

# Betley, Balterley and Wrinehill Annual Parish Meeting

22nd May 2024

Commenced: 7.30 pm

Terminated: 8.15 pm

**Present:** Councillor Bettley-Smith (Chair)  
Councillors Bullock, Drakakis-Smith, Ecclestone, Head, Owen and Speed and Watkin

**Mrs M Clough - Clerk**

**There were 15 Members of the Public in attendance.**

## 1. WELCOME

The Chair of Betley, Balterley and Wrinehill Parish Council, Councillor Bettley-Smith welcomed everyone in attendance. He explained the status and purpose of this meeting for the benefit of all in attendance.

## 2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Berrisford, Daly, Hales and Karling, County Councillor Paul Northcott and Borough Councillors Gary White and Simon White.

## 3. MINUTES

The Minutes of the proceedings of the Annual Parish Meeting held on 18<sup>th</sup> May 2023 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

## 4. CHAIR'S REPORT

The Chair presented a detailed report on the main issues affecting the Parish Council over the last 12 months. (For completeness, and as this meeting was a Parish Meeting (not a Parish Council Meeting) please refer to the Chair's report as attached to these Minutes, as Appendix 1).

## 5. PRESENTATION FROM MEMBERS OF THE PARISH COUNCIL

On behalf of the Footpaths Working Party, Councillor Owen reported on the improvements made to the Parish footpaths over 2023-2024. Significant progress had been made.

He thanked everybody who had contributed in the success of the project including landowners, Staffordshire County Council, and supporters such as local residents, the Betley Bonfire Committee, the Scouts and the Hand and Trumpet public house.

Councillor Owen highlighted that much of this work would not have been possible without the grant from the Betley Bonfire Committee and expressed sadness that such funding was no longer available due to the actions of the Parish Councillor who was found to be in breach of the Code of Conduct by the Newcastle-under-Lyme, Audit and Standards Hearing Panel.

The Parish Council had been successful in obtaining a grant in the sum of £500 from the Community Foundation of Staffordshire for the purchase of two information displays for the Common Lane route. These displays contained a QR code allowing the viewer to obtain further information from the Parish Council website.

A private individual had offered to purchase a gate, and the Parish Council wished to extend its sincere thanks for their generosity.

In the next 12 months the Working Party was hoping to install additional gates to make more accessible paths and to also write a 'Pubs, Paws, Pints and Prosecco' walking guidebook.

Finally, a competition was being considered for a logo, which would be used on signs and in the walking book.

## **6. LOCAL ORGANISATIONS**

There were no local organisations in attendance who wished to report at the meeting.

## **7. OPEN FORUM**

Three Members of the Public highlighted that they wished to make statements. For completeness, and as this meeting was a Parish Meeting, (not a Parish Council Meeting) the statements made by three individuals, are appended to these Minutes.

- (i) CBa – Appendix 2
- (ii) SBa – Appendix 3
- (iii) GGr – Appendix 4

## **8. CHAIR'S FINAL STATEMENT**

In his closing statement, Councillor Bettley-Smith reported that the Parish Council had a duty of care for its Councillors and its staff, and that the recent Finance and Audit Committee, having considered the risk to health and wellbeing, had recommended that meetings of the Parish Council be reduced from one per month to four per year. Instead, monthly meetings would be held of a newly constituted Planning Committee and the Finance and Audit Committee.

The Chair thanked everyone in attendance for their ongoing support during this difficult period.

**BETLEY, BALTERLEY & WRINEHILL PARISH COUNCIL**

**Parish Clerk**

Muna Clough  
Peach Tree House  
Calveley, Tarporley  
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0754 640 5090

**Chairman**

Robert Bettley-Smith  
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**FROM: ROBERT BETTLEY-SMITH**

**CHAIRMAN, BETLEY, BALTERLEY & WRINEHILL PARISH COUNCIL**

**CHAIRMAN'S REPORT TO ELECTORS' MEETING (22 May 2024)**

**Introduction**

I will be candid with you.

The situation on the Parish Council is not good.

The past municipal year has been quite depressing, extremely stressful, and often distressing; for all concerned. Indeed, the situation has had an adverse effect on the mental and physical health of several members.

