

Minutes of the Annual Parish Meeting of Staploe Parish held at 49, Woodhouse Lane, Duloe at the earlier time of 7pm on 20th March 2025

Please note: there was a problem with access to Wyboston Village Hall so we held the meeting at 49, Woodhouse Lane, Duloe instead and left a note on the door at the Village Hall in Wyboston.

Present: Cllr. J. Ibbett, Cllr. G. Meola, Cllr. E. Meola, Borough Cllr. S. Sira, 6 members of the public and L. Crawford (Parish Clerk).

1. Minutes of the meeting held on 21st March 2024

Having been previously circulated the minutes were approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

2. Chairman's Report – J. Ibbett

I would like to thank the Clerk for all her work this year and the Councillors for their support.

Parish and Borough Councillors

We were sorry to see V. Zwetsloot step down on 11th May. Cllr. P. Yockney was also granted a long term dispensation not to attend meetings in September. We therefore have two vacancies (from the resignations of D. Smith and V. Zwetsloot) and one temporary absentee leaving only 4 Parish Councillors out of a total of 7 available to attend meetings. We are keen to recruit new Councillors.

Borough Councillor Sharan Sira was elected as our new Conservative Borough Councillor in a by-election on 4th July 2024 following the resignation of Julie Cox.

Social Events

D-Day 80th celebrations – beacon and walk to Bushmead Priory. Thank you to the Wade Gery family.

Fish and Chip night 12th October – 35 people attended. Thank you to Codswallop.

Grants

Applications to the A428 grant for a new village hall, improvements to the play area, a new noticeboard, a permanent speed sign and average speed cameras were not successful.

We used the ward fund to buy a new noticeboard in Duloe and CIL funding to buy a new grit bin for Honeydon Road.

Ex Traveller Site in Upper Staploe

The landowners settled the debt on the ex traveller site in Upper Staploe on 17th April so they still own the land.

Planning, Development and Infrastructure

The Parish Council objected to the proposals for East Park solar farm.

An application was made to develop a solar farm at Cobholden. The Parish Council supported the application with the comments that mitigation measures must be implemented swiftly and effectively, and that working hours be observed. A further comment was made to Richard Fuller MP to say that there should be a policy of roofs first before good agricultural land and that the cumulative effect of solar farms clustering around electricity substations should be considered.

This application at Cobholden and the application for a second solar farm at Bassmead were granted by the Borough Council.

There have been recent changes to planning laws introduced by the Labour Government under a revised [National Planning Policy Framework \(NPPF\)](#) (12 December 2024). This includes a new housing target for Bedford Borough and in summary the changes indicate that:

- Bedford Borough's annual target for housebuilding has reduced to **1,202** and its base requirement over the next five years (with a 5% "buffer") is therefore **6,010 homes**. BUT very importantly for our area over-delivery in previous years can no longer count.
- The Borough's currently identified deliverable supply over the next five years is **4,371** which means there is a shortfall of **1,940 homes** against the requirement.
- So, from 15th January 2025, the Council will be able to demonstrate a housing land supply of only **3.46 years**.

- When a Local Authority is unable to demonstrate a housing supply of 5 years planning rules mean that there is a presumption in favour of sustainable development in assessing planning applications. This is sometimes known as “tilted balance” where the balance is tilted in favour of sustainable development. This has significant implications for our parish. Bedford Borough Council’s Local Plan would normally mean that development in areas classified as “Open Countryside” would not be considered suitable for new housing development and our whole parish is classed as open countryside. However, under a tilted balance situation the Local Plan holds less importance and national policies take precedence. Much of our parish would still be considered an unsustainable location due to the lack of facilities, services and public transport but the risk of unplanned development is greater.

The Parish Council believes that the best protection from unplanned development is likely to be a “made” neighbourhood plan. As a result we are supporting the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group in progressing the plan as quickly as possible. See the separate report on the Neighbourhood Plan.

Anglian Water are in the process of replacing the pipe along the Bushmead Road. Whilst this is welcome and was much needed the Parish Council were disappointed that Anglian Water’s contractors did not follow the agreed measures to reduce disruption in the three hamlets. This caused a lot of avoidable distress for residents.

The Parish Council responded to the East West Rail consultation in January. We expressed our preference for a route south of the A421 rather than the proposed route through north Bedfordshire and for the option to cross the A1 south of the Black Cat.

Community Cabins

We replaced the decking at the cabins, replaced the locks and repaired the CCTV. The water meter was also replaced by Anglian Water. The pipes froze in cold weather despite the water being turned off. The Parish Council are looking at options to install heating to avoid this situation in future and to apply to the Mayor’s Climate Change fund to install insulation and solar panels.

