

**MINUTES OF THE THEALE PARISH EXTRAORDINARY MEETING HELD AT  
7.30PM ON THURSDAY 15<sup>th</sup> FEBRUARY 2018  
THEALE VILLAGE HALL, ENGLEFIELD ROAD, THEALE**

Panel on the stage: Cllr Becky Williams (Chair), Alok Sharma MP (assisting the Chair) and Jo Friend, Clerk to Theale Parish Council (guiding on legislation and taking minutes).

Two members of Alok Sharma's staff were present and would conduct the count of any vote taken. Two officers from Tilehurst Parish Council were also present, their role was check all attendees against the electoral roll on entry.

There were approximately 200 members of the public present, seated in two separate areas, Theale electorate and non Theale electorate.

Cllr Williams opened the meeting by welcoming all those present to the Extraordinary Meeting of Theale Parish.

Cllr Williams asked if anyone present intended to film or record the meeting. A film crew from BBC South and the press reporters present indicated that they would be filming and recording. Cllr Williams explained to the public that if they did not wish to be filmed then arrangements would be made to sit them in a separate area. If attendees did not wish to be recorded then their only option was not to speak during the meeting. One member of the public did not wish to be filmed. The BBC South cameraman assured her that she was shielded by the people around her and therefore would not appear in any filming of the meeting.

#### **1. Introductions**

Cllr Williams introduced herself as Chairman of the meeting. She explained that although she was Chairman of Theale Parish Council, this was a meeting for the parish of Theale and therefore, apart from chairing the meeting, there was no role in it for the parish council. She, and any other parish councillors here, were present as electors. Alok Sharma MP was introduced, as was Jo Friend, Clerk to the parish council, who would be taking the minutes.

Cllr Williams outlined the format of the meeting – there would be a discussion on the business of the meeting as described on the agenda with the aim of completing that discussion by 8.15pm. The matter of a parish poll would then be addressed.

Alok Sharma MP addressed the meeting. He said he had been involved in the issue of a new primary school in Theale since 2015. During this time he had attended numerous meetings and had liaised between the parish council and West Berkshire Council. West Berkshire Council had issued a decision deadline of 31<sup>st</sup> January 2018 to the parish council and he had thought it sensible for the two parties to have a round table discussion, this took place on 22<sup>nd</sup> January. At that meeting he had proposed that a parish poll take place.

Mr Sharma went on to say that he thought Theale was a fantastic place to live but recently things had been a bit fractious. Hopefully, this meeting would go smoothly and it would be an opportunity for everyone to have their say. After the discussion there would be two things to decide – what any question should be and, should there be a parish poll on that question.

Cllr Williams then gave some general guidance as to how the meeting should proceed. Parish meetings such as this were quite a rare occurrence and guidance for residents on how parish meetings worked had been published on the parish council website prior to this evening.

## 2. Business for discussion:

*West Berkshire Council has requested that Theale Parish Council relinquish its lease on North Street playing fields in order that the former can build a new primary school on the site.*

An elector immediately stood up and stated he would like to formally call for a poll on the question 'Should Theale Parish Council relinquish its lease on North Street playing fields?' There followed an immediate show of hands supporting his call for a parish poll.

Other electors asked if the numbered cards they had been given on entry were voting cards (they were) and, how would the vote work?

The panel advised that, in the first instance, a question should be discussed before anyone calls for a parish poll on it. Therefore the elector who stood up should suggest his statement be put forward as a question for discussion rather than an immediate call for a poll. The chairman stressed that once a question was voted on and approved it could not be changed therefore it was extremely important to get the wording right in the first instance. The question had to be answerable by a simple yes or no.

An elector asked if it was possible to have more than one question. The panel explained that yes, more than one question could go to poll but, in this meeting, each question must be dealt with separately. Care needed to be taken with the wording of each question and they would be voted on separately at this meeting. If more than one question was approved and moved to poll then there would be separate ballot papers for each question on polling day.

Electors discussed the matter, comments included:

'I suggest the question should be fairly close to the wording on the agenda'

'Some people could say they want a school but on a different site – not sure how quickly West Berkshire Council would react to the view that it should be on a different site'

'It's not about the school, it's about North Street playing fields, the question should be about that'

'Just ask should we give up North Street playing fields?'

'How about to build or not to build?'

'I'm worried that if the question doesn't mention the school then some people may not realise why we are giving up the land'

'I disagree, we're not against the school we just don't want it built on that field. It should be built on other land'

'It is just 5 acres that we are being asked to give up'

'There's a danger that by building it there and thus increasing the village envelope, the rest of the land could be developed'

A non elector stood up and requested to speak about a proposal he had made to use facilities at Theale Green School to provide a long term solution. An elector interrupted him, asking the chairman 'are we allowing non electors to speak?' The chairman responded that there was no legislation preventing non electors from speaking at the meeting though they were not permitted to vote. She indicated that the non elector should continue. He stated that he had originally supported the building of the school on North Street playing fields but had changed his mind. He gave some details about his proposal and said he felt the idea of co-location with Theale Green was a good solution for the long term development of education in Theale. There is a better solution than building it on North Street playing fields.

