

## MEETING OF LEITHOLM ECCLES AND BIRGHAM

### COMMUNITY COUNCIL

Leitholm Village Hall

Wednesday 24 January 2024 @ 7.00pm

#### 1. Attendance and Apologies

Attending: Community Councillors: Bob Hope (Chair), Gill Murray, Gregg Pearson, Seonaid Blackie, Julie Jackson, Diane Dickinson, Anne Wales, SBC Councillor Donald Moffat, SBC Councillor John Greenwell, Katie Douglas (Minute Taker) and several local residents/members of the public.

Apologies: Kevin Howell, Helen Anco (Treasurer).

#### 2. Minutes of Meeting 22 November 2023

These were proposed by Gregg Pearson and seconded by Anne Wales.

#### 3. Matters Arising

Addressed within Chair's Report and rest of these minutes.

#### 4. Chair's Report – including Battery Storage update

Despite a short break for the Festive season this has been a busy period for our community council.

Following the input from Beth Landon at our November meeting, Anne Wales and her team have continued to develop our Community Led Plan (Plan for Place). We recently met online with key council officers to discuss our plan and where it goes from here. It came as a shock to discover that Scottish Borders Council have yet to agree the format it wants for the plan to be registered. It would appear that our plan is much further developed than any in the Berwickshire, if not council area. I highlighted to those attending the fact that community councillors are volunteers and that it is unreasonable to expect us to devote significant time writing a plan. Our time is far better spent in consulting our community and working towards delivering on the priorities highlighted in the plan. We were offered, and declined, the services of a paid consultant to write our plan. The plan is already well-written in a form which is understandable to our community and we believe that it would take more time to guide a consultant than it would to do the actual work. Furthermore, this is intended to be our community led plan as opposed to a plan which ticks council boxes.

I commend the work of Anne and her team in developing and delivering our plan.

The theme of the workload being placed on community councils continued over the festive period as Scottish Borders Council emailed us 12 substantial draft policy documents for comment. Thank you to those who responded with comments. I responded to this consultation between Christmas and New Year in broad terms, taking cognisance of your comments. These included:

- a. A need for a realistic outline of the duties of a community councillor and the anticipated time commitments expected of the role.
- b. I outlined what I believed to be the most significant roles of community councillors as: consulting our communities, feeding their priorities to SBC/public bodies and keeping them informed through our plan for place; responding on behalf of our communities in relation to SBC consultations and consultations from other public bodies; considering planning applications for any buildings/developments in our area, consulting communities and responding.
- c. A request that our community council be increased to 12 community councillors with the additional two not being tied to a specific village to provide a flexibility of representation and tasks.
- d. Much of the policy document related to the formal election of Community Councillors. I reported that there are seldom a surplus of applicants requiring such a process.
- e. Finance: I reported the need for guidance within the policy to allow community councils to use online banking services.
- f. Planning: policy suggests that we should have an identified planning officer who will, in the future, require to check the council system regularly for planning applications in our area. Given the amount of work already being undertaken by our community councillors and the fact that community councils are statutory consultees, it should remain the role of SBC to notify community councils of planning applications in their area.
- g. The Equalities document makes reference to community councils improving the diversity of membership. We believe that this should be in line with local demographics.
- h. I highlighted the need to simplify and streamline processes as opposed to complicating them through the introduction of such a raft of policy documents.

#### **Battery Energy Storage:**

At this time little has changed in relation to applications from developers. AAH still has the application for the Laundry Field on hold. I have written to them asking if they can advise of their intentions. Their response is that they are still considering options and will contact me in coming months. I have also sent a copy of my correspondence to AAH to Robert Walker, the landowner. I have also meet

informally with the Walkers and outlined the concerns of local residents, to little response.

Following the letter circulated by Will Ramsay to both Leitholm and Eccles residents, I responded to the community. Our concern is that should a developer be granted permission to create a battery storage facility other than in close proximity to the substation, this will open the flood gates to further applications. We are aware that agents for developers are still canvassing land owners throughout our area. We are currently preparing our strategy to oppose development at Pittlesheugh.

I understand that developers continue to contact local landowners, including some farmers at the Kelso end of Birgham.

