

Little Easton Parish Council

Minutes of the

**Annual Parish Assembly**

Wednesday 22 MAY 2024 – 7:00pm

Little Easton Memorial Hall

**1. Welcome from the Chairman**

Chairman welcomed all residents in attendance

**2. Approve the minutes of the Annual Parish Assembly 19 April 2023**

Minutes approved and signed

**3. Chairman's Report**

APPENDIX A

**4. Internal Audit feedback – Clerk**

APPENDIX B

5. Date of next Annual Parish Assembly – T.B.C.

**6. Chairman to close the meeting.**

Meeting closed at 7:15pm

**Signed**.....**Date**.....

## APPENDIX A

Good evening, everyone. It is a legal requirement for the Chairman to update you of what your parish Council have been doing over the past twelve months and give you the opportunity to ask any questions you may have. To clarify there will be a public session in the meeting immediately following this one.

I start by introducing my colleagues:

- Councillor Emma Wells
- Councillor Simon Benstead
- Councillor Ian Sussams
- Myself, Peter Bright
- Finally, our Parish Clerk, Mr Ian Brown

I would like to thank all of my colleagues on the Council for their ideas, fortitude and hard work. It's not easy being a Councillor and the clerk. There is an expectation that we will be 'Jacks and Jills of all trades'. Contemporaneously, Councillors have to abide by local government rules and conduct themselves in accordance with the Councillor Code of Conduct. My colleagues do that superbly but we do, what we can do, when we can do it. We are not in a position to resolve every issue that comes before us.

My report focuses on three key areas:

- A summary of our achievements over the past year. I will also take the opportunity to explain this Council's philosophy.
- A financial report, to which I will ask our Clerk, Mr Brown to add his comments regarding the recent audit.
- Finally, I will turn to the future of the parish as we face a period of dramatic change.

Last year, an election year, six councillor posts were available. Only three parishioners put themselves forward creating an uncontested election result with the legal minimum of Councillors and half available posts unfulfilled. The General Power of Competence (GPC) can only take effect if no less than 2/3rds of Councillor roles are filled following an election; later co-options do not count.

The GPC allows a Council to make decisions in delivering some services and projects without having to seek permission from higher authority. Just one additional Councillor at election time could have made things easier for your Council. Now, the parish has to wait until 2027 to gain GPC with the consequent risk that some decisions to satisfy parishioners may prove too onerous to execute.

This Council's philosophy is simple:

- We will strive to represent parishioner views and improve quality of life
- We will not raise funds unless they are for specific reasons.
- We will hold a year's reserve of recurring fixed costs as recommended by the Joint Panel on Accountability and Governance.
- We will not skimp on quality. What is cheapest may not offer long term value.

In the past twelve months we have completed or arranged:

- Refurbishment of the War Memorial
- Replacement of broken and rotted recreation green benches and picnic tables
- Refurbishment of those benches and picnic tables that simply needed TLC
- Replacement of the football goal and netting
- Moved from personal e-mail accounts to gov.uk accounts as recommended by the Local Government Association – one of the first parish Councils to so.
- Set up a parishioner mailing list
- Resolved some outstanding issues with the children's playground including erection of a noticeboard and fixing the gate to ensure a safer, quieter and softer closing
- Repaired the zip-wire and lopped impeding overhead branches
- Clearance of NE corner of the recreation ground
- Assisted the organisers of the Coronation party. Of special note was the commitment shown by Lisa and Sharon, the parish's unofficial Social Event Organisers, together with a small band of helpers.

Other projects we had planned at the start of the last financial year subsequently proved unnecessary. These were:

- Local Plan consultation – Easton Park was not included in the draft local plan
- UDC charge for conducting a local election – election uncontested

The following projects were postponed due to poor weather conditions in the second half of the year and are subjects of discussion for the meeting to follow:

- Safety 'matting' path from the Memorial Hall to the playground
- Concrete pad with necessary cabling to allow seasonal erection of a Christmas tree

Finance. Your Council is in a strong financial position and we continue to ensure all funds are used by either holding a mandated reserve or against specific projects. We do not hold funds for the sake of holding funds.