Other Matters

The Parish Council adopted an accounting package called Scribe which is designed for Parish Councils.

3. Financial Report (L. Crawford – Parish Clerk)

Opening Position

We opened the financial year in April 2024 with £42,655 in our accounts of which £35,483 was in earmarked reserves and £9,092 was in available reserves with £1,919 VAT due to be refunded in May 2024.

Earmarked reserves were for: Community Infrastructure Levy funds £17,229, reserve for rebuilding the Village Hall £7,293, grant funds for the Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP) £6,739 (repaid and a new application made in 2024/25), , savings for tree inspections and works £789, RADIUS funds £706, street light inspection savings £590, decking savings £500, elections funds £465, Dennybrook campaign savings £386, deposit for the football club £100 and other savings of £685 for occasional admin, and maintenance.

We should be holding 6-12 months of precept in unearmarked / available reserves (£7,257 to £14,513). Therefore, £9,092 was within the appropriate range.

Receipts

Our precept was £14,514. In addition to this we received:

- £6,587 in a Neighbourhood Planning grant (after the previous grant of £6,740 was repaid)
- £3,359.33 in Community Infrastructure Levy funds for the second tranche of funding for Honeydon Barn conversion on Honeydon Road near Colmworth. These have to be spent on infrastructure within 5 years (by 5th December 2029).
- £3,299.80 in insurance claim (repair to street light in Duloe Butts)
- £1678 from the Ward Fund to purchase a new noticeboard in Duloe
- £338 ticket sales for social events (fish and chip night)
- £748.53 bank interest
- £512 for cabin hire
- Total forecast receipts to year end are £31,036.66

Payments

We aim to meet our regular payments and regular transfers to reserve (eg. saving towards the village hall) out of precept.

This year we are forecast to spend £59 more than we budgeted in our regular payments. This is due to overspends in:

Scribe accounting	-£368
Community Cabin maintenance	-£257
Audit fees (new auditor)	-£140
CCTV maintenance	-£75
Electricity for cabins	-£61
Donations to St Neots museum	-£50
Other overspends (insurance, grass, power to street lights & sundries)	-£130

These savings were offset by underspends in:

Clerk's training	£50
Other administration	£52
Office costs	£57
Hall hire (meetings)	£84
Other maintenance	£86
Tree surveys & works	£200
Newsletter	£304
Other underspends (salary, expenses, training, social events etc.)	£190

In addition, we are forecast to spend £22,710 using other income such as grants, insurance payouts, donations or earmarked reserves:

Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP)

Grant Repaid	-£6,740
Grant Spent	-£4613.25
Total NDP payments	-£11,324.74

CIL (replacement decking, grit bin, noticeboard top up)	-£6,332
Decking savings	-£1,000
Extra grass & hedge cutting (field & Common)	-£149
Social events	-£142

Closing Position

At the end of the financial year on 31st March we expect to have £29,898 in earmarked reserves and £5,390 of general funds making a total of £35,288. This is below the recommended range of 50-100% of the 2024/25 precept (£7,257 to £14,513) in available reserves. However, we are expecting a VAT refund of £1,252 in May which will take us to £6,642 of available reserves which is £615 below the recommended range. However, due to the level of earmarked reserves this should not be an issue.

Budget for 2025-26

In 2025-26 our precept will increase by £996 (+6.8%) to £15,510. This corresponds to an increase of £4.96 per year for each Band D household in the parish.

- Key changes compared to the 2024-25 budget are:
 - Significant reductions:
 - £500 savings to replace the decking removed (replaced in January 2025)
 - £70 less for office costs as the new printer is using less ink
 - Significant increases:
 - £412 for Scribe accounting package
 - £278.50 for salary increase for the Clerk (set by unions / government)
 - £185 for defibrillator maintenance / parts
 - £150 for maintaining the CCTV

- £140 extra for internal audit (local auditor no longer auditing councils)

We have assumed we will earn £225 less interest as rates are due to fall.

Lucy Crawford (Parish Clerk)

4. Village Hall Report (Cllr. G. Meola)

The Village Hall Committee has continued to meet (ad hoc) although the village hall in Duloe is now demolished. and the planning application lapsed.

In November 2024 the current Village Hall Committee felt that as some time had now passed it would be right to find out what residents of the parish currently thought about a new village hall.

