

Exford Parish Council
Draft Minutes of Extraordinary Parish Council meeting

Held on: 17th October 2017 at Exford Memorial Hall 7.30pm

Attendance: Mike Ellicott, Kathryn Tucker, Joan Atkins, Derek Lloyd, Brian Martin, Judy Skinner, Cllr Frances Nicholson. Clerk: Jane Laycock.

Members of Public: Oliver Edwards, Jill Edwards, David Edwards, James Edwards, David Garbett-Edwards, Martin Gardner, Howard Gibbons, Tim Greenland, Roger Hoey, Jane Hoey, Michael Johnson, Chris Jones, Mark Sprake, Louise Sprake, Bowen Thomas, Lin Thomas, John Winter.

Apologies for Absence: Jeremy Hickman, Cllr Steven Pugsley.

Declarations of Interest: Derek Lloyd (property accessed from Higher Mill Farm Lane). Brian Martin (lives in the vicinity).

Higher Mill Farm Lane/Rattle Row

Chairman (ME) opened the meeting and explained the format. The reason for the meeting is problems with vehicles travelling along Higher Mill Farm Lane (HMFL) and the dispute over signage at the end of HMFL or whether signage is required at all. Chairman emphasized that all Councillors have an open mind on the subject and no decisions have been taken on the matter by the Parish Council. The primary purpose of the meeting is to hear people's views which will then be discussed by the Councillors. Chairman will then look for a resolution proposal from the Councillors which will be voted on.

He also confirmed that Exford Parish Council (EPC) are merely a consultee of Somerset County Council (SCC) and although suggestions can be made, the final decision on signage rests with SCC. This is contrary to the email dated 14th September from Jo Sharp of County Highways (CH). He then handed over to Cllr Frances Nicholson (SCC).

Frances Nicholson (FN): FN stated that she felt it was important to clarify the position of SCC and read out a statement dated 17/10/17 from CH. This confirms that although SCC values the input that parish councils can bring to the situation, the final decision will be made by the Highway Authority after taking into consideration views and comments. CH state that communications have been received from many bodies, including the Chief Executive of Exmoor National Park Authority (ENPA) who all expressed concern about any signage being to the detriment of local businesses, primarily Westermill Farm which contributes greatly to the local economy. CH continue that although it appears that there are very strong feelings that no signs should be erected at this location, they would be willing to erect a small 'Unsuitable for HGVs' sign but only if EPC were in agreement with this. CH confirm that they believe that the recent cutting back of hedgerows and improved signage and reflectors on Mill Cottage will help the situation and also that they are aware of discussions regarding altering the camber of the road outside Mill Cottage.

FN also read out a copy of the letter sent by Chief Executive, ENPA to Jo Sharp at CH.

FN commented that there have been increasing concerns expressed at the Exmoor Consultative Panel regarding people camping off site on the moor and ENPA have stated that they would be concerned if any new signage impacted on use of Westermill campsite.

FN also referred to the issue of altering the camber of the road outside Mill Cottage which was raised at the site meeting on 22nd August. EPC have obtained a quote from an acceptable contractor (C J Lynch) of approximately £2500 to do the work, however this would be doubled by CH costs for signage, diversions etc. FN suggested she may be willing to attempt to broker a split of the costs.

ME clarified that the reason for the signage suggested following the site meeting on 22nd August was that this was the most it was felt would be acceptable to all parties at that meeting. Other suggestions were also made in an attempt to resolve the problem of vehicles hitting Mill Cottage.

Further concerns such as the damage to the mill leat wall are a separate issue to be dealt with by CH and ME confirmed that they would not be covered at this meeting.

ME stated that the size of vehicles passing along the road has not increased significantly, however the frequency has and he remains very sympathetic to the problems experienced by the property owners.

The meeting was then opened up to the speakers:

Bowen Thomas (BT): BT stated that residents along HMFL had cut back their hedges according to the specifications of CH in 2016 and since then there have been several near misses and direct hits to properties. The only solution should be a replacement sign at the end of the road giving specific dimensions for HGV's. It is a red herring that this would put people off as it would exclude virtually all campervans and would encourage the right size of vehicle. The priority has to be the protection of property.

Lin Thomas (LT): LT stated that this issue appears to be between the residents of HMFL and one business and asked if any other businesses had contacted the PC to object to a sign. Clerk read out an email from Kevin Avery (Avery Plumbing and Heating) objecting to any transport restrictions as they may affect his business. LT stated that she understood that Wellshead have no objections. LT stated that as owners of a large campervan and members of a number of motorhome websites, that no campervan owners would be put off by an advisory sign stating dimensions. LT also stated that there are already a large number of advisory signs on Exmoor.