In December, James Finnie and I had a positive meeting with Councillor Euan Jardine, leader of SBC and Ian Aikman, Chief Planning Officer for SBC. The meeting was facilitated by Councillor John Greenwell. This meeting was in relation to policy and the need for guidance in the application of the National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) which is the only policy governing all building/development in Scotland. From this meeting we learned that our concerns are shared, both by SBC and the Heads of Planning Scotland group. Both have made representations to Scottish Government Officers.

As Gillian Martin, Minister for Energy and the Environment refused to meet with us to discuss policy quoting the Ministerial Code and conflict of interest, but had no issue meeting with Zenobe, I have written to the First Minister seeking clarification of the Ministerial Code. To date there has been no response.

Following our online meeting with Andy Kinnaird, Head of Transforming Planning in the Scottish Office in November (also attended by representatives from Rachael Hamilton and John Lamont's offices, Andy paid a site visit last week. The meeting was also attended by Cara Davidson, Environmental Officer, Scottish Government, representatives from Rachael Hamilton and John Lamont's offices, Richard Jackson, James Finnie and myself. This was an opportunity to again highlight the need for guidance in relation to NPF4 and BESS and to show our visitors our area. Andy has responsibility for the creation and updating of NPF4. As such he is not involved in any individual planning application. He is ideally placed to consult with communities.

Sharon Cochrane and Paul Reynolds, two volunteers from our area have kindly set up a Facebook page and Gmail account in the name Renewables in Proportion. The intention is to encourage community councils and campaign groups from across Scotland to use the facilities as a means of sharing concerns and actions. It is not for use by the general public, but instead those directly involved in community councils and campaign groups.

The scale of the issue is highlighted in that in the past two weeks I have had contact with the following groups:

East Lammermuir Community Council - facing a colossal development including BESS and substation to service offshore wind farm.

[Branxton Energy Storage Facility – East Lammermuir Community Council](#)

Murroes and Wellbank Community Council - Angus area:

Challenges in relation to Solar, Wind Turbines and BESS

Bishopton in Renfrewshire:

Bess and other developments

Loch Ness: Pump Storage Hydro affecting Salmon migration

[Facebook](#)

Beaully, Kirkhill, Dalmally, Argyll and Bute, Skye: Power Lines

[Communities B4 Power Companies](#)

Dumfries and Galloway:

[Save Our Hills Dumfries & Galloway | \(saveourhillsdumfriesandgalloway.co.uk\)](#)

**Zenobe:** Richard and I are meeting with representatives of Zenobe tomorrow, initially to discuss Community Benefits, then to meet with people residing in proximity to the development to discuss Zenobe's plans and give residents the opportunity to provide input and raise any concerns they have. We see these meetings as being the start of a process. So far, Zenobe has been cooperating with requests for meetings etc.

Julie Jackson asked if there is anything more that local residents could be doing in relation to the campaign against the proliferation of BESS.

Bob Hope responded that James Finnie is organising a further meeting of the campaign group and this issue will be discussed. Bob extended the campaign group's thanks to everyone who wrote letters to Scottish government ministers about this and for forwarding their letters and the responses received. It appears that all letters sent were funnelled to the Energy Consents Unit rather than being dealt with by the individual Ministers' offices and a standard "cut and paste" type response was issued to all letters. This includes the letter written by SBC Leader Councillor Euan Jardine who also received a response which clearly came from the ECU and was a similar cut and paste job.

Bob stated that the next step was to focus on robust opposition to the Pittlesheugh planning application, when it is lodged. At that point, the campaign group will most probably ask for further letters of objection from local residents. Once again, template letters can be provided to assist residents in framing their responses however everyone is encouraged to make their letters personal and focussing on

their particular concerns. The intention is to hold drop-in sessions at Leitholm Village Hall where residents can use laptops and printers to produce their letters.

Bob stated that the campaign group's view is that the developer AAH may be looking elsewhere than the Laundry Field as a BESS development opportunity however their planning application for screening stays live for 5 years unless they withdraw it.

Seonaid Blackie pointed out that this planning application has been cited as the reason for potential purchasers not viewing the houses for sale around Orange Lane.

Gregg Pearson asked whether there has been any comment from SBC on the planning documents.

Bob confirmed not yet. It has been sent to all Community Councils and there is a group meeting at end February, which Bob will attend and hopefully also with James Finnie if there is an available place. James is extremely well versed in National Framework 4, which is the applicable policy document.