Of the 160 questionnaires circulated 32 questionnaires were returned. 21 questionnaires indicated that they wanted a village hall. 10 indicated they did not and 1 questionnaire was unsure. Two people Offered to join the Village Hall Committee and 15 people offered to volunteer to support the Village Hall Committee.

The Village Hall Committee the responses to the questionnaire and reflected on the fact that the land that the hall would be built on was conveyed to the parish by the estate of Thomas George Bates. with the object of "improving the conditions of the life of the residents" it was felt after much discussion that it was important to continue to look at building a new village hall, but most importantly. with the aim of providing a facility that more residents in the parish would support and to also look at options for funding which would have the least financial impact on residents.

Therefore. residents will continue to be consulted as the project progresses.

Mark Crawford has now stepped down as Chair of the Committee. it would like to thank Mark for the time he gave to the Committee and to the parish, he will be missed.

Currently. the Village Hall Committee is made up of Parish Council Representatives and three residents of the parish. who all volunteer their time with the aim of contributing to our parish. The Committee has also recognised that it needs to encourage clubs or groups arising in the parish to join the committee, to support the development of a new village hall — new members are welcome. The Committee is also looking to finalise a date in October 2025 for its AGM and to appoint a Chair, Finance Officer and Secretary.

It is also hoped going forward to encourage those volunteers who have declared an interest to become more involved with the Committee to help develop a business plan and look at funding opportunities for a new village hall.

The Village Hall Committee does not generate an income and relies on Staploe Parish Council to donate funds to enable its legal requirement regarding Public Liability and Trustee Indemnity Insurance, it is hoped that the parish Council will continue with this support.

The Parish Council also has generously set aside in its reserves funding for a new village hall currently £8792.90 (Jan 25) and its commitment is appreciated.

On a more practical note, the Village Hall Committee has met its obligations in relation to its Annual Return to the Charity Commission and its bank account was reconciled at its last meeting on 23 January 2025, its current balance is £79.23 (20/03/25).

It is not going to be easy, but the Village Hall Committee hopes that the residents of the parish will support the Committee to build a new hall that is an asset to the parish and one that everyone feels they can contribute to and be part of, it may take time but it is hoped the outcome will be of benefit to all.

Gerardine Meola
Parish Council Representative
Staploe Village Hall Committee
March 2025

5. Playing Field Report

The playing field continues to be used by St. Neots Town Youth Girls Team for their training and matches which is working well. The field is maintained by Bradgate Grounds Maintenance. The Parish Council pay for 8 cuts per year and any additional cuts are paid for by the club.

It is also used by families and dog walkers on an informal basis.

6. Community Cabins

The Community Cabins continue to be used by St. Neots Town Youth Girls Team for their training and matches. They were also hired by a church youth group on one occasion.

We have replaced the locks as they were beginning to fail. We also replaced the decking in January. The cabins have a lot of mould on the walls and condensation problems as well as issues with burst pipes. The Clerk is seeking quotes to apply for grants to insulate the cabins and add solar panels. Meanwhile we are also looking at heating options to keep the pipes from freezing.

Anglian Water replaced the water meter so that now works well and can be turned on and off more easily.

7. Borough Councillor Sira's Report

The planning inspector has given the Borough Council an extension until the end of May 2025 to pause the inspection of the Local Plan 2040. Sam Fox will be taking over from Jon Shortland. Borough Cllr. S. Sira will be arranging a meeting of Parish Councils to meet Sam.

Borough Cllr. S. Sira advised Councillors to formally register their interest with Eastpark Solar in order to be notified of proceedings. Tim Price is heading up the campaign against the solar farm. She advised the Council to ensure they are receiving all the notifications from Tim and his team.

She wanted to know if the Parish Council has any plans to celebrate VE Day. Councillors said that there were no plans as it would be on a bank holiday weekend and they thought a lot of people would be away.

Borough Cllr. S. Sira's monthly report is given below:

February Monthly Report

- **Devolution**

In light of the local elections that are taking place in many of Bedford Borough's neighbouring authorities, the Council's Executive has determined that it would not be prudent to proceed with detailed discussions on devolution at this time. The elections could result in changes in leadership and potentially bring new perspectives on devolution which would impact discussions.

Bedford Borough Council remains open to constructive dialogue with our neighbouring authorities and the Government regarding potential devolution opportunities as long as this is able to bring tangible benefits to the Borough.

- **Debenhams**

Internal works at the old Debenhams building are proceeding smoothly with upgrades to toilets, electrics, and repairs to the building's windows and roof underway near completion.

