

Stiffkey Parish Council - Minutes

Meeting Date: Monday 27th November 2023

Location: The Village Hall, Stiffkey

Minutes of the Parish Council meeting held on the above date and venue.

Present:	Also present:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Paul Claydon· Jane Hiscocks· Alex Hooper· Rocky Husain· Jamie Lawrence (Vice Chair)· Martin Williams (Chair)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Nea Horsford – Clerk· 23 Members of the public· Alan Wright - Wright Consulting· Josh Halton Farrow – Wright Consulting· Sue Simpson – National Trust· Graham Brown – National Trust

1. Apologies and reasons for absence apologies received from Michael Dalby, Philip Harrison and Duncan Baker MP

2. Presentation from Alan Wright of Wright Consultancy Alan spoke about the role of the Consultant Engineers with regards to making judgements on the existing structures, the brief given by NT looking at the existing structure, notes about the marshes and the location of the bridge and photographs taken from their appointment in 2019 through to their last visit in December 2021 (see appendix one). The meeting was then opened for the general public to ask questions.

i) **I want to understand a little bit more about the report you prepared. Can you tell me a little about that?**

There were a succession of letters and emails that went back and forth outlining the different issues and discussing the sketches you saw on the screen.

But no actual formal report?

I produced a letter that was the last letter but it actually just refers back to a succession of emails.

So over a period of time from 2019? You started sending emails and you followed up with further emails and you sent a final letter which is your report which is effectively a letter?

Not being funny, but I can do very basic calculations very quickly, but that structure, there is almost no point doing calculations on it. That structure had failed, the deck has got holes in it, the handrail had bits falling off it and there was no cross bracing. It was totally inadequate for a public crossing. Now you can argue, that laying a couple of planks and people are happy to walk across it, but that doesn't inform me, it's just people are making their choice and their decision to cross it.

What tests did you do? We have seen some lovely photos and videos of people bouncing up and down, but what actual engineering tests did you do?

We didn't need to do any tests.

You didn't need to do any tests?

You just saw a load test there from someone who is qualified.

We saw someone bouncing up and down the bridge basically, but no actual tests on the structure? No tests on the struts that went into the piles or the piers or whatever you call them? To check the wood and see whether that was sound?

Thirty-five years of experience and judgement on different structures, I don't have to do tests to see if wood is rotten.

There were no tests to establish, no actual evidence that the wood was rotting?

I have just shown you in the load test.

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This doesn't establish whether the wood is rotten, that just shows someone jumping up and down on the bridge and may show it is unstable, but doesn't show if that particular piece of wood is rotten if you did no tests on that.

I think that's a slight exaggeration, we appoint a Structural Engineer to exercise his professional judgement – that's what we are doing here.

You didn't prepare a report, you just sent a few emails over a period of time, as you just said.

Plus site visits as Alan described. You have seen the photographs.

- ii) **Your role, professionally, what advice did you give the NT before you deemed it not to be safe to use it? What was the follow on from that? Did you understand the consequences having that bridge removed?**

What the consequences on the public would be? With the potential, without any shadow of a doubt, the loss of life with the result of that moving? Did you follow up on that point as a professional Structural Engineer or not? Because that is part of your responsibility in my opinion. You are equally as culpable as the NT are, pulling it down without warning people and telling them they can't cross there. People have been going across in other places which has significantly jeopardised everything.

As a doctor of building constructions, my judgement and what I am appointed to do is to tell my client if the building is fit for purpose and fit for its use and safety use. So actually, I have to look at it with technical guidance and then I have to make a judgement. Some people may not want to hear the judgement, just like if you are seen by a Doctor and they tell you that you have cancer. You don't want to hear that, ok? So there are times, I have to give that judgement. So, I gave that judgment. However, as part of that discussion as someone who lives locally and walks on that coast, there were long debates about the consequences of what to do with the bridge. They were in discussions, they are not part of our brief, but we definitely discussed the role of the Trust and the need for them and looked at the areas of further research. Those were all things that were discussed at that time. Unfortunately, my brief then stopped, once I said it is not fit for purpose, it has this or the other problem. It is then down to the client to make decisions as to what they do with that advice.

- iii) **What date did you give that advice?**

I think the letter was September 2021 and we then went out and did further visits this end of 2021 to make sure.

