

BUCKFASTLEIGH TOWN COUNCIL

Minutes of the Buckfastleigh Town Council Meeting with the Victoria Park Buckfastleigh Trustees held on Monday 12th December 2022 at 7.00pm.

Present: Councillors: Sue Clarke (Chair), Erin Kohler-Ockmore, Huw Cox, Sylvee Phillips, John Bailey, Ron Fox, and Judith Hart (Town Clerk). From Victoria Park (VP): Pam Barrett (Chair), Phil Northcott, and Solveig Wallis

Press: None

In attendance: 24 members of the public

1. Apologies for absence, introductions, and declarations of members' interests in accordance with the Code of Conduct: Cllrs Mark Jefferys and Leigh Walker-Haworth. Dan Simpson (VP)

No apologies from Cllr Caroline Bach-Price. No interests declared.

2. Questions and comments from the public:

Paul Wadsworth: Raised three questions regarding the parish poll addressed to each member of the Council requesting that councillors to respond before the public.

- i. Does each councillor agree that the vote was “hardly overwhelming”?
- ii. What view does each councillor have on the public misrepresentation of the vote result?
- iii. What view does each councillor have on banning of respectful free speech on the “Buckfastleigh Devon” Facebook Forum?

Cllr Bailey: Does not engage in social media, the result of the vote is not binding but there was a majority.

Cllr Phillips: The public were misled over the vote, the figures presented are not a true representation of the final figure of £250,000. In real terms 80% of the electorate are being asked to pay the increase.

Cllr Kohler-Ockmore: Does not use social media but agrees that the results of the vote were not overwhelming.

Cllr Clarke: The poll achieved a result and was run in a fair and democratic way. The Government is elected on a small turnout, that is the way the process works. No comment regarding comments on social media pages.

Member of public: We are lucky to have a pool for local people

Cllr Clarke: It's a difficult time for everyone and a divisive process for the Town Council.

Member of public: The pool is run well and looks after its users.

Cllr Fox: There was not a huge turnout but felt it was a good majority. The Victoria Park trustees did not have to ask for a vote but instead asked for a poll. The Council could have just

said “yes” or “no” to the application without seeking public opinion. Other mediums than social media can be used too.

Cllr Cox: The results of the vote was not a clear mandate. The figures quoted on the radio regarding the turnout and the results of the vote were misleading. There are some private Facebook groups in the town and their prerogative is to veto comments which is not very democratic.

Member of public who does not live in Buckfastleigh: There is wide diversity in Buckfastleigh, and the swimming pool is an example of this. There is no age, gender, or disability barrier to using the pool and those that do use the pool use the community facilities such as shops and car parks. At a time when communities are divided, the pool brings people together and it is an incredible facility. People cannot equate the benefits to finance and if it closes, it will remove the heart of the town.

Question to each of the councillors: Is there another facility that offers such diversity?

Cllr Fox: No

Cllr Phillips: There are other facilities such as the school and does not agree that so much money goes to just one asset.

Cllr Bailey: There are no other significant facilities in the town, the pool and park are very important.

Cllr Kohler-Ockmore: The Seed fits some of this description. There are lots of other facilities such as the Town Hall and library.

Cllr Clarke: No. The pool obtains grant funding for free swims.

Cllr Cox: The pool is not the only facility in town, there are numerous organisations operating for the benefit of the town which needs to be looked as a whole.

Member of public: Be Buckfastleigh is also a good facility.

Member of public: We have been banned from various Facebook pages. We would like to know what is going on but cannot communicate with the Facebook administrators who control the content of some of the Buckfastleigh sites.

Member of public: Works in charity shop, many people enjoy the pool, and it is beneficial to the community. It would be a shame to lose it.

Member of public: There is an unreliable bus service, and some residents may not have a car to reach another pool.

3. To discuss the Perennial Grant Application 2023-27 submitted by the Victoria Park Trust:

Pam Barrett points out that this not a Town Council meeting but had to push hard to get this meeting and Members could have avoided some of this conflict if the two organisations had met earlier. She is disappointed as to how this application has been handled and there has been damage from various parties.

Pam summarised how the swimming pool was previously run by Teignbridge District Council and that over £400,000 has been invested in the pool since the charity took it over in 2014. The

pool and park have met its target as a resource, and we all know it is a good thing. Staff are employed, there are volunteering opportunities and it hosts Hello Summer activities. The current hole in funding is due to increased energy bills. Prior to the energy crisis, with the help of the Town Council, the pool was in a good position.

Solveig Wallis: There is a lot of support from the community, and some are represented at this meeting.

CEO of Camphill Devon: Not everyone has a strong voice. It is the most integrated activity in Buckfastleigh and would be a sad loss if it closes, more so than the financial damage.

Solveig Wallis: Buckfastleigh Primary School posted a video from the children. It costs £2.20 per swim for the primary school to use and they cannot afford to go elsewhere. It employs and trains lifeguards. Victoria Park and pool is 125 years old this year, it is part of our social history.

Member of public from Ermington: Uses Buckfastleigh pool for past 3 years and spends money in the town. A diverse pool and wonderful asset.

Member of public: The energy crisis will not last, and we need to get past this. Can local businesses help?

Member of public: An important asset to the town. The pool and park improves mental, spiritual and physical health and brings community spirit together.