This all resulted in a member being reported to the Monitoring Officer, by 3 Parish Councillors, a member of the public and the previous clerk, for breaches of the Code of Conduct. The investigating solicitor found overwhelming evidence that the member had infringed the Code in multiple areas. An Audit and Standards Hearing Panel convened by the Borough agreed fully with the conclusions in the independent report and found the member was in breach of Paragraphs 1.1, 2.1-2.3 and 5.1 of the Code. The Parish Council was then required to consider and then apply the recommended sanctions, which we did on Friday 17<sup>th</sup> May.

I am not going into further detail here. The information has been published and the matter has been widely reported in the local press.

The minutes of Parish Council meetings, which have a legal status and give a flavour of the issues, continue to be challenged by the member.

*"The Parish Council has a legal duty to keep records of its meetings which can then be used in evidence in a court of law. Minutes become legal when they are approved by the council and are signed by the chairman as an accurate record."*

But despite the problems, some productive work has been done.

### **Significant Achievement**

The footpaths initiative goes from strength to strength.

I would like to record my thanks to Councillor Mandy Berrisford, who leads the group, and Councillors Neil Bullock and Gareth Owen, for their excellent work to bring all of this about. I must thank the Morris family for providing gates and also, as they are known in the village, Mr Squidge (Mark) and Squidgeon (Ben) for giving us a significant amount of their time to instal a number of kissing gates and other gates, with their labour being provided free of charge. This is the approach, which is typical of our community, has existed for many years, on which our parish thrives.

There is a separate report on footpaths.

### **Thanks**

Firstly, I would like to thank our MP, Aaron Bell. He continues to help us on a range of issues, including correspondence with the Environment Agency and County Council. We are fortunate to have him as our MP.

Secondly, I would like to thank our County Councillor, Paul Northcott. We continue to work with Paul to try to address our various and significant highways issues but there is a limit on what even he can achieve.

Thirdly, I would thank our two Borough Councillors, Simon and Gary White, who give us an outstanding service on a range of issues. Simon, as Mayor, visited the school and distributed Coronation mugs.

I would like to thank Gwyn Griffiths, now our Clerk Emeritus, for his guidance and support over many years and for arranging a successful handover to Muna Clough our new clerk, who I would thank for her excellent work in very difficult circumstances.

I thank Sebastian Daly for his work as Vice-Chairman, and Richard Head, who is the Parish Council's representative on, and chairman of, the Village Hall Committee. Various Councillors serve on outside bodies, such as the Betley Trust. Their contribution is also very much valued. However, I should especially thank Neil Bullock, who liaises with the local police on our behalf, and deals with enquiries from residents.

But, could I thank your Parish councillors for their hard work on behalf of our residents and also for their support and encouragement for me personally, during what has been a very difficult year and at times daunting year. I sincerely hope for a better year in the twelve months.

### **Expenses**

Despite views expressed by one councillor, I do not accept, nor have ever accepted, the chairman's allowance. This will continue to be the case, despite the budget line having been reinstated.

No allowances are payable, or have been paid, to Parish Councillors. Any payments to Councillors have been for items purchased for and on behalf of the Parish Council and for nothing else.

That brings me to finances more generally.

### **Finance & Budget (Current Year)**

The Precept for 2024-25 is £20,866 compared to £18,178 for 2023-24. This significant increase is due to additional mandatory expenditure; for example, we were required to enrol the clerk in the pension scheme. Going forward, our policy will be to increase the Precept in line with inflation; so, the increase next year will be significantly less.

Reserves were circa £22,000 in March 2024 compared to £24,182.38 at the end of 2022-23. We will use some of the reserves, where necessary, to meet expenditure this year, which is currently budgeted at £20,485. Unfortunately, our expenditure will be increased in the absence of grants from the bonfire committee, received in previous years.

Regrettably, expenditure will also be increased this year as repair work, previously carried out by members, on a free of charge basis, is no longer being carried out, following criticism of some of those members and derogatory comments made about one member by the member of the Parish Council, who was subject to the Audit and Standards Hearing.

### **Sandy Croft**

Sandy Croft continues to be well used. Most dog walkers, but not all, have been diligent to ensure no mess has been left in the area. We ask those using the area to ensure no litter or dog mess, including that which they have bagged up, is left in the area. There is a dog waste bin just by the bridge, so bagged dog mess is easy and conveniently disposed of.

