

CHAFFCOMBE PARISH COUNCIL

COVID - 19 EMERGENCY

Minutes of the Extraordinary Meeting of Chaffcombe Parish Council held by remote connection using Zoom on

Tuesday 22nd September 2020 at 7.30 p.m.

Members of the public were invited to attend the remote meeting using Zoom and to contact the Clerk prior to the meeting with any questions or comments they wished to make. Due to time constraints members of the public were advised that they would not be able to speak at the meeting.

1. Attendance and Apologies

Those present:

Mr K Dunthorne (Chair)
Mrs M Butler (Vice Chair)
Mr R Bale
Mr D Bracher
Mr S Robinson
Mrs L Vijeh (County Councillor)
Mrs S Osborne (District Councillor),
Mrs S Morley (Clerk)
Mr Mike Otterbeck (leading the Broadband project)
Mr Peter Botterill
Mr Steven Haig of Ninesprings Radio

Apologies - None

2. To consider making a grant towards the provision of Broadband in the village, to include the Village Hall.

Background to the agenda point

Mike Otterbeck has been liaising with BT Open Reach to bring Broadband to Chaffcombe. He attended a Parish Council meeting some time ago and put forward his ideas which the Parish Council agreed to support. Each private resident who signs up to the installation of Broadband is eligible for a Government voucher of £1,500 and businesses are eligible for a voucher of £3,500. Each resident is required to sign up to BT as a provider for a specified length of time; BT is willing to pay any penalty costs for changing provider.

The Broadband being installed will cover only the village itself and will not include outlying properties such as Lydmarsch or Avishayes.

In order to finalise the project a legal entity must be set up to sign the contract. The people who sign up to set up the legal entity will be liable to meet the costs of the project. The cost is now considerably higher than it was when the work started to bring Broadband to Chaffcombe.

The number of people currently interested in the scheme will cover the full cost of installation. However it is tight and if people drop out there is a risk that there could be a shortfall in the amount available from the vouchers. To ensure that the people who set up the legal entity are not personally liable, the promise of a grant to cover any shortfall is being sought from the Parish Council. This is a grant in the last resort because it is hoped that the vouchers should cover the full cost of installation.

Dispensation

Four of the five Parish Councillors are potential beneficiaries of Broadband, having signed up to the scheme. This is considered a pecuniary interest because the availability of Broadband is considered to increase the value of a recipient's property. All four councillors declared their pecuniary interest in the project. It has therefore been necessary to issue those councillors with a dispensation to allow them to discuss the provision of a grant, and to vote on whether to make one. Without such dispensations there would be only one councillor without an interest and the Council would not be quorate.

Councillors have previously authorised the Clerk to make dispensations if she feels it is the correct thing to do. Accordingly the Clerk issued dispensations for:

Ken Dunthorne
Mary Butler
David Bracher
Stan Robinson

Consideration of agenda point

The Chairman opened the discussion by saying that in his opinion the only way the scheme can go ahead is if it is self-funding. Other councillors agreed. A point was made that it is reasonable for people to make a personal contribution towards the project. If they subsequently drop out they will forfeit their contribution if it is needed to cover the full cost. It was commented that if they have made a financial contribution it is less likely that they will drop out. If there are enough people in the scheme, which there are at the moment, there is no personal cost involved so people should be willing to make a small contribution that may or may not be needed. The amount which has been suggested is a voluntary contribution of £250 to be held as a contingency fund to cover any shortfall and ensure that the people setting up the legal entity will not be liable.

At the moment the scheme is costed at £97,684 with a possible extra £700. It is a condition of the installation that people cannot be made to make a contribution which must be voluntary. The people who are planning to act as directors of the legal entity will not act if they are not protected by the promise of a grant, or a contingency fund, if costs overrun.

It was commented that there is no reason why people cannot contribute. Broadband increases the value of their property and is essential nowadays. There was general agreement that Broadband is a necessity. For a contribution of £250, which may not be needed, residents will be getting a voucher for £1,500 towards the cost of installing Broadband. It is therefore rather like a deposit. Another commented that if people really want Broadband they will be prepared to pay a bit for it. At the moment it looks as if the costs of the project can be covered by the vouchers, so long as Open Reach do not increase it again.