Some electors responded and further discussion ensued:

'I don't see how it can be included in the poll as we don't have enough information on it'

'There has been a comprehensive investigation into 11 possible sites in the village and I am satisfied that West Berkshire Council's reasons for not having it anywhere other than North Street playing fields are good ones'

'The West Berkshire Council website clearly said that there's a deadline and if we don't meet it the money will be spent elsewhere'

'If we don't agree on a specific question then they (WBC) will move on'

Penny Myers, Chair of Governors at Theale Primary School spoke: I have been in contact with West Berkshire Council this week and there is no intention on West Berks part or from the primary school, to pursue this idea of co-location.

Further discussion ensued:

'The intake figures on West Berkshire Council's website show that the school has become overcrowded because of the admittance of out of catchment children, WBC has caused its own problem'

'With more housing planned for Theale where will these children attend school?'

'One thing we have asked for is honesty and transparency'

'West Berkshire Council keeps setting deadlines then breaking them'

'We have seen plans dating back to 2014 for redevelopment of the current site, why wasn't this done?'

'Some seven schools around this area had vacancies for 2017 including Englefield and Bradfield primaries'

'There's a lot of discussion but the question is should the parish council release a third of the land to build this school?'

'Tonight we need to focus on this business, other ideas can be pursued if the poll answer is no'

Alok said 'We are getting to the point where things are becoming over complicated – should the parish council relinquish the lease to build a new primary school on *that* site?'

'We haven't got a problem with a new school just with the site being proposed. Could the question have the bit at the end removed?'

'You must consider any future developments that could be built on that site if you release it without specifying it's for a school'

'Any complications related to releasing all the lease (all parish council land is under one lease) would be dealt with, it's like a commercial transaction'

'I agree with Alok's suggestion'

'What about 'should Theale Parish Council keep North Street playing fields?''

An elector asked the panel if there was a question that the parish council would find less useful? The chairman replied that the parish council did not have an 'approved' question, it was a decision for the residents and they have to trust in their ten elected representatives on the council who will consider the residents' views.

Alok observed that three questions appear to have come up.

'We should keep it to one question because of the costs involved.' The panel clarified that all questions would be voted on at the same poll so the costs of having multiple questions would be the same or similar to the costs of just one.

'Given that we've already got three questions is it time for the meeting to move on from discussions?'

'Please clarify why Theale Parish Council has the final say on this. Councillor Williams explained that the decision whether or not to release the land must be taken by the parish council, it's their lease. The result of the poll is not legally binding and there are other matters the council must take into account. The parish councillors are your elected representatives, it is they who will make the final decision.

Further discussion:

'Can we vote to reduce the number of questions down to one?'

'Can we have two questions, one on each side?'

The clerk explained that each question would be voted on individually at this meeting. If the majority approved only one question then there would be only one. Similarly, if the majority approved two questions there would be two. That is how the number of questions must be decided.

'The outcome of the poll must give the parish council as much information as possible therefore the question has to include reference to the school.'

'I want to take away from this campaign that there will be no further loss of green space in Theale.'

'Can we ask what the parish councillors' views are?'

The chairman responded saying that the parish council is there to represent what people want but they have to represent the whole village. I can't tell you what the parish council will decide. She reminded people that, although there were parish councillors present at this meeting tonight, this is not a parish council meeting and, like me, they are present only as electors not as parish councillors.

Alok said he had written down three questions that he thought had arisen this evening. He would read them out and if anyone had another question would they please put their hand up.

No one put their hand up so Alok suggested he read out the first question again and the electorate would vote on it. He would then repeat the process with the other two questions. Each question would need a proposer before being voted on. The name and address of the proposer will appear on the ballot paper if the question is adopted.

### **Question 1**

*Should Theale Parish Council relinquish the lease on the land at North Street playing fields to allow a new primary school to be built on that site as per planning consent?*

Proposer: Jodi Scholfield, Flat 2, 58 High Street, Theale

Voting was by a show of voting cards.

For – 129      Against – 44

The question was **approved**.

In excess of the required ten electors indicated that they wanted the question to go to a parish poll.

### **Question 2**

*Should Theale Parish Council retain the lease on North Street playing fields?*

Proposer: Richard Bennetts

Voting was by a show of voting cards.

For – 54      Against – 118

The question was **not approved**.

**Question 3**

*Should Theale Parish Council relinquish the lease on the land at North Street playing fields?*

Proposer: Liz Quinnell

Voting was by a show of voting cards.

For – 52      Against – 130

The question was **not approved**.

The chair confirmed that Question 1 would go to a parish poll. The poll has to be held within 14 to 25 days and it will be arranged by West Berkshire Council.

There was a round of applause and the chairman was congratulated on the way she had chaired the meeting.

CLlr Williams thanked everyone for coming and closed the meeting at 9.05pm

Signed .....

Chairman Theale Parish Council

Date .....