West Rudham Annual Parish Meeting

Meeting Minutes

22nd May 2025

Parish Councillors present (as members of the public) : James Ringer (Chair), Lucinda Reddyhoff (Vice Chairman), Josephine Tyler, Stephen Mayor, Clive Scott, Ian McCallum and Christine Jewell.

Also in attendance: County Councillor Michael Chenery, Borough Councillor Chris Morley and Caroline Boyden (Parish Clerk)

No members of the public

1. **Welcome and to receive apologies for absence**
   The Chairman welcomed those present.
   Apologies, Cllr McCallum

2. **Receive declarations of interest in items on the agenda and consider requests for dispensations -** None

3. **To approve the minutes of the Annual Parish Meetings held on the 10th of May 2024**
   The minutes were approved as proposed by the Chairman, without amendment, and signed by the Chairman as a correct record by those present at that meeting.

4. **To receive the Annual Report from the Parish Council Chairman, James Ringer**
   We have had quite a year on the council. We sadly said farewell to Jodie, who had done great things for us as clerk. In turn we welcomed Caroline as our new clerk, thank you for stepping into the breach and getting us all organised with our independent email addresses as well as sorting all of our clerical issues.
   We have also added 3 new members to the council. Within the past 12 months we have welcomed Steve, Ian and Christine to the team. Thank you all for coming forward and I hope you can feel you are making a difference to our community.
   We have had very few issues of planning to deal with over the past year, I am not going to complain about that! Finances continue to be a little tight, still recovering from having to extricate ourselves from a groundscare contract and perhaps a lack of foresight in setting past precept budgets. We have subsequently raised the precept which in percentage terms appears lofty, but in practice is not a huge financial rise.
   We have managed to get highways to apply a SLOW warning on the road in Pockthorpe, but we still seem to be struggling to achieve the erection of the village gateways to the west of Lynnfields. Sadly, the chief highways officer moved to another area and momentum seems to have been lost with his transition. I hope this can be concluded within the next few months.
   Councillors Chenery and Morley have been keeping us updated with how the Borough and District are progressing, but sadly we were not permitted local elections with the majority of the country earlier in May.

We must thank Michael for his endeavours in getting our mile stones renovated and painted.
We continue with keeping our green spaces and footpaths tidy and cut, as well as supplying and servicing 3 dog waste bins.
As chair I would like to thank you all for your support over the past year, knowing we have a full council is a most comforting feeling, as well as a firm and steady hand on the clerks tiller.
I believe we have a strong and active council and thank you all for that.

James Ringer, Fox Covert, West Rudham

5. To receive the Annual Report from Borough Councillor, Chris Morley

The beginning of the year saw some significant changes to the leadership of the Council with Cllr Bland being appointed as Mayor (Cllr Bullen Deputy) and Cllr Alistair Beales being elected by his peers in the Independent Group to lead the Council. Alistair appointed Cllr Ring to be his Deputy.
Also, we started the recruitment process for a new Chief Executive Officer, Head of Paid Service. This culminated with the appointment of Kate Blakemore who joined us in September. Further senior management changes took place later in the year to improve spans and lines of responsibility.
The new Cabinet faced some serious challenges, one of which completing a significant house building programme amounting to some £100m, energising the building upgrades in Kings Lynn as part of the Town Deal, which is explained fully as "Vision King's Lynn" on our web site, analysing the future of Alive Sports and Leisure company and generally re-examining the longer-term strategy for the borough.
However, for my Portfolio, the critical challenge was to address the black hole in our finances that the Council faced downstream. Although we had a funded budget for the period 24-26, funding depended upon emptying our General Reserves and leading us to not being a sustainable going concern which is our statutory obligation.

A major contribution to this situation was the decision by the Conservative Administration in election year 2023 to hold fees and charges for 23/24 at 22/23 prices but at a time when inflation was running at 11%. This not only meant a significant reduction in our revenues but also diluted our bank reserves.
It costs over £50m to run West Norfolk Council and to balance our budget (ie when income equals expenditure) when the sums we receive from taxes and grants from Government only amount, on our books, to less than £22m (Council tax net of IDB Levy - £4.5m, Business Rates £14m, and Government support grants - £3m), we are totally dependent upon the revenue we raise from our services including, rent from our estate, our parking services, commercial waste collection, and such like.
To hold prices fixed when inflation was running at such high levels reduced our income by around £2m in year 1, compounded in year 2, and consequently diluted our General Reserves. To address the situation the Cabinet agreed a blanket 10% increase across the board, to derive a funded budget, albeit with the use of reserves. Within this budget we sought a £1m productivity saving and current indications are that we have improved on that figure by £0.6m and hopefully more when the end year figures are tallied. These figures will be with us shortly as the year end Statement of Accounts has to be drafted and submitted to our external auditors by end June, which is the date Government has set as part of the programme to improve the timeliness of audits, which have been delayed across the country since COVID.