And you recommended to knock it down?

I never said I recommended to knock it down, I said it was not fit for purpose. So that was because we wanted to go out and think again about the issues and how we might repair it and consider the options for what we do about it. After December 2021, the client then makes the decisions independently.

Can you confirm your email went out after or before the bridge was dismantled?

My letter, I think was dated September 2021.

- iv) **I have used that bridge for 55 years, most days, many days and in the past if anything was broken on it or when it had the extension put on, which was a perfectly fine extension at the time. People did it or people from the Trust did it. Latterly, the last ten years or so, nothing was done on that bridge. In your opinion, had it had regular maintenance, would it still be up now?**

Had it had regular maintenance?

Yes, like it used to have had.

No, I don't think it had it been regularly maintained.

Actually, I am pretty certain if I search my photographs, I can find bits of handrail that went on and were added in during and after our visit.

I am talking about last ten years when nothing was ever done on it

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That's not the case, I think the Trust did less on it during Covid because they didn't do any project work.

Actually, that's not true, it isn't just the NT did nothing during Covid. The Parish Council started writing to the NT asking them to repair the bridge and to look at the piers, I might add. So, what seemed to be the main issue in 2017, and there was no reply and no action despite us following up on that. I don't want to create a massive issue about this, but that is actually what happened.

I think there are other mechanisms at play though in that creek, i.e. erosion with the sea and indeed the surveys done have highlighted the rates of erosion. Those mechanisms would happen anyway, even if the bridge had in your view, had been maintained.

It is not in my view, I am just stating to you what happened and the fact that the Parish Council reported to the NT that the bridge required repair and maintenance, which included those cross bridge structures of the piers which it turns out, because, hey guess what, you're probably very well paid and very qualified Structural Engineer has identified that it was one of the main causes as to why there is an issue. It is not just about erosion, it is about that they actually broke and went. So, I don't think it is as simple as natural erosion and it was going to happen anyway. I am just pointing out that the Parish Council did get in touch with the NT. Saying nothing happened with the programme over Covid – no you knew about it before.

So you are you saying the maintenance of the cross braces would have prevented erosion?

I don't know, I am going on what the Structural Engineer is saying. His final actual conclusion was this didn't help. This was an actual factor that he saw had deteriorated because one fell away. I don't know, I am not a Structural Engineer, I don't pretend to know more than a Structural Engineer, I pointed out the fact the NT were told and they were made aware. What subsequently happened structurally, Mr Wright, I bow to his wisdom as I am not a Structural Engineer. Otherwise, what is the point of employing him?

I think the point we have established is, perhaps if maintenance had occurred more regularly, it would have prevented the problems that you reported on.

- v) **Have we actually established the answer to the question? Had the bridge had regular maintenance would it have definitely been needed to be removed?**

Do you dispute that it hasn't had regular maintenance?

I am pretty certain if I search my photographs, after my visit in 2019, when I raised the fact there were no handrails in place, additional handrails were put back in place

I would like to say as a person who has walked and worked there, I used to ring up the Trust and say "There's a handrail broken" and person would come out within two days and that has stopped.

No matter how much maintenance was done, the erosion of the south bank clearly had been an issue for many, many years and continued to be.

It hasn't been for many years as it was extended, not sure when and it has eroded and people accepted that. But the fact that the erosion and the bracing was ignored and the fact that it needed it. I have worked on that shore all my life, I know what it is like, it's a mobile system you are working with. Boats, bridges, whatever. Now you have people walking across what was the old sewer pump.

- vi) **I have two parts to my question. The first one is, you have pointed out the erosion had taken place and you have pointed out to the NT. Why has the NT done nothing about the erosion? The erosion is the problem, the bridge has come away because of the erosion. Why does the NT done nothing about the erosion?**

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It's not something I can answer, but I am sure Graham is going to answer, but almost certain for endless amount of environmental reasons, what do you use, and I am very happy to put the slide back up, but what do you do?

My background is in Hydrology, so what you do is put stone down and things like that in that place and it creates another hard point in a very soft bank which environmentally you may not wish to do that. It is certainly something in terms of this new bridge that has come up and is something we will be looking at. Is it appropriate to do that as it may create another focus for erosion around the hard structure, and this is the issue we have and for the same reason if you add more piers to the bridge you are more likely to have scour and erosion around the structure you replace it with, so it is a consideration for us going forwards. So in terms of the environmental impact it is something that is typically resisted to put that hard element into the landscape. If the soft environment around that space was a different material you might have a different approach.

