

Great Elm Parish Council
Minutes of meeting held at the Village Hall, Great Elm
Friday September 27th at 7.30pm

1. Present

Colin Jacobs, Member
Edmund Thompson, Chair
Gerry Peachey, Member
Jim Duffus, Deputy Chair – had to leave around 8.45pm
Kevin Whitmarsh, Member – had to leave around 8.15pm

2. Apologies

None

3. Public participation

Sally Rosa, Parishioner, had to leave around 7.55pm
Hugh Johnson, Parishioner, had to leave around 8.45pm

4. Declarations of Interest

Chair noted that since the agenda was finalized a new planning application had been received that related to his neighbour's property. Because it affected his own property he thought it fair to declare an interest and for the other members to make the decision on the GEPC response to Mendip without him, under the auspices of the Deputy Chair.

5. Minutes of previous meeting

Approved

6. Actions from the previous meeting

None

7. Rubbish around bridge/Duck Pond

Deputy Chair gave details of the problem and the concerns raised by parishioners about rubbish being left by visiting dog and other walkers, crayfishers and picnickers around the area of the bridge where there is an old, unsecured bin. Chair showed printouts of photos sent to him by a parishioner. Deputy Chair also relayed information gathered to date from Mendip on the situation. The bin is emptied by a private contractor, but the precise arrangements are not yet known (even by Mendip), but apparently the contractor or its drivers are new and so the bin has not been emptied regularly due to unfamiliarity with the collection route.

This and the large number of visitors to the Parish over the summer months and at weekends results in the bin very quickly getting filled and overflowing, with rubbish then piling up around the bin, subsequently to be spread about the area by wind and, it was thought, by badgers and foxes looking for food. A plastic bag has been found regularly tied to a signpost near the bridge and bin, about which parishioner complains have been received. Deputy Chair suggested this might be the contractor leaving it as a spare liner for the bin.

The matter was subject of very full discussion.

Hugh Johnson gave some very useful insights on the relationship between the provision of bins and litter problems based on his professional training and expertise working as a ranger with national parks, for which he was thanked. He informed Members that many national parks, nature reserves, areas of natural beauty and popular country walks both in the UK and elsewhere no longer provide bins based on evidence that responsible people who do use provided bins will equally responsibly take their rubbish home when there are no bins provided.

The problem in Great Elm, it was agreed by Members, is not so much littering (people just throwing their rubbish down wherever they are) as perfectly responsible and conscientious people putting the rubbish they bring into the parish into the bin or, if it is full, around the bin. Members suspect that putting rubbish around the bin once it's full is done in a rather unthinking way by otherwise responsible people who presume, because they see a bin, that someone other than themselves has a duty and the resources to clean up their rubbish that they decide to leave on the ground. They do not, of course, think they are littering, but in reality they are. Most, it was thought, would if they took the trouble to think about it easily see the inevitable consequences of the wind, badgers and foxes in strewing their rubbish all over the beauty spot they have taken the trouble to visit. But many evidently do not think.

The problem, it was broadly agreed, is that even responsible people do not always think but instead act rather instinctively. In this rubbish situation, they see a bin and instinctively see it as an invitation, a nudge in behavioural psychologist-speak, to dispose of the rubbish they have brought with them. The bin fills up quickly, especially on fine weekends and bank holidays. At this point, without really thinking, someone seeing the bin is still stimulated to deposit their rubbish on top of the full bin. They balance their rubbish precariously on the top. They leave. A breeze topples their rubbish off the top of the piled-full bin. The next person comes along and sees the rubbish next to the full bin and, without giving it any thought, is stimulated to think subliminally, 'ah, other people are putting their rubbish on the ground next to the full bin, therefore it's fine if I do it, too', and they do, and so it goes on. In the absence of swift and frequent emptying, the situation gets worse.

Members agreed that one possible answer is to provide, as some parishioners have suggested, is to provide more or larger bins and to ensure swift and frequent rubbish collections. However, this has drawbacks. More or larger bins (i) are themselves unsightly, (ii) their provision is costly, (iii) their regular and frequent emptying is costly, (iv) and the regular and frequent emptying of bins is always susceptible to failure due to human error, breakdowns or the simple fact of excessive rubbish accumulating at weekends and bank holidays (the times when the parish has most visitors bringing rubbish to the parish). These factors were considered to weigh against the provision of more or larger bins.

It was also considered broadly that the provision of more or larger bins (i) failed to address the underlying problem (of a bin subliminally inviting people to think they can both leave the rubbish they themselves bring to the parish and leave others to take responsibility for it) and (ii) was sub-optimally sustainable from both financial and environmental perspectives.

It was also noted that, in addition to Hugh Johnson's professional expertise in this area, a Great Elm example of non-bin provision exists. The start of the cycle path and the cycle path itself that also attracts large numbers of visitors to the parish offer a contrasting experience to the duck pond area. Where people park and the cycle path itself have no bins and do not suffer the same problems as the duck pond as a result. There is occasional litter where people park and begin their rides/walks (just as there is litter in small degree everywhere), but it seems overwhelmingly that visitors simply take the rubbish they bring with them back home responsibly. There are not even signs asking them to take rubbish home.