Once the space is safe and functional the Council will be opening the Tourist Information Centre and Corn Exchange Box Office in the repurposed 'cosmetics' section of the old Debenhams building potentially on the 1st April.

The Mayor and Executive are actively exploring potential business opportunities for the rest of the site.

- **Council Town Centre Initiative**

The Council has created a cross-department working group that brings together the Environment, Events, Economic Development, Markets, Highways, Trees, Buses, Licensing, and Property at a dedicated collaborative team aimed at improving our town centre.

- **New SEND School**

On 10th February 2025, Bedford Borough's officially opened the new state-of-the-art SEND school in Kempston and welcomed its first 60 pupils.

The new school is located on the site of the former Robert Bruce Middle School on Hillgrounds Road. The Council stepped in to provide the £23m needed to construct the school after the Department for Education (DfE) failed to provide the initiative funding.

This ensured the project did not stall further, the DfE have also committed to reimbursing the Council for the cost of the school in April 2025.

- **Flood Reserve**

Last year the Council's Executive conducted a detailed review of the Council's financial reserves to ensure they were not inappropriately allocated.

The review identified an opportunity to re-allocated £150,000 worth of reserves that were being held without a clear purpose. These resources were invested into a new £150,000 Flood Reserve, which will enable the Council's flood team to work more efficiently, deploying funds rapidly wherever flash flooding occurs.

- **St Paul's Square and Traffic**

Work is underway on both the south and north sides of St Paul's Square that will see the area benefit from new paving slabs, improved kerbs, and wider pedestrian walkways. Simultaneously, work is nearing completion at Midland which will then transition to phase 2 of the development that would be improvements to shop fronts (the road will be fully open during this phase).

Due to these major works, increase congestion has become a concern for residents when navigating the Town Centre. Council is closely monitoring congestion and has already made adjustments to the timing of the traffic lights at the bottom of Town Bridge, significantly reducing queues. Further adjustments will be made as needed.

Additionally, the emergency gas works at Ashburnham Road increase congestion in the area however, these works have been completed easing traffic flow.

Further information on closures are as follows:

- April 2024: There will be overnight closures to enable essential right-turn improvements from the bridge to the embankment.
- July 2024: Once this work is complete there will be a 24/7 closure of the south side of the square during schools summer holidays to minimising disruption to road users.
- Overnight closures: Throughout the project there will be overnight closures for general resurfacing, updates on these will be shared well in advance.

It is important to note that the current Mayor and Executive cannot revise these plans, the scheduling was inherited and any changes to or revisions would risk losing the funding for the works.

- **Boast for Highways maintenance**

The Council have invested into high-tech jetting units to improve road maintenance, enhance flood prevention, and reduce long-term repair costs. These new units are set to begin operation next year and can potentially clean thousands of gullies across the borough, preventing blockages, reducing surface water flooding and potentially reducing potholes. At night, they can be converted into salt spreaders to keep the roads safe during winter by improving gritting operations.

- **Invest to save/QRoutes**

The Council has also invested into innovative technology solutions like QRoutes. This software is a dedicated programme that assists Council officers in optimising bus routes.

Since its introduction, the Council is now on track to achieve a £750,000 in savings for the 2024/25 budget and an additional £300,000 in children's social care transport—totalling a £1 million reduction in the 2025/26 transport budget without cutting services

8. Neighbourhood Plan Report (T. Tagg – Chairman of Staploe Parish Steering Group)

We have made considerable progress with the Neighbourhood Plan in 2024/25. The green infrastructure plan, green space plan, housing needs assessment and design codes were completed, endorsed by the Parish Council and published in September 2024.

The draft Neighbourhood Plan was prepared and published in February 2025. We now await a habitat screening assessment from Locality before we publish our six week public consultation (Regulation 14 consultation). Once this is complete we will consider the responses and make any amendments deemed necessary and then submit it to Bedford Borough Council to arrange independent examination. Once this has been done there will be a formal referendum and if 50% or more respondents vote in favour of the Neighbourhood Plan it will be “made” and the plan and its supporting documents will be considered legal documents to be considered when determining planning applications.

We believe that this will offer some protection from unplanned development. However, to achieve the maximum protection we would need to allocate at least one site for development. Therefore we plan to begin a review of the plan as soon as it

has been made. We will do a housing needs survey, a call for sites to meet the needs identified, get consultants to assess the sites for us and consult residents on them before selecting a site for allocation. We anticipate that this will be a small site.