The community orchard is well established, with a few trees replaced. The water supply has now been connected by Severn Trent; so, we are hoping for a higher level of success with our trees!

A 'dog watering' and public water facility will be installed shortly.

### **Memorial Garden**

We returned to normal with the Christmas Tree lighting and an event for the children was held in the village hall afterwards. The lights this year will be lit on Friday 29 November (Friday before Advent Sunday).

The original WI tree we thought had died is flourishing, albeit in a more attractive bush format, in a more visible position.

A flag will be flown and a festoon (red, white and blue) will be mounted at the rear of the Memorial Garden for the D Day celebrations during June.

### **Achievements & Lack of Progress**

Achievements include:

- The replacement of numerous stiles with kissing gates.
- The Speed Watch scheme continues but activities have been curtailed due to a lack of volunteers.
- More recently, there has been some improvements in Checkley Lane and Peter Hatton has done much to deal with the flooding both in terms of his labour and funding drain jetting.

The lack of progress is due entirely to the failures of others (mainly Staffordshire Highways and/or their contractor) and includes:

- The flooding and drainage on Checkley Lane.
- Repairs to pavements; particularly, the Wilderness and by the Village Hall. The situation in these areas is critical (we continue to press the County Council for action).
- Road drainage in areas of the Parish is still an issue. The County Council have been pressed on this issue, on numerous occasions.
- Clearing the grass from pavements and edging. We are in the absurd situation that although we have funding allocated, we are instructed not to carry out such work.

### **Areas that need to be tackled in the next year**

- Further pavement clearance (known as edging)

- Work with Staffordshire Highways (if it proves possible) to get some repairs done to the pavements.

Thank you.

**Robert Bettley-Smith**  
**May 2024**

Councillor Drakakis-Smith is rightly at liberty to issue communications to parishioners in her own right and has published 2 containing Parish Council information. Both of which have contained errors.

The last newsletter in February / March 2024 contained about 11 errors or omissions of facts or inaccuracies. It is important to state that none of these relate to the Parish Council minutes.

In the interest of time, I would like to draw your attention to 3 of these.

Firstly, an omission. The grant requested by the Parish Council from the Betley Bonfire Committee. The ‘issue that arose’ that Councillor Drakakis-Smith refers to in her newsletter and led to the non-payment of the grant was solely as a result of Councillor Drakakis-Smith’s actions and behaviours towards the Bonfire Committee following requests made direct to her and her failure to act. This, Councillor Drakakis-Smith failed to mention as the reason for the non-payment of the grant.

Secondly, asking and I quote ‘what kind of beast is the Bonfire Fund’. When challenged at the next Parish Council meeting regarding the use of the word “beast”, Councillor Drakakis-Smith denied at least twice writing this in the newsletter. When her newsletter was then produced at the meeting it was confirmed that Councillor Drakakis-Smith had used the word ‘beast’ despite her denials and it was only then that she made an apology to Dennis Morris.

Thirdly, an inaccuracy. Within the newsletter COUNCILLOR DRAKAKIS-SMITH states that Steven Ball asked the Parish Council to sack COUNCILLOR DRAKAKIS-SMITH. This is incorrect. Indeed the Parish Council are not able to do so. At the last PARISH COUNCIL meeting, COUNCILLOR DRAKAKIS-SMITH agreed to review her notes on the subject and apologise if what she had written was incorrect. I am aware that Steven Ball received a written apology confirming that that the newsletter contents were incorrect plus confirmation that this will also be printed in the next newsletter.

If the inaccuracies and omissions were not enough, what then disappointed and amazed me at the Extraordinary PARISH COUNCIL meeting on 17/05/24, COUNCILLOR DRAKAKIS-SMITH denied directly to me, ever having making the apology in the PARISH COUNCIL meeting or indeed sending Steven Ball a written apology. This behaviour and refusal to take accountability falls very short of that I would expect and the irony was not lost on me that COUNCILLOR DRAKAKIS-SMITH continued to make denials even whilst at the Extraordinary PARISH COUNCIL meeting to discuss the sanctions following the overwhelming evidence against her confirmed in the independent report. I would not be surprised if COUNCILLOR DRAKAKIS-SMITH even denied our conversation took place.