#### **Finance:**

I am delighted to report that Helen is making good progress following her operation in December. In her absence, Julie has been holding the cheque book and dealing with cash transfers. It is my understanding that we have in the region of £1000 in our account for core community council purposes. We need to decide how we make best of use these funds over coming months. Anyone with reasonable expenses should claim them now. I would also propose that we prepare and print an executive summary of our Community led Plan and an Annual Report for community consumption.

On the matter of Finance, I attended the Berwickshire Forum Grant committee last week. My understanding is that with council cuts the grant allocation is likely to be cut further. Given that some grant applications are now to allow volunteers to carry out tasks in their communities which had been done by the council in the past, I feel that the grants should actually be increased as a recognition of the part played by volunteers and to ensure that they have the materials to carry out tasks, deliver projects.

#### **5. Treasurer's Report**

See Chair's report above.

There was general discussion around SBC budget cuts and the knock-on effects on the availability of grant funding for community groups and projects. Increasingly, volunteers are carrying out work that the Council should do. The Council does have a statutory duty to provide certain services.

Bob encouraged those attending to start thinking about how any potential “community benefit” funding received from Zenobe could be best spent by the three local communities. What happens may well depend on the amount of any funding. If it’s a significant amount, it may be best placed with Foundation Scotland to assist in its management. Smaller amounts could be self-managed at a local level.

Julie Jackson asked if this is something that should be asked of the local communities now.

Bob responded that he thought best first to refer back to the Plan for Place to assess residents’ priorities and identify any areas that still require to be addressed e.g. provision for young people.

There followed a general discussion around the scope of provision for activities and groups for young people in the area. It was identified that one of the primary issues for young people was lack of transport to get them to towns such as Kelso. John Greenwell pointed out that there are currently four separate “wheels” groups provided transport and they are losing money – an option might be for them to consolidate for efficiency. [Connect Youth](#) provide activities for young people in Berwickshire and their Chair is Stuart Nixon. Beth Landon of the Community Action Group also has remit for community transport. It was suggested that we could link with them to discuss options for improving community transport if community benefit funding was received.

## **6. Planning for Place updates**

### **Leitholm sub-group**

All the seasonal events organised for Leitholm and area, were attended well and enjoyed.

Meeting had with Alison Boyles – our new SBC Community Engagement Officer. Discussed village repairs and maintenance that’s been asked for since Spring 23.

Actions are to investigate the possibility of funding for planning of purpose-built Swap Shop similar to the one in Duns. The design could include a roof canopy to allow the current village ‘swap shop’ / bus shelter to be removed and replaced with the proposed new build. It could have fridge / freezer capacity and as such provide a few basic items to residents / holiday makers.

The Berwickshire Federation of Village Halls AGM was attended. A meeting is being arranged to discuss with other like-minded Village Halls, the process of becoming a Community Trust / SCIO.

The current Village Hall Constitution is being updated with support from Borders Community Action.

SBC Road Traffic and maintenance are starting work 29th January to add road markings to village road boundaries to reinforce speed restrictions. Work is also being done to connect the current speed control sign to mains power for greater reliability.

Funding has been awarded to continue the Gentle Exercise class for the next two years, to cover costs for heating for Indoor Bowling, Kurling & Seated Boccia and Games night.

BT Broadband is due to be installed in the hall soon.

A Winter Warmer fund has been awarded to help us to update Kitchen equipment, with a slow cooker and dishwasher.

The Walk it team continue to provide fortnightly ambles around the village and fields, with attention to wildlife and ecology. Keith Elliott, an expert on historical sites and local heritage, is due to visit and share some of the walks with us.

We now have a monthly What's On information Calander to inform our local community of events / regular classes.

### **Eccles**

- Eccles Defibrillator (update from Helen) - a little bit of good news, actually a big bit – Grace Ormiston and Alyson Paul have been beavering away during the past two months determined to find funding for the Defibrillator for Eccles. The funding has been sourced. They received confirmation from Kelso Heartbeat that the balance of the cost and maintenance will be available from them. Kenny Oliver is committed to financing £1,000 and has confirmed. Josh Hebdon of Knots & Barley will host the defib on his building wall. Waddells Joiners have also offered a financial contribution.
- Awaiting date for installation of village speed check.
- Eccles Primary School is now up for sale. Once sold there will be no council owned land in Eccles.