9. St Neots Town Youth Girls Team Report

It's been a slightly more challenging year for the girls. Lots of new players, who are in a team for the first time, against others who have been playing for 10 years, means it has been difficult for them. The fact that we've managed to introduce new players to the game is a positive though. The way the league has been organised has also changed, which has resulted in the team only having 7 home games to date (with one remaining, which may not happen). So we've not used the field as much as we would have liked. Golfers have been a problem, with more recently taking divots out of the pitch, but can't see how that can be managed or prevented.

There has been progress, with two members of our team already moving into adult football and playing for Eaton Socon ladies, with one of them recently playing in the county cup final. The partnership with Eaton Socon is there to hopefully enable our players to be involved into adulthood and realise the long-term benefits of playing in a team and maintaining an active lifestyle. Eaton Socon are adding a second team as a result:

<https://stneotstownyouth.com/eaton-socon-ladies-fc>

The use of Duloe Playing Field has really helped us promote the girls game and get to this stage, so has been really beneficial. We would like to look at how we could utilise the field better to develop the girls game further, as it is such a good environment to introduce younger girls to football, hence the recent requests and questions. We are very mindful around traffic, but are looking at options to introduce two or three younger teams (u7, u9 & u11). They play on much smaller pitches and have far fewer players (5v5 etc instead of 11v11), and would not be at home at the same time. The FA is even looking to introduce a 3v3 format.. I will keep you updated and submit any proposed changes.

The enquiry around a ladies team using the field on a Sunday afternoon was in case Eaton Socon FC had demand for a third team. It is unlikely for the coming season, but will let you know if anything changes.

The new decking looks very smart, and the locks are a lot easier to use! A big thank you to Emilio for allowing us to use his mower to cut the grass ahead of a game, despite the trouble it caused! As ever, we appreciate all of the help & support you've provided throughout the year. So a big thank you to you too.

10. Eaton Socon Charity

No report received.

11. Open Forum

A resident of Honeydon expressed her concern about the number of HGVs coming down Lower Honeydon Lane and Begwary Lane into Manor Farm Lane. They often get stuck or lean dangerously as they navigate the corner at Dairy Farm. This road is wholly unsuitable for long vehicles. The original planning application to use Whitehouse Farm for warehousing and distribution said that HGVs would access the facility via Mill Road. Please can we have a lorry ban in Manor Farm Lane.

The Clerk reported that she had met with a representative from Bedford Borough Council Highways Department (BBHD) in January and she had emphasized that residents don't want the corner at Dairy Farm physically widened / "improved". They just want to stop the long vehicles. BBHD agreed to try to contact HGV sat nav companies to discourage them using this route.

BBHD suggested that the companies at Whitehouse Farm should erect signs to say HGVs turn left opposite their gate but also a series of signs directing Whitehouse Farm deliveries from the Bushmead Road, down Staploe Road and Mill Road. BBHD recommended the signs go close to the hedge as they are not supposed to go on the verge.

Borough Cllr. S. Sira asked the Clerk to send her a list of the sign locations, signs to mount on and what they should say and she will see if she can get the signs installed. A428 funding may be an option given that lorries are being directed by satnav to go via the Bushmead Road to avoid the Black Cat.

The Clerk reported that BBHD will consider introducing a give way into Manor Farm Lane so the through road goes down Cadbury Lane. This wouldn't cost much and might be effective in making HGVs think before going down the "Unsuitable for HGVs" road.

BBHD do not have any funds for weight restrictions and are not keen on them because once one is in place people push for further restrictions and that forces more lorries onto other local roads causing further problems.

Cllr. J. Ibbett explained that a lorry ban would be difficult because agricultural vehicles need to access the site.

The landowner from Whitehouse Farm asked if residents could send him the registrations of lorries using Manor Farm Lane. He did not think that all of the lorries in question were destined for Whitehouse Farm – some were pallet lorries / JCB's which do not go to Whitehouse Farm. He explained that they are told to use Chawston / Mill Road to approach on the order documents but sometimes they are one off drivers and get it wrong.

Residents emphasised that the current situation is a danger to Dairy Farm Cottage which is listed. Lorries get stuck and tip towards the cottage. Many years ago a lorry shed its

load into the garden of the cottage because it was leaning as it went round the corner. The large lorries are also a danger to residents who walk in the lane – there is nowhere to go to get out of trouble when a lorry approaches as the banks are steep and the visibility is poor.

Cllr. J. Ibbett suggested that it would be helpful if the hedge at Dairy Farm was cut back because it is a problem for tractors who can't see the sign. Residents offered to pass on the message to the owner.

The meeting closed at 8.35pm