

WINKLEIGH PARISH COUNCIL EXTRA- ORDINARY MEETING

Wednesday 11th November 2020 at 7.30pm

held remotely in accordance with The Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority Meetings)
(England) Regulations 2020

MINUTES

Present: Cllr Turner (Chair), Cllr Hodgson, Cllr Brown, Cllr Bayley, Cllr Radcliffe, Cllr Mercer, Cllr Naylor, Cllr Whitehead, Cllr Jacobs, Cllr Findlay, Clerk Melanie Bickell

Also Present: County Cllr Saywell, District Cllr Newton, 18 members of the public

Meeting commenced 19:36pm

101.20 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

non received

102.20 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST FROM MEMBERS

Cllr Bayley declared a pecuniary interest in the future of the post office. The Chair explained that Cllr Bayley will remain to explain the situation and answer any questions and will then leave the meeting

103.20 PUBLIC PERIOD

Matters raised by members of the public to be taken forward to a future Parish Council agenda for consideration

- Winkleigh Parish Council to write to the Post Office detailing the outline planning applications currently being proposed for development within the parish and ask for the services to be retained because Winkleigh is a Local Centre within the Local Plan with a growing population
- WPC to consider crowdfunding over raising the precept to raise £9600
- An offer from a parishioner to loan £4800 to WPC, interest free, to kick-start the crowd funding which will be repaid if crowdfunding is successful and target figure is met
- If the parish council provide any money to the Post Office, this should be by way of a loan and not a grant, to be re-paid to council over time and held as a Community fund can be used to help with similar situations in the community in the future

103.1. County Cllr Saywell, also representing Geoffrey Cox MP

I fully understand, appreciate, and share the anxieties and concerns of residents regarding the potential loss of Winkleigh Post Office. There is no doubt that Winkleigh Post Office is a strategic asset for Winkleigh and its rural hinterland, it is still a vital public service for rural communities that depend upon the services a rural post office can offer. Winkleigh is a growing village, situated quite far away from the market towns of Crediton, Torrington and Okehampton, with public transport not particularly good. Efforts are being made to attract more businesses and businesspeople to the parish, particularly on the airfield, which who will need a Post Office.

As your County Councillor, I will do all I can and have asked the County Council Communities Team to look at funding sources, but funding is limited. Geoffrey Cox is lobbying relevant Ministers and Government departments about this. It is important to look at the short term and long term, sustainable plan to make sure we secure the Post Office and the services it provides into the decade and beyond. It makes no sense for a local centre like Winkleigh to lose its Post Office, so let's do all we can to save it

103.2. District Councillor Newton

I reiterate and fully support the vital need to ensure a fully operating Post Office service in Winkleigh, not only for Winkleigh Village or even the Parish but the wider area. The Post Office in the village serves quite a wide area and we should not become too fixated on Winkleigh Community itself. I Urge councillors to take a broad view to seek a long term and sustainable solution for provision of a Post Office service, which will also benefit the village shop. You have got to look at modern business trends in other villages and community and around the country, and what in the modern way is sustainable, isn't question of maintaining the status quo but achieving the service in a modern and workable way. I Implore you to have a distinct programme to re-examine the whole look at the long term programme, and the services the Post Office and shop provide and need to continue to provide, that is a sustainable

solution and fit for purpose for tomorrow as much as today. I Strongly urge businesses to come back and have another go at finding a joint solution.

103.3. Tony Bayley – Postmaster for Winkleigh Post Office

This is not a Post Office decision, it is a Royal Mail decision, they are individual companies that separated about eight years ago. The Royal Mail decided to shut all sub-sorting offices in the UK. where feasibly possible to do so, in order to save £335 million over two years. This was first talked about late 2018 and I unofficially heard about it at the start of this year, however, due to COVID, the process was slowed down and I only received a formal notice and letter at the end of September 2020.

I contacted Geoffrey Cox, as my MP, who went to the Minister of Post, and I have received four letters from The House of Commons, stating he is extremely supportive and he will do whatever he can to support retaining the Post Office for the Community and wider Community.

With the Royal Mail side of the Post Office closing it will take 51.4% of the income away, which leaves the Post Office, in its current state, completely unviable, even if I was to run it with zero staff, zero rent, zero utility bills, and only paying myself, as the sub post-master, the minimum wage, it would still make a loss.