However, that increase for 24/25 fees and charges was still not sufficient to catch up with inflation and further price pressures were leading us to a £4m shortfall and call on Reserves for 25/26. Therefore, for this year we conducted a more structured review of our costs such that our fees mirrored our expenditure. For many fees this meant an increase of CPI plus 5% but for some others, notably dog waste bins, a much higher figure.
This exercise has reduced a potential £4m shortfall to a surplus, along with continued efficiency savings, of £2m (a £6m turnround enabling us to face the future with more fiscal confidence). This confidence has enabled the Council to agree a Fees and Charges Policy which dictates that future prices will increase by no more than CPI + 1% without advance Cabinet approval. This will give all Town and Parish Councils more surety in future when drafting budgets and precepts which have to be submitted to the Council in sufficient time to enable a final Council Tax determination to be made. Unfortunately, we faced more headwinds at this time. Our Major Housing Programme was proceeding at pace by the end of the financial year at a time when our tax receipts are at their lowest. Therefore to ensure our cash flow position was secure , we decided to provide Precepts in 2 stages. We have a statutory right to do this and trusted recipients would have sufficient in their own bank accounts to support us. We did however offer to discuss and mitigate the effects of this change if any Parish would have found difficulty.
As regards house building and similar, our Local Plan was agreed by Government Inspectors on 27th March 2025. This is now the plan against which planning applications will be judged until such time as a new plan (on which work has already started) is agreed. The Local Plan 2021-2040 has been posted on the Borough web site and has the latest planning policies and an interactive map from which you can confirm parish development boundaries. Look out for separate information, currently being drafted, as to the relationship between this Local Plan and existing Neighbourhood Plans.
One of my personal objectives is to lobby our MPs and the Government about the iniquitous levy on our finances (which I have mentioned earlier and many times through the year!) from Internal Drainage Boards .The IDBs play an important role in reducing the risk of flooding but the beneficiaries are not just residents and farmers of part of West Norfolk but our road and rail networks, and many other critical infrastructures, such as a power network across the east; and as such are a national asset and should be funded as such. The future funding model being assessed by the D of E has yet to start and the Government funding offer this year is £5m split amongst many needy Councils. The total estimate for IDB funding is £55m and £5m is on offer. We will be lucky to receive £200K against a local levy to us of £3.5m!

I have recently had a reply from the under Secretary of State DEFRA, via James Wild and a presentation is being prepared to give to interested Members at the Houses of Parliament in the not-too-distant future.

2nd home (and extra for empty homes) premiums came into effect this year. It is too early to judge the impact on our finance, but the majority of the premiums collected will go to the County. However, the Council Leader has negotiated a return for this year which, with our own allocation, could amount to around £1.25m which we will use as a contribution to our Affordable Home and Homelessness Strategy. If the Council wish to invoke the 2nd home premium for 26/27, a Determination will have to be made before the end of this calendar year.

Although we are using the opportunity to apply a Premium to 2nd homeowners, we are still offering 100% Council tax discounts to both retired and working people who lack sufficient earnings and savings to meet an acceptable threshold. Our £500k grants

programme for worthy causes is still in operation and all Parishes have had the opportunity to benefit from our Councillor Community Grant Scheme. We have also allocated £2.3m of CIL monies in 24/25 with North Creake securing a Major Award with East Rudham and South Creake securing Minor Allocations.
In parallel with the Levelling Up Act of 2023 the Procurement Act of 2023 was triggered for action this year. The processes take over those followed when part of the EU and are predicated on using more digital access by suppliers and a social value policy which encourages local Small and Medium Enterprises for growth in this Borough.
Through the year we have contributed to and endorsed the Norfolk Economic Strategy and the Kings Lynn Cultural and Heritage Strategy. We have also brought Alive back into the body of the Council with a strategy to improve, through replacement, the facilities at the Oasis in Hunstanton in close order.
We now eagerly await the Government's next steps on the pathway to devolution for Norfolk and Suffolk together with Local Government reorganisation. We have gone at great length to keep all informed of our preferred solution for 3 unitary areas in Norfolk and our submission is with the Department and we will pursue whatever lead we are given.
Finally, as your Borough Councillor, I have tried to keep you informed on Council matters and supported with much mixed success planning, littering, financial matters and such like , but I have never had a complaint about our regular waste or bin service. This is due to the excellent work of our waste team and the strict but reasonable relationship they have fostered with our Contractor Serco. They all deserve our plaudits.
I trust all have found the above, at least in part, an informative view of the last financial year as I see it and am fully open for further questions and criticism!
Chris Morley
Bircham with Rudhams.

6. To Receive the Annual Report from the County Councillor, Micheal Chenery - SEE APPENDIX 1

7. To receive reports from any other clubs or organisations in the parish – none

8. Parishioners Open forum - None present

Meeting ended at 6.50pm

The Chairman thanked everyone for coming and closed the meeting at 6.50 pm.

Signed by Chairman: …………………………………… Date: ………………………………..