Member of public: Need money to get over this hurdle.

Pam Barrett: In other towns, pools are supported by district councils. Swim England has estimated that 80% of swimming pools will be lost and she has been proud to be part of community pool discussions. The Department of Communities and Sport needs to look at community-run pools and government intervention is needed. Buckfastleigh Pool is currently in its best condition since opening. Devon has a high proportion of community-run pools.

2 more members of public arrived at 7.50 pm

Pam has been talking to all the Devon pools which are at different stages of survival with some still on energy caps. Swim England's chief engineer has visited our pool and concluded it meets requirements. The national situation is fluid and there is discussion with government regarding grants to the leisure sector.

Phil Northcott: The price per unit has increased since 2019. The actual gas and electricity bill for 2019/20 was £7,957.85. It is estimated that this will increase to £35,718.86 for 2023/24. The energy price cap is likely to come in before the pool is opened which may reduce this by £8,000. Estimated increases are expected in January and April.

Member of public asked if any unused funds will be returned to the Town Council?

Pam Barrett: The grant is only needed for energy costs.

Phil Northcott: As a charity we pay reduced VAT at 5% and cannot obtain grants that cover running costs.

Member of public: But this is a grant for running costs?

Pam Barrett: We have brought in sustainable energy experts and have a new boiler. The site is not suitable or has the capacity for solar panels or air source heat pumps. We may be able to

have limited solar but only for the changing rooms and showers. Victoria Park is a floodplain so not suitable for air source heat pumps. The cost of installation would be huge due to the floodplain.

Cllr Kohler-Ockmore: The Town Council grant can be used for almost anything for Victoria Park but other grants cannot be obtained for this

Pam Barrett: There is grant funding for social prescribing e.g. free swimming.

Cllr Kohler-Ockmore: There must be other pools accessing other funding that is not from a parish council. Are there other answers?

Pam Barrett: Leisure centres are about to collapse due to lack of funding.

Cllr Bailey: The Football Club energy bills have doubled despite measures to install new fittings.

Pam Barrett: Capital funding is needed if the trustees pursue the suggestion to reconfigure the plant room and change the dosing system. The pump is quite old and needs to be changed. This would cut energy costs by approx. £3,000 per year but need capital funding to do this. They are also looking at the internal hot water system e.g. showers. A new pump costs £10,000 – this is a priority and would need to be installed before the next season. Pam would like community pools to receive the same funding as council-run pools.

Member of public: What has the Town Council grant been used for?

Pam Barrett: It funds the free swims for TQ11 residents.

Cllr Phillips: This was not our understanding and £11,000 from Victoria Park was used to subsidise Hello Summer.

Pam Barrett: Children in Need funds Hello Summer.

Pam referred to the Victoria Park trustees allegations regarding use of the Bungalow and their lease agreement. She confirmed that she has raised this with the Teignbridge Monitoring Officer and will be contacting the Charity Commission.

Cllr Cox and his partner left the meeting at 8.15pm together with 2 members of the public.

Pam confirmed that a notice has been served on the Bungalow and is disappointed in how the Bungalow trustees have behaved. There has been an allegation that the Bungalow trustees are trying to take over Victoria Park. There was a heated exchange of opinions which some members of the public felt was not relevant to this meeting.

Solveig Wallis: The trustees are seeking sponsorship from local and national businesses, organising fundraising events and donations which is likely to raise £6,000.

Pam Barrett: Some South Hams residents use services in Buckfastleigh, but this is not supported with funding from this area. They are looking at users from outside the parish and how to reinvigorate fundraising events.

Phil Northcott: In August 2022 it was estimated that Victoria Park needed £65,000 (including the existing £21,000 annual grant from the Town Council) and submitted a perennial grant to this effect. This figure has now dropped to £61,000 and it is estimated this could be further reduced to £44,000 with revised figures and if £10,000 is kept in reserve by the Council as a contingency.

The Clerk confirmed that she has looked at various options to help resolve this matter.

Cllr Clarke pointed out that this meeting could have happened three weeks ago, but the trustees were not available to meet.

Pam Barrett: Closing the pool now would be premature.

Member of public: Other organisations may also need help with funding. Why is there so much focus on one asset?

Cllr Clarke: We do support other organisations.

Member of public: Why are we having this conversation when we have voted in favour of increasing the council tax to support the pool?

Pam Barrett: There is a need to discuss this in public and having a discussion is part of the process.

Member of public: Why are we here if this is not a decision-making meeting?

Cllr Fox: This is a meeting with the trustees.

There have already been two Town Council meetings and fact-finding meetings hosted by the VP trustees.

The Clerk explained the grant and meeting process.

Cllr Kohler-Ockmore left at 8.40 pm.

Member of public: There is wider community benefit and the Town Council must consider this.

Pam Barrett: There are complex health and safety regulations. Running a swimming pool has high risks which incurs lots of additional work and cost but brings huge benefits to the community.

Member of public: The pool has had a huge growth in swims and deficit to those who do not have a voice. The amount of capital funding invested in the pool would be thrown away if closed.

Clerk: If the Town Council chooses to use some of surplus rather than raise the council tax, this would only support the pool for one year.

Pam Barrett: We need a commitment for more than one year to secure other funding. We cannot predict future energy costs but will look at other means of funding such as donations and subscriptions.

Meeting closed at 9.20 pm.