To the NT, why did you tell a lie about the license that you had from Crown Estates, when you said you needed a license when you already had a license?

We haven't lied. We have a license for our current structure, otherwise we would have an unlicensed structure in the creek. But the license is for a particular footprint on the marsh, depending on the design on the new bridge we may need to have a different footprint on the marsh and we will require a new license and until we finalise the design, we won't know whether our current license is fit for purpose or whether we need to apply. We do need a license. If we have to go further back into that area of the marsh that has eroded and make a longer bridge, then we will need to change the license.

- vii) **Mr Wright, this is not a trick question, I just want to understand. When you were talking about your 100Kg and your loads and all of those kind of things. When you went out to look at the bridge, how are you distinguishing between what modern day, if you like requirements are and what requirements are as this as a heritage asset. Do you make a difference or do you have to go on current legislation tells you is safe and it should be?**

Judgement, risk, and what are the consequences if people or if something goes wrong.

So basically, you have a little bit of leeway?

It is all about judgement and experience, so there are Engineers who will walk into structures and condemn them and we will find ways to justify it or either to highlight the risks and find ways to stiffen them, adjust them and work with them. There are different categories of Engineers in the same way there are Doctors, Lawyers and Accountants. So it's about judgment and that's why I put up there it is subjective.

I do understand that, I was just trying to get my head around at what point, you felt that regardless it being a historic asset as such, actually the safety of that bridge you had to say, it's got to be done.

I know I said I didn't do any testing as such, but I have got probes to poke into bits of wood if that's what you call testing, but that structure had enough bits missing and the south bank, as I have shown you. It had dropped the best part of 150mm. That chunk of bridge was coming down it was only when it comes down. We looked at lots of options, piling, gabions, all of the scour issues and its quite a specialist subject. All of those options were discussed and all of them were considered when it was deemed not fit for purpose.

- viii) **You said the bridge was not fit for purpose, did you actually tell them to take it down?**

I say, whether it is fit for purpose and I highlight the risks associated with it's continued use.

My understanding is the bridge was closed off as a result and it became very clear people were going over the barrier and still using the bridge. We had to take advice from our

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operational risk advisors within the Trust, who advised it needed to come down to prevent people from actually walking across it.

Not patched up and while we thought about what we are going to do with it?

No, we had already been advised that people should stop using it and it was going to come down in the future.

ix) What permissions had you obtained in order to be allowed to take it down?

We didn't need any permissions to take it down.

The NT did inform the Parish Council before they took the bridge down

x) You said you were formally instructed by the NT in 2019. Informally meaning you weren't written to?

Informally was an email and some photographs asking to meet up and look at the bridge and depending on initial views to make a further assessment. I visited back again in September and that's when it became official and that is what often happens.

It wasn't bad enough in 2019 for you to be concerned about it's safety?

There were some handrails missing which were replaced and repairs done. Then the cross braces dropped off and bank settled down, so all the things we discussed in 2019, came true by 2021.

Sue Simpson then did a brief summary explaining the following points

- i) They are on track with the programme shared at the last PC meeting and they are very confident about the programme. We would like to share the designs with the community and we have a date on the 25th January 2024 to share the designs
- ii) The NT will need the support of the community when they submit the planning application
- iii) The designs will be online
- iv) Planning Application will go in spring 2024
- v) We will take comments on board, but we will need to balance it with getting the bridge delivered within a timescale.
- vi) There will be one design due to the time restraints.

3. The NT were thanked for their time and the NT left the meeting at 19.55pm.

4. Update from District and County Councillors

4.1 Michael Dalby sent his report in advance (appendix 2)

4.2 Cllr Holliday (appendix 3) circulated her report and requested they are published on the

4.3 website. There is to be a new swimming pool in Fakenham. The mobile dental services are only visiting Norwich.

5. Cllr Holliday left the meeting at 20.01pm

6. To receive declaration of interest and requests for dispensations Cllr Lawrence declared an interest in the Church Street wall discussion due to his holiday rental business. Cllr Williams also declared an interest as he had provided a service to the same property. Cllr Williams declared an interest in the Social Media discussion due to his wife being admin of one of the village facebook pages.