John Greenwell added that he understood that there had been two expressions of interest in buying the old school grounds. One was for a form of community hub. John had no further details.

Bob noted that it would be worth a team of volunteers going around the doors in Eccles to ask residents what their priorities are within the Planning for Place structure to make an assessment of whether the residents of Eccles want e.g. a community hub or have other priorities. Gregg agreed – would help in getting a clear understanding of the residents' priorities.

### **Birgham**

Anne Wales reported that the LEBCC Plan for Place has been deemed to be well developed so the intention is to finalise this and she will circulate it for final comments before it is submitted to SBC.

Anne reported with updates from Birgham:

- The village website has been completed and is about to go live. There will be a link to the CC website.
- The CC newsletter has been circulated to all in Birgham on the e-mailing list.
- Groups and societies continue to meet in the Village Hall with a Music night and Scots night planned for February.
- There is now more co-ordination of activities across the Village Hall and the pub, with the domino night and the quiz now re-instated at the pub.
- Road safety and the issue of the pavements in Birgham have been discussed at the BCDT.
- Improvements have been made to the park, in the form of more play equipment for younger children, enhancing their opportunities for exercise and social interaction.
- There is a proposal for keep fit sessions at the Village Hall using the newly installed wi-fi ( to start on 5 Feb).
- Volunteers continue to cultivate the Birgham in Bloom planters and funding events are held throughout the year to support this activity.
- Arrangements for Birgham in Bloom 2024 are underway
- Volunteers continue to undertake grass cutting around the village and even on the path down to the river. The Council only cuts the cemetery and the playpark.

## **7. Reports from Councillors**

John Greenwell reported that SBC budgets are squeezed more than ever. All elected members work together to produce the budget. The Council must allocate budget to meeting its statutory duties therefore it's the non-statutory areas which are under increasing threat. There is a meeting scheduled for 29 February at which the budget will be finalised and it's not looking good. Projects marked for 2024 are being pushed into 2025.

The condition of C and D roads within the county is becoming even worse. The Council recognises they need investment.

Carol Cooke at SBC is in charge of grass management so John recommenced Community Councillors get in touch with her if there are concerns about grass cutting in the villages. Bob asked if the meeting with Carol Cooke was going ahead and John suggested emailing her to check this. John noted that there is regularly



conflict between what different groups of residents want – some want manicured grass and others want it left to grow wild.

There was general discussion around the restrictions on local authority budgets and why, with rising populations, there was not an increased council tax take. Seonaid Blackie raised the difference in service levels between the urban and rural populations.

Donald Moffat noted that the police were doing more in relation to speeding in villages and towns. The community action team has also been carrying out drug raids.

Donald Moffat noted that the Community Justice Team is available to do work on community projects. They are well supervised and have done some really good work on other projects. They carry out the work for free so the only cost is of the materials. Bob agreed and said this would be noted for future projects.

## **8. AOCB**

Bob reminded everyone attending that there is a vacancy for a Community Councillor for Birgham. He has circulated details of this vacancy around the village and has spoke to a couple of people who have expressed interest. Bob will update on this.

Gill Murray raised the issue of the missing cemetery gates at Leitholm cemetery. Liam Thomson confirmed that these were off the gate posts and within the cemetery. He has checked them and they are broken beyond repair. Gill noted that people leave the gates open and they swing back and forth and become damaged. John Greenwell confirmed that cemeteries fall within his portfolio so he will raise this. Liam Thomson volunteered to assist the Council with hanging new gates as they hung the last ones upside down. Liam had to re-hang them so they worked properly. Liam estimates a new gate for the smaller entrance will cost around £500.

Gill offered Leitholm Hall as a venue for defib training for the residents of Eccles. A resident attending the meeting confirmed this was in hand and it would be held in Eccles to maximise those who can attend.

Gill noted that no one appears to be using the LEBCC Facebook page and Bob confirmed that the LEBCC website also had very little traffic. The workload of the Community Councillors is such that it's hard to find time to update these sites. Bob undertook to produce a new newsletter.

## **9. Date of next meeting:** Wednesday 20 March 2024 at 7pm, Birgham