkins returning each week as well as plenty of new faces cropping up along the way.

Mum and I have loved getting to know everyone and we are so appreciative of the many keen helpers who pitch in and pack away at the end of each session with us. Mary has been key in keeping Munchkins running on a Tuesday now that I am back at work, and we really couldn't do it without her.

7. ISSUE AND QUESTIONS RAISED BY PARISHIONERS

a. Neighbourhood Plan – How long will the Neighbourhood Plan take before it is adopted?

The Clerk – Now that the Plan has been submitted to Central Bedfordshire Council, they will arrange for a 6-week submission consultation (Regulation 16). After this consultation an Independent Examiner will examine the Plan and many request clarification from the Steering Group of CBC. After this has been completed there will be a referendum of Meppershall registered electors on whether they wish to adopt the Plan or not.

b. Woodlands Rest Green Open Space – What is happening with the Woodlands Rest green open space. The Clerk – The Parish Council has agreed to take ownership of the green

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open space at Woodlands Rest 12 months after Davidsons leave site. Obviously, there are numerous contractual obligations that Davidsons need to adhere to for this to happen and the Parish Council have appointed a tree expert to ensure that planting and the state of the trees is as it should be. Obviously, we are concerned about the recent works on site and are in contact with Davidsons and plan to conduct a site visit with them next week.

- c. **Shefford Road** – The development of 9 new dwellings by Burgess Homes has extended into the highway making Shefford Road narrower. What is being done about this? *The Clerk and Cllr Stephenson have contacted CBC Planning enforcement about this issue who have passed it on to Highways. We will be pressing for an answer this week.*

8. MEETING CLOSE

The Chairman thanked all those who had attended and closed the meeting at 8:10pm.

Where no signature exists in this electronic version, a hard copy version is available for inspection from the Parish Clerk.