I have audited accounts showing the current financial status and the projected financial status without the Mailwork payments from Royal Mail, which will leave a deficit of nearly £14,000 per year. Wages alone are just under £10,000, I only have two employees who are doing the absolute minimum we can get away with safely. I cannot cut the wage bill any lower than already, which is as already cut by 50%. I have looked at volunteer staffing only but the Post Office are not happy at sole use of volunteers as they still need to be DBS checked and trained but if they don't feel like coming to work they don't have to, which creates its own problems. At the moment the two members of staff are paid for 4hrs Mon, Tues, Weds, my wife volunteers on Thursday and Friday afternoon, therefore, the Post Office is running on absolute minimum staff.

I have applied to severe hardship fund for a grant £1000 per month, which has been approved and funding will last until December 2022 but cannot be guaranteed any further.

This will leave around £800 per month in deficit. The Landlords of the building have reduced the rent until for a year saving £100 per month

I have an option to take £21,000 tax free redundancy and walk away, but because I live here and I care about the community and the wider community I serve, I cannot morally do that, and with more housing and businesses to come to the Parish, there is likely to be a greater need for the full range of services this Post Office can provide. In four years, business banking via the Winkleigh Post Office has gone up by 400%, the parish is trying to attract more businesses, therefore, I fully agree we are only trying to get over the short term hurdle and form a long term plan. I can only see two options for a long-term plan. The first is for two shops to go into one, i.e. Londis, or secondly, turn the Post Office into a community owned status Post Office whereby the community own it and they get all the profits from it and they employ the staff and post master, which I believe is the best way forward for the long-term.

I am very uncomfortable with taking community money and assure the parish that any money you would be injecting into the Post Office would be solely to pay staff costs.

I do not believe the current format of the Post Office will ever be financially sustainable. The sorting office is behind the Post Office, I have a small payment from Royal mail by way of compensation, and would be willing to spend that money on conversion of the premises, so that the Post Office will double in size and expand the retail sales. The landlords have given their consent for this proposed conversion. The retail will double and will bring in more revenue but his will not be sufficient to bridge that massive gap but will certainly help, and the wider sale of products should enhance the customers as well

Cllr Findlay asked what steps Mr Bayley has taken in the last two years to make a business plan. Mr Bayley responded that until end of September 2020 the closure of the Sorting Office had been rumours only, he has looked at other shops/premises that are available in the Village, other than Londis, but nothing is suitable, the old Lloyds bank, is not an option because the owner wants to sell the house and shop as a single entity and there are no other options

Cllr Radcliffe asked about the long-term sustainability and asked if the recent drive in Distinctly Winkleigh editions had provided any positive response or improvement. Mr Bayley responded that yes it has improved, and he was amazed how many people didn't know they could pay bills, pay in cheques and withdraw cash, and it had been a positive exercise in educating people. Cllr Bayley highlighted the importance of Winkleigh Post Office which covers many other Hamlets and Parishes around Winkleigh as well as their businesses, The 'horizon system' generates data every time it carries out a transaction and the data shows there has been a 400% increase on business trade in the last four years.

Cllr Radcliffe asked that in order to plan for the future, was Mr Bailey able to give an oversight of what the percentage of users of the Post Office facilities that exist at the moment are now. Mr Bayley replied that an

educated guess would be 20-25% use on a regular basis, i.e. weekly or more than once a week, 25-30% as and when they needed the services, 10-15% occasionally and remainder never at all. However, due to COVID, a new working pattern is going to emerge with people no longer commuting and working from home which means they are more likely to use their local Post Office rather than that close to their normal workplace, and I believe that this might increase these percentage by half.

Cllr Mercer asked if the 'horizon system' measured what other parishes use the Winkleigh Post Office, and Mr Bayley responded that it only comes up as a transaction and is not location based, however, the closure of the Post Office will also have a broader impact on other parishes

Cllr Hodgson asked if Mr Bayley had considered applying for a Government low cost loan. Mr Bayley replied he had looked in to it, and he could get a £50,000 bounce back loan within 48 hrs, but it is a loan and a loan has to be repaid at 2.5%, repayable over 6 years, and it was unlikely the profit from the retail sales would be sufficient to pay back the loan and he didn't want to take out a loan due to his age and viability of the business.

Mr Bayley explained that the Post Office cannot current take payments against or give cash from Credit Cards because the Post Office will not pay the ¼ % charge.