I would therefore like to ask COUNCILLOR DRAKAKIS-SMITH, that whilst she remains a parish councillor, that to try to help you from making further errors and to ensure that we have one version of the truth circulated, that COUNCILLOR DRAKAKIS-SMITH agrees to any further publications discussing parish affairs, for the newsletter to be reviewed by the PARISH COUNCIL prior to circulation.

19/05/24

### **Annual Electors Meeting**

Thank you, Chairman, for the opportunity to speak.

I would like to thank ADS for her written apology for the error she made in her last newsletter, in which she stated, incorrectly, that I had asked the PC to sack her.

This is possibly one her fundamental flaws, either she is unable to recall and write down exactly what is said, or she deliberately spreads lies and dis information.

I spoke at last years public meeting, when the investigation into her conduct had just started. Knowing what was likely to happen, any right-minded person would have apologised, modified their behaviour, and the world could have moved on. From everything I have seen, read and heard she did modify her behaviour – it got worse!!

In my opinion the only satisfactory outcome would have been to have removed her from the council, whilst this is not possible, I think the steps taken by the PC, will have the same effect, if required. At this point I would like to complement the Chairman for the way he handled last weeks meeting, it was clear and unbiased. No doubt ADS will take a different view, via her anonymous blog (no feedback) or her inaccurate newsletter.

To the remainder of the council, especially those who made formal complaints, well done for what must have been a difficult 2 years for you. As councillor ADS has chosen not to resign, despite the findings of the standards board and the unanimous decision by those councillors eligible to vote, there is an alternative. Can I suggest you change your monthly meeting schedule to 4 per year, which will help minimise the impact of the appalling abuse you suffer. As Gwyn would like to say 'of course this is for members to decide'.

To members of the public who still think it's a storm in a teacup, I suggest you do the following, take a look on social media and local news outlets, those people who have commented all use the same words and phrases - bully, spreads lies, claims to represent people and doesn't live in the area, etc. Also,mand more importantly, I would urge you to speak to the other 11 members of the PC, and Gwyn, who I'm pleased to see is with us this evening. This will give you a true and accurate picture of the last 2 years.

Finally,mand this is for you, ADS, if you cannot contribute to the community in a positive way, then LEAVE,

Steven Ball

## Outcome of Code of Conduct complaints

I have kept my counsel to avoid any suggestion of prejudicing or influencing the process. Now that the process is complete I can be frank.

In all the documentation related to this matter the most important perhaps is in the letter of 1<sup>st</sup> May 2024 from the Borough Council to Cllr Drakakis-Smith, in the following words:

*We hope that the content of the independent report and the comments of the author will guide you in identifying the ways in which your conduct has been below the required standard. We sincerely hope that it is possible for you and for the whole of the Parish Council to work productively and cordially together in the future, for the good of the community that you all serve.*

This was an opportunity for the councillor to accept the difficulties her behaviour has created, to recognise that change was needed and the Council could then press a Reset button going forward.

However, from the councillor's response at last Friday's meeting it appears that she regards herself as the victim in all this, that she is right and everyone else involved are wrong. The complainants, the monitoring officers, the independent person who oversaw the process, the external investigator, the Standards Sub-Committee members, and the parish councillors who passed last week's resolution. I make that 20 people. But in Cllr Drakakis-Smith's view she is right and they are all wrong.

But if you're going to claim that **you** are right and everyone else is wrong it's probably best to get your facts right, especially if in your statement to the Hearing you declare that "I have a high regard for truth and honesty".

Sadly many of the claims made by the councillor are demonstrably incorrect. Whether this is confusion, misunderstanding, misinterpretation or conscious mis-statement I have no way of knowing but in her response

to the Investigator's Draft Report I found 13 errors; I found 11 in her statement to the Standards Sub-Committee, and that's before considering her leaflets and social media.

Chairman, you will be relieved to know that I'm not going to list them all, but it is important to highlight a few - around 6 - of them to emphasise just how the councillor's case that her behaviour was somehow justified is full of errors.

Xx xx xx xx

The bonfire cheques. In her evidence to Ext Inv she states:

Cheques handed over 7<sup>th</sup> February 23 and did not appear in the accounts until 1<sup>st</sup> June.