7. To approve the minutes of the meeting on 25th September 2023 and 24th July 2023 both minutes were **APPROVED** Proposed PC 2nd JL. However, Cllr Hooper stated the September minutes publication date was 26th October not the 24th.

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8. **Clerk's report (verbal)** the Clerk handed in her resignation as she felt she could no longer work in the environment two Councillors were creating. Her resignation was **ACCEPTED**

9. **Matters arising from September's meeting**

- i) Community First Responders – update on raising funds and awareness given by Cllr Hooper
- ii) Traffic concerns and speeding – a meeting had taken place with Steve White from NCC Highways Dept to request replacement and additional 20 mph repeater signs, and the clearing of vegetation and debris which hindered pedestrian movements.
- iii) Historic footpath registration progress – an update had been received from Ben Nuttall at NCC stating he was expecting a peer review shortly prior to submitting his report to the legal team for verification.

10. **To discuss any planning applications received since last meeting**

PF/23/2446 Replacement fence to north and east boundaries – no comments

11. **Electricity tariff out to tender** it was established the current tariff runs until 31/03/26 when it can be reviewed

12. **Provision of Dental Services update** – provision of NHS dentistry continues to be extremely limited.

13. **Litter from vehicles/bin lorries and bins blocking the road** – Cllr Harrison had confirmed via email the litter had much reduced. A wheelie bin is being constantly left on the road opposite the village hall and it was agreed the residents should be informed this should only be left out on collection dates.

14. **Social Media Facebook page and website** – it was agreed the PC should develop a Facebook page in a noticeboard only format without any comments allowable. Proposed by RH 2nd by JH

15. **Clerk's laptop update from clerk after two months usage** it was agreed the clerk should have a new laptop which was fit for purpose with Microsoft windows

16. **Approve Freedom of Information Guide and Code of Conduct** were **APPROVED**

17. **Approve meeting dates for 2024 see attached proposed dates** were **APPROVED**

18. **Consider renewing Parish Online in July 2024** – agreed to review at March meeting after a training session had taken place in February.

19. **Discuss budget and precept for 24/25** – Due to technology issues it has proved difficult to provide a fully readable document. It was agreed figures would be prepared and circulated before the January 2024 meeting, where they can be agreed.

20. **Stiffkey River Flood Alerts** – the details of how to register for alerts are to be placed on the PC website.

21. **Correspondence**

- i) Norfolk Coastal Forum Meeting
- ii) NNDC Planning Service Roadshow
- iii) Church Street Wall repair

22. **To resolve local Government cost of living pay award from April 2023 and WFH allowance** the 2023 pay award for the clerk and Working From Home Allowance at £26 per month was **AGREED** – proposed by AH 2nd by JH

23. **Financial Matters**

i) Bank balances and finances 2023/24 to date

ii) **Approved payments list**

- a) N Horsford salary from 25th September to 27th October £343.20
- b) N Horsford salary from 28th October to 01st December £343.20

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- c) N Horsford expenses from 23rd August to 01st Dec £ 30.69
- d) N Horsford salary uplift from 1 April 2023 £ 20.00
- e) Jones Electrical Street lighting maintenance £ 41.51
- f) NNDC Elections £ 324.57
- g) NNDC Dog bins £ 258.96
- h) RBL Poppy wreath £ 20.00
- i) NPTS Clerk Training £ 24.00
- iii) **Note the following has been paid since the last meeting**
 - a) Unity Bank service charge £ 18.00
 - b) SSE Electricity street lighting October £ 51.31
- iv) **Receipts since last meeting**
 - a) NNDC precept £3715.0
 - b) Unity Bank credit interest £ 79.00

The payments were agreed after discussion. It was requested by Cllr Hooper that Cllr voting was noted. Proposed PC, 2nd JL, For MW. Abstained AH, RH, JH. It was pointed out in discussion that quarterly reporting of spending against budget had not been fully reported on by the RFO during the last two quarters. The Chair confirmed when a new RFO is appointed this will be addressed.

24. Items that have arisen since the publication of the agenda – for information only, to be included in the next agenda. It was requested that the provision of Defibrillators for the village be discussed at the next meeting.

25. Date of next meeting 22nd January 2024

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