The consideration of offering counter-time to a high street bank did not seem a viable option as so many bank customers do their banking online which is why the banks have closed so many of their High Street branches as this is not a financially viable option for them

Mr Bayley left the meeting at 8.18pm

109.20 WINKLEIGH POST OFFICE POSSIBLE CLOSURE

Winkleigh Parish Council has been advised by Tony Bayley, Postmaster, that the Post Office in Winkleigh is likely to close. He has received formal notice from The Post Office that the sorting office service will no longer be required from 27th March 2021 which drastically reduces the income for the Post Office by £1,864 per month, making it no longer financially viable to remain open in its current form because it is not financially viable to operate as a 'stand-alone' Post Office

If the Post Office closes, then Mr Bayley has stated the Post Office Service will look to create an outreach post office service to visit the Village, limited to 3 mornings per week, for a 2½ hour period, which will only be for limited general post office services and **will not include** business banking, cash withdrawals, retail sales and the range of services currently provided.

The Parish Council discussed options to support the Post Office, both financially and Community Interest based, for the short-term and long-term, however as the WPC do not have the General Power of Competence, they are limited with regards to what financial support can be offered to the Post Office, other than by way of an annual grant of £9,600 under S.137 of Local Government Act 1972, which allows the Council to make donations to community organisations that add value or benefits to its inhabitants, provided the expenditure is in proportion to those who would benefit in the community. (Maximum expenditure for WPC under S.137 each year is currently £14,060)

The only way the Parish Council can currently raise this money is via the precept [Council Tax]. If the Parish Council were to raise the precept by £9,600 to support the Post Office in 2021/22, this is an increase of £15.11 per year for a Band D Property, (£1.26 per month/£0.29p per week)

Cllr Turner proposed that WPC supports in principal exploring all options for financial assistance to save the Post Office in the short term and WPC will investigate long-term solutions for the ongoing financial stability for the Post Office, Seconded by Cllr Brown, Cllr Turner called for a recorded vote in accordance with Standing Order 4r, Cllr Turner in favour, Cllr Brown In favour, Cllr Jacobs in favour, Cllr Findlay in favour, Cllr Mercer in favour, Cllr Radcliffe in favour, Cllr Whitehead in favour, Cllr Naylor in favour, all in favour and **Resolved** (RR120/11/20)

Cllr Turner moved that Members agree to place an article in the Winter edition of Distinctly Winkleigh, informing the wider parish community and businesses that due to Royal Mail restructuring and not COVID, the Winkleigh Post Office is facing potential closure at the end of March 2021 if short-term funding is not found. The council is investigating all options both for the Parish Council and the Community for the short and long-term future financing of the Post Office, which is not limited to but includes financial support from the Council, and ask for suggestions and solutions for the sustainability of the Winkleigh Post Office, together with a request for views on raising the precept for next year should this be a legal option for the Council if other financial options are not sufficient, by £0.29p per week, to provide a grant from the Parish Council if legally permitted to do so, which will be reviewed on an annual basis and not in perpetuity. Responses to be received by 11th December for collation and consideration at an extra-ordinary Parish Council Meeting on 16th December (to be confirmed), seconded by Cllr Brown, all in favour and **Resolved** (RR121/11/20)

Clerk to inform neighbouring parishes

Clerk/RFO to Council: Melanie Bickell, Lower Itton, Spreyton EX17 5BB

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Cllr Mercer moved that an option appraisal is undertaken to look at the alternative provision models and the appraisal brought back to the Parish Council before making any decisions on the precept, to include a costs, benefits, legal and auditor advice on the propriety of what the council are proposing, seconded by Cllr Brown, all in favour and **Resolved** (RR122/11/20)

The Council agreed to form a Post Office working party to discuss all of the facts and options in full, and produce the options appraisal summary, members Cllrs Jacobs, Whitehead, Turner, Findlay, Naylor and Clerk

Cllr Naylor moved that the Clerk to write to Royal Mail asking them to reconsider their decision to close Winkleigh Sorting Office in light of Winkleigh being identified as a Local Centre within the North Devon and Torridge Local Plan and the proposed housing developments and increase of businesses on the airfield and creation of a local business hub, seconded by Cllr Turner, 8 in favour, 1 abstention and **Resolved** (RR123/11/20)

110.20 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

25th November 2020, 7.30pm

16th December 2020, 7.30pm Extra-Ordinary Meeting (to be confirmed)

Meeting closed 9:16pm

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