

Pen Selwood Parish Council

Minutes of the Extraordinary General Meeting held on the 24th June 2014 at 7-30pm in the Village Hall.

Present were – Cllr Peter Fitzgerald (Chairman), Cllr Tony Appleton, Cllr Jane Ashman, Cllr Cliff Clark, Cllr Jenny Steadman and Cllr Andrew Jenkins (Minutes).

21 members of the public and a representative from the local press.

Apologies were received from Cllr Bryan Young who had declared an interest prior to the meeting.

The Chairman opened the meeting by stating that he thought that it could be a difficult meeting and that he therefore requested that there should be no interruptions and that he intended to allow everyone to have a chance to have their say. He made it very clear that the comments reported in last week's edition of the Blackmore Vale Magazine were his views and not the views of the Parish Council.

He stated that he was aware that the subject of the meeting was an unusual one for a Parish Council and that the Parish Council were very sorry that we felt it necessary to call the meeting. However, because of a number of complaints from Parishioners about very serious animal welfare issues in the Parish and expressions of frustration that various officials are not carrying out their duties properly, the Parish Council felt that an extraordinary general meeting was required.

The Chairman expressed concern about the difficult times that are being experienced by small stock farmers at present and stated that he very much disliked having to interfere in other people's private lives.

The Chairman stated that he proposed to give a statement setting out his understanding of the position and then would ask Parish Council members for their comments before asking anyone present who wishes to express their views to do so. He expressly stated that comments should be factual rather than emotional. The PC will then decide what further action, if any, they should or could take.

Chairman's statement :-

Colin Young kept a large number of cattle during the winter in the Hopkins family stock buildings. In about March of this year, Nathan Hopkins returned the animals to the fields that Colin Young rents in Pen Selwood.

The fields very quickly became overstocked and the cattle began to look in very poor condition. They were breaking out onto the highway regularly.

There now remain 20 or so cattle quite apart from a number calves.

The DEFRA Ministry Vet and the RSPCA both concluded that the cattle were severely under-nourished and reported the matter to the Somerset Trading Standards Officer to enable him to

decide whether criminal proceedings for Cruelty to Animals should be brought. They were told a few days ago that the Trading Standards Officer hasn't yet decided whether to bring proceedings. DEFRA and the Trading Standards body have the power to confiscate cattle in extreme circumstances but are very unwilling to use it. Both DEFRA and the RSPCA have revisited in the last day or so and report that the cattle are now looking a lot better.

The position concerning the 40 or so calves in the small paddock is slightly different. There is very little grass but Janey Allen had told the Chairman that they are being fed regularly and that she herself regularly checks the water and tops up the water.

The fields in question belong to the Diocese and the agents are Greenslade, Taylor and Hunt who don't seem to have taken an active interest in the welfare of the animals. However, the tenancy ran out on 25th March and the Diocese finally decided not to renew it. Colin has declined to remove his stock and the Diocesan solicitors are bringing proceedings to obtain possession.

The Chairman then asked Parish Councillors for their comments.

Cllr Jenkins reported that the PC had contacted the agents, DEFRA and the RSPCA on several occasions since the last Parish Council meeting to check on the situation.

Cllr Ashman stated that she was pleased that the Chairman had made it clear that the press report was not a report of the Parish Councils view of the situation.

Before opening the meeting to the public for comment the Chairman asked that if any member of the public had an interest in the land, animals, etc. they should declare that interest before they speak.

Mrs L Nelson explained that she and Mrs A Kirby had submitted applications to take over the tenancy of the land in question. Mrs Nelson went on to say that she felt it was sad that Colin and Caroline Young were not represented at the meeting but that it was true that animals were starving and suffering on their land. She stated that she would like more action to be taken.

The Chairman asked for suggestions as to what further action could be taken.

Mrs S Willis-Flemming stated that the village had put up with the situation for 3 years.

Mrs S Appleton stated that she felt that the article in the Blackmore Vale magazine focused on the calves and not the starving cows. She stated that the problem has been on-going for 5 years not 3 and that it was not just the starving animals but also the old tractors, redundant farm equipment and rubbish stored on the land as well as a number of dogs being shut in the bungalow for hours on end.

Mr G Parcell reported that the cattle are now being fed and watered and that he felt that the Blackmore Vale Magazine article was slanted against Mr Young. He stated that he considered that it was wrong to put Mr and Mrs Young and their family in a position where they have been verbally abused. The chairman and members of the PC expressed concern that the family were being treated in this way.

A member of the public from outside the village read out a letter from a friend of hers, who had purchased a dog from Mr & Mrs Young, describing the poor conditions that greeted them when they went to collect the dog. A copy of the letter was passed to the Chairman.

Mrs S Fitzgerald reported that she had approached the M.P. for help and advice.

Cllr Clark lives next door to Mr and Mrs Young and reported on-going problems of noise from dogs that are shut in the bungalow and that have, in the past, been shut in vans.

Mrs Nelson stated that she considered it was important to record comments on acts of cruelty on all animals in the care of Mr and Mrs Young.

Mrs Appleton added that we do not want to see a repeat of a situation recorded in South Cheriton where, in the past few years, a number of cattle were in such poor condition that they had to be destroyed.

The Chairman reported that the Diocese were fully aware of the situation and were worried by it. The Diocese agents were unable to attend the meeting because the matter is subject to legal proceedings.

Mr C Tanner asked what would happen to the cattle if Mr Young is forced to leave the land. Do we just move the problem to another area?

Mr Parcell stated that he felt that we need to talk to Mr and Mrs Young to find out what the problems are.

Both the Chairman and Mrs Appleton told the meeting that they had tried to contact Mr Young but there has been no response.

Mrs Veit asked why the RSPCA were not taking any action to which the Chairman answered that it is because Trading Standards are taking the process forward.

Cllr Clark reported that the poor treatment of the dogs has been reported to the RSPCA who say that they are unable to do anything and that the matter should be reported to Trading Standards.

Cllr Ashman noted that there has been some improvement in the condition of the animals and that we should hope that this continues and that we should say that we have noticed the improvements.

Mrs Nelson congratulated and thanked the PC for calling the meeting.

Ms Rossiter advised that Mr Young should be encouraged to improve the situation and that we had to be careful not to split the village opinion.

Mr Parcell offered to arrange a meeting between Mr Young and a member of the PC.

Some discussion followed about who should meet with Mr Young and what was to be the intent of the meeting.

It was agreed that Cllr Ashman would offer to meet with Mr Young and that the aim of the meeting would be to give Mr Young an opportunity to explain the situation from his point of view. It may

assist if Mr G Parcell takes on the role of mediator and makes the initial contact with Mr Young. It was generally agreed that “bridges need to be built”.

Mrs Nelson stated that she felt it was important to remember that we, as concerned citizens, are here to represent the animals that are suffering. They may be being fed at the moment but there have been times when they have been knee high in mud have had very little to eat which is the main reason for them breaking out onto the highway.

Ms Rossiter said that there is a need to identify the areas where the situation can be further improved.

Mr Veit supported Mr Parcell and Cllr Ashman in their intent to meet with Mr Young.

It was agreed that the contact details of the various agencies involved in the situation should be posted on the notice boards and the Village web site. Cllr Jenkins had suggested, earlier in the meeting, that a number of letters from concerned individuals would have more impact than 1 letter from the Parish Council.

The Chairman closed the meeting at 8-45pm.

Note :- The representative from the local press left the meeting at approximately 8-25pm.

Minutes taken by Cllr Jenkins.