On 1<sup>st</sup> April 2023 we had £57k as our opening cash balance. On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024 we had £54k. This was despite a reduction in the precept of 12%, benefitting all households.

Of course, we gained through savings on specific projects such as the Local Plan consultation (£5k) an uncontested election (£1.5k) plus negotiated reductions in cost for the benches, picnic tables, football goal (£1k) and the Coronation grant (£0.5k).

Projects that could not be completed due to weather conditions resulted in underspending of £3.5k.

The War Memorial cost more than we budgeted. Our budget of £5.5k proved inadequate in the light of hidden water damage and worn brick-pointing resulting in water ingress. To reduce the risk of further damage all faces had granite slabs installed. The gate re-oiling, fence painting and paving slabs were also extras to be dealt with. The cost overrun was £2.4k and our only overrun of the year.

We also identified and earmarked funds during the year for miscellaneous work that needed attention and reassessed estimates of unstarted projects. We project the total value of last year's uncompleted projects to be £6k this year.

In February 2024 and following a projected monthly cash flow forecast we decided to deposit £50k into our bank's interest-bearing instant-access account. Subsequently, with the first 50% of the precept paid to us by UDC, we have deposited a further £15k in this account.

If all the new projects that we propose for this new financial year are executed as per our projected budget, then our opening balance on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2025 will be £24k. £17k of that figure being held as our recurring fixed expenditure reserve.

For the remaining three years of this Council, we will need to raise the precept in each year but the substantial increases of past years (to bolster the Council's financial position) are unnecessary unless the level of requested projects or an urgent situation comes to light.

Non-recurring expenditure will always be agreed at a public meeting. In the event of an underestimate of a project's budgeted cost we look to either fund the difference from existing underruns or review the prioritisation of unstarted projects.

Finally in this section, to improve our cashflow during the year we have decided to submit quarterly VAT returns rather than yearly.

The third section of my report looks towards a future that is nebulous and impossible to budget for.

It was a shock when, in September 2023, the Secretary of State for Housing granted authorisation to Landsec for 1,200 houses to be built on parish land. Currently there are 200 houses in the parish to which we can add 47 over the next two years re the land behind The Stag. But 247 houses is dwarfed by 1,200.

It's incomprehensible that the parish will not change. Noticeably there will be a lot more traffic and people. The 47 houses available from 2025 is the start, although manageable if we prepare for that.

1,200 houses is a different matter. Realistically, they may become part of Dunmow and Little Easton will become Little-er. Regardless, there will be a dramatic increase in the number of people in the area, some 3,000. The Conservation Area, lakes, bridleways, roads, recreation green – no parish asset will remain untouched.

Doubtless there will be new community facilities for 1,200 houses and as they become available the Memorial Hall may find it is competing against newly-built amenities. Conversely, demand for our free-use recreation green will increase but the Council will do what is necessary to protect its asset and ensure the tenure of the cricket club, with one of the best wickets in the county, is not threatened.

But this is nothing should 10,000 houses at Easton Park be approved. Bigger than Saffron Walden is today, Easton Park would be classified as a town. There will be huge community facilities and a high risk that Little Easton, as a separate parish, would cease to exist.

Easton Park may not part of the draft local plan now but assuming the local plan gets approved in 2026, five years later there will be a reassessment of building need within the district and depending upon the politics of the day Easton Park development will rear its ugly head again. With a lobbying owner, an eager government and a desperate UDC one possibility is that Little Easton will be merged with Great Easton to form “The Eastons” parish.

There is an increasing recognition of the value of Easton Park as a park. The Big Green Internet and other countryside bodies are keen to retain Easton Park as open land for everyone’s benefit. Stop Easton Park are still working hard to get Easton Park earmarked as a park for all. Express your interest In SEP and ask how you can help. Sign up to the Stop Easton Park e-mail list if you haven’t already done so and express your concern.

I now turn to Mr Brown for his comments on the recent audit.

#### **APPENDIX B**

Thank you to the Chairman for his fulsome review of 2023-2024

The Internal Auditor report will be circulated to Members so they are aware of the Recommendations in that report.

As ever the council received a firm but fair internal audit with recommendations this year they review their Standing Orders and Financial Reserves.

DRAFT