David Garbett-Edwards (D G-E): D G-E stated that they have owned Mill Cottage for over 20 years and their property has been hit four times in the past year. He referred to the letter to CH supporting a restriction sign agreed by EPC at their meeting on 23rd May. D G-E commented that with one exception, all the residents of HMFL agreed that a restriction sign was required. Height and width limits are essential and large HGV's should be directed via an alternative route. He also stated that Westermill campsite have had a past request for campervan usage declined due to access issues. He requested continued support for a replacement advisory sign to give advance warning to vehicles.

Roger Hoey (RH): RH referred to minutes of last meeting of EPC regarding the cutting back of his hedge and stated that he was happy for the hedge to be cut but had objected to the lack of communication regarding this. Regarding the issue of proliferation of signs, RH stated that there is already a restricted access sign at White Cross which is within the parish boundary.

Oliver Edwards (OE): OE referred to letters of support from NFU, his solicitor, British Holiday & Home Parks Association and ENPA, copies of which were provided. He stated that any proposed signs would discourage potential visitors to Westermill. OE confirmed that the agricultural lorries which are needed to run his business cannot come any other way to Westermill Farm. They are all within the legal limits and are well aware of the route.

Jill Edwards (JE): JE referred to the point raised by LT that having a width restriction on the sign could be helpful. She stated that if someone is driving around an unfamiliar rural area, seeing a restriction sign may be off putting. JE also stated that the increase in off-site camping is not contributing anything to the local economy.

David Edwards (DE): DE stated that as a fourth generation Exmoor farmer he welcomed any improvements which would benefit the community although he considered that the road does not need additional signage, just proper maintenance of the hedges alongside it.

James Edwards: Confirmed the points raised by OE, JE and DE.

Mark Sprake (MS): MS referred to his experience of a similar situation in another part of the country. Although there may be a need for some sort of signage, it should be kept to a minimum as too much can be detrimental. He also commented that there has been an increasing problem with rubbish and waste dumped by motorhomes camping at White Cross which he clears up on a weekly basis. He stated that there should be as much access to campsites as possible.

John Winter (JW): JW commented that although he lives next door to Mill Cottage, no one has asked his opinion. He expressed concern at the possible proliferation of road signs and thought that there had been no problems with lorries since the hedges have been cut back. He was concerned that the refuse collection vehicles may be affected by a restriction and also that the existing good community atmosphere is being affected by this issue.

Michael Johnson (MJ): MJ stated that he has been impressed by the tourism and pleasant balanced atmosphere in the village. Tourism also brings in a lot of money. However, he is concerned that non-business owners are not regarded although they also matter economically. He also stated that campervan owners should be checking the access to the campsite. He mentioned that on the OS map Westermill has no caravan sign and there is also no mention of campervans/caravans on the website. He suggested that Westermill should improve their publicity which could offset any possible loss of business from people being deterred by signage.

Councillors' comments:

ME stated that there are two sides to every argument and no solution is going to be perfect for everyone. He reminded Councillors that they need to give 'great weight concern' to the ENPA plan.

KT commented on the considerable depth of feeling of residents along HMFL and stated that she has sympathy for both sides. She wouldn't be averse to a sign.

DL stated that as a local resident and also a caravanner he is well aware that the passing places are inadequate for a large truck or a car and caravan. Westermill website does warn people that it is a single-track road although the passing places are not mentioned. He also stated that people tend to follow sat navs without using common sense. He commented that we would have to be very clear on the definition of an HGV.

BM commented that it is a difficult balancing act to take everyone into account. He stated that EPC is not biased in any way and in his experience never has been. As a point of principle access along this road should be kept as open as possible for everyone and this applies to many roads on Exmoor. HMFL looks considerably better now the hedges have been cut back and signage put on Mill Cottage. Additional road signage would not stop the problem.

BM proposed that in view of the actions already taken, no further signage is added.

Voting: 3 in favour, 1 against and 1 abstention.

Motion that there is no additional signage was passed.

ACTION: Clerk to write to SCC and reverse the earlier suggestion of a small 'Unsuitable for HGVs' sign at the junction of Mill Lane and Higher Mill Farm Lane.

Meeting closed 8.35 pm.