In summary, having discussed the matter in very great depth, there was a broad consensus amongst Members that, rather than provide more or bigger bins, the best approach to a longer-run, more effective and more sustainable solution might be to simply remove the duck pond bin and simultaneously put up a wooden sign asking folk to take their rubbish and dog excreta home. There was also agreement that this could be done on a trial basis to see if it is in fact effective.

However, before deciding firmly what to do it was agreed that GEPC needed to find out exactly how regularly and frequently the bin is in fact emptied (Mendip have asked GEPC to do this and the Deputy Chair has very kindly agreed to monitor the situation). It was also agreed that GEPC needs to find out exactly how much more frequently it might be possible perhaps to have the bin emptied. Again, the Deputy Chair, having made some contacts with Mendip has volunteered to get the information.

It was also agreed that GEPC need to find out who put the bin where it is and if anyone in fact owns it (so GEPC can get permission to remove it if necessary). The bin was not always there and seems to have appeared from somewhere at some point. It is not set in the ground and is obviously moveable. The Chair noted being told some time ago that bin spend months, perhaps years, at the bottom of the river, and might itself be in effect litter.

GEPC does not seem to own the bin or to have put it there. Mendip or highways might own and have responsibility for the bin, but there was some suggestion that a well-meaning parishioner had put it there some years ago. Ownership of the land where the bin currently sits is unknown. Chair noted GEPC can only install bins without permission on land it owns, and noted GEPC does not own any land. On land not owned by the parish permission has to be sought from the owner before a bin can be installed. Highways-owned land apparently requires installation to specific criteria and by designated contractors.

Agreed definitive information on all these matters would need to be sought to enable a final decision on action to be made. Chair agreed to ask previous GEPC members if they had any recollections that might be useful. Deputy Chair to enquire of Mendip.

8. Planning matters

Chair noted new guidance and template from Mendip on how Parish Councils should give their recommendations on planning applications. Recommendations should fall into three categories: Recommend Approval, Recommend Refusal, Recommend Leaving Case Officer to Determine. Each category of recommendation should state material planning considerations underlying the recommendation. Some of these considerations are set out in the new template provided by Mendip, but recourse to national and local planning policy documents is required for details. Chair noted responding to planning applications would henceforth be a more detailed, technical and, consequently, onerous matter, with greater knowledge and expertise regarding planning policy needed.

Planning applications and decisions noted:

a. Planning applications

2019/2013/HSE Proposed erection of a new garage structure with solar panels and alterations to the existing dwelling. – GEPC supported

2019/2014/LBC New garage structure with solar panels and alterations to the existing dwelling. – GEPC Supported

2019/2035/FUL Demolition of existing building and replace with 1no. 4 bedroom dwellinghouse. – GEPC Supported (dealt with by Deputy Chair, Chair having declared an interest)

b. Mendip decisions

2019/1467/HSE Proposed outbuilding with extensions and alterations to an existing bungalow. Approval with conditions

2019/2221/FUL Conversion of redundant rural buildings to three no. live/work units, Plot North Of Court Farm. With the Chair having declared an interest and Deputy Chair needing to leave (Kevin Whitmarsh already left), agreed Deputy Chair to deal with matter in circulation perhaps consulting ex-GEPC member and architect Ric Swan for expertise.

9. Highways/footpaths

Noted broken rail on bridge on path to Mells by river repaired.

10. Speeding through village

Discussed how speed of traffic was dangerous, intimidating and had effect of making Great Elm a largely no-walk village, with a consequent unfortunate 'separation' of the east and west ends of the village, resulting in a less sociable village community. Agreed reducing speed of all traffic, not just illegally speeding vehicles, through the village would make the village safer and improve amenity. Agreed the objectives should be adopted of reducing the speed limit within the village from 30 to 20 miles an hour, and within the entire parish from the current national speed limit or 40 miles an hour down to 30 miles an hour. Agreed Colin Jacobs would investigate the means, mechanisms and procedures to achieve this, producing a brief document of findings for subsequent discussion and action.

11. Future of GEPC, given continuing absence of clerk and lack of interest from potential applicants.

Deferred to next meeting due to absence of two members.

12. Funds for Village Hall refurbishment deficit

Deferred to next meeting due to absence of Deputy Chair who had asked for this item to be discussed.

13. Financial report and matters

Chair noted Joy Book (ex-Clerk) had forwarded a final demand from Mendip for election expenses that had been sent to her old Frome address some months ago. Chair said he had asked Mendip to send the original invoice and clarify why GEPC was being charged election expenses when it had not had an election.

14. Correspondence

None.

15. Clerk's matters

None.

16. Items for next agenda / Items for Report

None.

17. Meeting ended

Formal meeting ended approximately 9.45pm

18. Date of next Meeting – Next quarterly meeting: Friday 31st January, 2020.