At the moment it does not look as if many people will drop out although there are some empty properties and some rented ones. Currently the Village Hall does not have a phone line so until they do get a phone line they cannot be included in the scheme. If they do sign up, their voucher will be worth £3,500 so it is in everyone's interest if they can join in. The Village Hall is a major part of the parish and Broadband at the Hall opens up the possibility of more varied use of the Hall in the future. The Village Hall trustees have to meet to decide whether to go ahead or not. Several councillors thought it would be a good solution to contribute towards the installation of the phone at the Village Hall.

A councillor expressed concern that if a grant is made by the Parish Council for Broadband in the village, will there be enough to give a similar grant for Broadband at Lydmarsh or other outlying properties. At the moment it seems that the nearest connection to Lydmarsh is Monmouth Court in Chard.

Councillor Osborne is looking at whether it is possible to get a grant from SSDC but in order to get this there must be some input from the Parish Council.

People will now be asked to make a voluntary contribution of £250. So far at least 10 people have indicated that they are willing to do so. Any grant from either the Parish Council or the District Council is a back-up guarantor grant in case of a shortfall. An email is ready to be sent out asking people for a voluntary contribution and saying that if no-one contributes the scheme will not go ahead. The Parish Council were asked for their approval to send this email.

A question was asked if a loan could be made by the Parish Council to cover the shortfall with the amount of the loan being raised through fund raising to pay the Parish Council back. This was thought to be a difficult solution because it could take a long time.

One Councillor was opposed to the Parish Council using precept money to support Broadband which did not cover the whole parish. The meeting was told that there are currently 76 properties which

have signed up to the scheme which BT have said is 80% of the Parish. (Following the meeting the Clerk checked the number of houses in the Parish and there are 101.)

There had been a lot of discussion and the Chairman called for a vote on the proposal to make a grant to cover the cost of Broadband.

Two councillors voted in favour of making a grant, two voted against and one abstained. The Chairman used his casting vote to vote in favour of making the grant.

The grant will be made in the last resort if funding for the project falls short of the amount needed. Councillors gave permission to send out emails to everyone who has signed up to the project to ask for a voluntary contribution to cover any short fall. Anything not used will be returned. The Village Hall trustees will be asked if they can contribute as well. The Parish Council will hold contributions as restricted income, preferably in a separate account which the Clerk will investigate setting up. A legal entity will be set up to manage the project.

The time limit for the current scheme is March 2021. If Lydmarsch are interested Mike Otterbeck is happy to discuss this. Avishayes could be included as well.

3. To consider making a grant towards provision of a new transmitter at Chard for Ninesprings Radio

Mr Steven Haig attended the meeting to speak to councillors about his proposal. Radio Ninesprings is a not for profit community radio station with charitable status broadcasting from Yeovil for two years. Reception on FM could be better and Ofcom have awarded the station 2 more FM frequencies, one to cover the Chard area and one for the Wincanton area. They have written to all local councils within an 8 mile radius of the proposed new transmitter to request support and a suggest donation of £150 from each council area. They will undertake to promote local activity in the parish and publicise events. They need to be able to go back to SSDC to show community support in order to receive any grant from SSDC.

Councillor Osborne pointed out that a lot of the local parishes in the Windwhistle area are Meetings and don't precept and due to Covid a lot are not meeting. Those that do usually only meet once or twice a year. Two local Meetings are currently without Clerks and Chairmen.

Several councillors expressed their support for the project. One councillor expressed the view that there are already a number of transmitters on the ridge. The proposed one for Ninesprings Radio will be at the Golf Club who are in favour of it because they will receive free advertising in return.

After discussion Mr Dunthorne proposed that Chaffcombe Parish Council make a promise of a grant of £150 towards the project. The grant will be provisional on the project going ahead with support from SSDC and other local parishes and organisations. The proposal was seconded by Mr Robinson and all councillors voted unanimously in favour. If the project goes ahead a cheque for £150 will be issued.

Meeting finished at 8.35 p.m.