Both dates incorrect and exaggerate the length of time it took.

Appeared on accounts on 19<sup>th</sup> May. And cheques handed over 3<sup>rd</sup> March, not 7<sup>th</sup> February. How do I know?

The 19<sup>th</sup> May date is on the Fin Statement supplied to ALL councillors - including Cllr Drakakis-Smith - in the normal way. As to the handover date - Well, on her own blog on 7<sup>th</sup> March she wrote: "*On Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> March I was invited to attend the handing out of the Bonfire Committee Awards. Those who received an award were very pleased. A good night was had by all.*"

Given that the councillor was fully aware of both dates, why did she provided dates to the Exter Invest that were incorrect?

Xx xx xx xx

Cllr Drakakis-Smith claimed that she had heard the Chairman say that he received a "wage" or "stipend" that he then donated to "charitable causes". All nonsense - the Chairman, the Clerk and others at the meeting heard no such statement; despite this being explained carefully to her very carefully she persisted with this bizarre notion even in her submission to the Extern Invest.

Xx xx xx xx

In her submission to the Exter Invest (paras 9.23 & 24) she stated that "*Nastiness is not alien to this council and there have been several*

*issues which have ended in formal investigations. I understand that a legal investigation is pending”.*

Typically she does not identify these issues and investigations. The last formal standards investigation (prior to the current case) was nearly twenty years ago so what is she talking about here? Since 2006 when I became Clerk the **only** formal investigation has been the one involving Cllr Drakakis-Smith.

And I have no idea what “legal investigation” she believes is or was pending. Perhaps she can tell us?

Xx xx xx xx

In a submission to the Extern Invest (Document 6.2.16) the councillor suggested that the complaint by Cllr Daly was “possibly a result of my raising the issue of cheques presented” by the bonfire committee.

There is a problem with this. When Cllr Drakakis-Smith first raised the issue Cllr Daly had already submitted his complaint!

Cllr Daly has many talents but even he would struggle to submit a complaint as a result of something that had yet to happen.

Xx xx xx xx

At the Hearing on 30<sup>th</sup> April the councillor claimed that it took me 2 years to make a complaint against her. Since she only joined the Council in May 2022 and I submitted my complaint in June 2023 that cannot be the case. I make that 13 months, not 2 years.

She also claimed that having submitted my complaint in June, I only provided evidence three months later.

Untrue. The 44 pages of evidence were submitted with original complaint in June. Indeed -

Indeed, the Ext Inv states clearly (Para 7.51) that the evidence base for my September complaint was “*included with GG’s original complaint*”.

Xx xx xx xx

FINALLY

In her response to the Draft Report the councillor states that, in her view, Cllr Daly's complaint followed a meeting of March 2023 where he "*appeared to have misled the Council*". I note she does not specify how he had misled the Council.

Now, Cllr Daly is a person of some standing in this community and in his profession; a profession which requires him to meet high ethical standards. A suggestion that he had misled the Council is a serious matter. In the 15 years I have known the councillor I would not associate him with misleading the Council. Indeed I'm pretty confident he didn't mislead the Council at that meeting since the only reference to Cllr Daly in the Minutes of that meeting is in Minute 71 - "*Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Daly (unwell) and Head (unwell). RESOLVED that the reasons for absence be accepted as valid under Section 85 of the LGA 1972*".

Yes, Cllr Drakakis-Smith is suggesting that Cllr Daly made a misleading statement to ... a meeting where he wasn't even present !

**Individually, these mis-statements might be termed as one-off slips or errors. When statement after statement after statement is just WRONG one has to view the councillor as an "unreliable witness" and her claim to be a guardian of truth rings rather hollow. To say the least.**

It was clear last week that some residents are supportive of Cllr D-S, perhaps wishing to support a friend or because they have taken at face value the various claims she has made.

**I hope that they will take note of the evidence that many of her claims are clearly in error. And that after long and careful consideration an independent external investigator and a panel with no axe to grind have concluded that Cllr Drakakis-Smith failed to treat others with respect, engaged in bullying and harassment and brought the Council into disrepute.**

Finally Chairman, I would like to thank councillors and residents for their support during what has been a very difficult time for myself and those close to me. Thank you.