

Heckington Parish Meeting held on 19 August 2024 in the Village Hall, High Street, Heckington, NG34 9RA

There were 58 members of the public present.

1. Election of a Chair

Mr Davison proposed that Mrs Tucker stand as Chair for the purposes of the meeting. The proposal was seconded by Mrs Wright and the parish meeting voted unanimously to elect Mrs Tucker to the role of Chair.

2. Apologies

None received.

3. Parish Poll

To discuss and pass a motion with a view to moving forward with a Parish Poll administered by North Kesteven District Council to advise the Parish Council on public opinion relating to the purchase of 6-acres of land at Star Fen, noting that the outcome of the Parish Poll is non-binding.

The Chair asked the meeting if they were in favour of proceeding with a parish poll; this was confirmed, and the show of hands was unanimous.

The Acting Clerk informed the meeting that there are typically one or two questions on a parish poll which must be answered with a yes or no answer and despite there being two example questions on the agenda, it is for the parish meeting to decide the final wording.

The Chair read out the first question on the agenda, '*Should the Parish Council sell the 6-acre plot of land at Star Fen?*' There was a resounding 'yes' from the parish meeting in response to this question.

The Chair welcomed discussion.

A parishioner said that he thought it was laudable that the parish council wants to find out what the public opinion is, but he is concerned that the price of the land might have dropped, and he doesn't want the parish council to be forced to sell the land at a loss. He was reminded that the results of the poll are non-binding. He said that he understood that but was concerned that the Parish Council might be accused of not listening to the public.

Mr Davison said that this matter had caused a great deal of controversy, and the parish council may sell the land at a loss but the money that has been tied up in the land could be used elsewhere.

Mrs Oscroft asked whether the parish council had looked at developing a business plan. She said that her personal view was that the land should be sold, but she thought that this information should be available to the public, so that they can make an informed decision.

The Chair said that she thought a business plan, if required would follow after the poll.

A parishioner said that if the electorate are going to be asked to vote on this question, there needs to be a description of the land; location, size, facilities, otherwise people will not be able to make an informed decision.

Mr Davison agreed with this statement and added that the parish council needs to consider very carefully how the poll is communicated.

Mrs Oscroft said that she thought that the parish council should seek advice from the lady present at a previous parish council meeting who had offered to produce a business plan free of charge, again so that the public can make an informed decision at the poll.

The Chair added that the parish council have been discussing the land since March and that there has been plenty of time to have some basic costings in place around potential development.

A parishioner added that her view is that the land should be sold.

Mr Waine agreed that a business plan should be created to enable the electorate to make an informed decision. He went on to say that the parish council have got a mandate to develop the land further to a motion passed by the parish council in February 2024. He went on to say that the second poll question, *'If the Parish Council opts to keep the 6-acre plot of land at Star Fen, would you be in favour of its development as a public amenity'* is irrelevant. He went on to explain why there should be only one question.

The Chair added that NKDC would have to approve change of use of the land from agricultural for any future development to take place.

A parishioner offered to change the wording of the first question to 'exploring' the sale of the land. His opinion was that this gives the parish council some flexibility surrounding the sale of the land if the price has fallen.

In response, Mr Davison said that the parish council would not be expected to sell the land immediately; it is the electorate's wish that the land is ultimately sold.

A parishioner added that he thinks the perception from a majority will be that the land should be sold immediately.

A parishioner said that he understands the results of the poll are non-binding, but he is concerned about public perception of the parish council. There was some further discussion about the wording of the question and a parishioner suggested the wording, *'seek to sell'*.

A parishioner said that the parish council have previously indicated that the land was bought at a favourable price, but it is the further costs associated with developing the land which are a worry for the electorate. He said the first question is simple and if the majority vote in favour of selling the land, the parish council should sell the land at the best possible price. He went on to say that if that if the parish council ultimately decides to keep the land, then it is an investment; it doesn't have to become a public amenity. The Chair agreed but said there would be costs associated with the land. Mrs Bell indicated that the parish council had already received invoices relating to the land.

A parishioner asked whether the parish council can sell the land. Mr Davison explained that ultimately the parish council can do with the land as they please; it was purchased without consultation and it, along with any other parish council asset, can be sold. He added that it would be politic to have a poll to determine the views of the electorate. He added that his vote would be to sell the land as soon as practicable. The poll is a way for the parish council to re-engage with the electorate and demonstrates that the parish council is willing to listen.

A parishioner asked about communication surrounding the poll and asked what the best option was to inform people who might not be aware about the purchase of the land and some general discussion ensued.

A parishioner asked whether the valuation had been made public. The Acting Clerk confirmed that Will Barker had indicated that the valuation report was to remain strictly private and confidential, and he had declined to provide a redacted report.

A parishioner said that this valuation was sat on Will Barker's desk for a month for anyone to view.

A parishioner asked whether Will Barker is legally allowed to withhold that information and what the consequences would be if that information was shared. The Acting Clerk said that Mr Barker would pursue legal action against the parish council.

There was discussion around the value of obtaining a further valuation/s to ascertain the current value of the land.

A parishioner said that they had been informed by the parish council that the price of the land was favourable, although there is some doubt about that, and we cannot view the valuation. She asked whether the valuation was addressed to one person or the parish council. The Acting Clerk informed the meeting that the valuation was addressed to the Parish Council care of the former Chair, not to an individual.

A parishioner asked why the parish councillors have not been given access to the valuation. The Acting Clerk confirmed that the councillors have been given access to the valuation, and it has been viewed by many parish councillors this week, as confirmed by Mrs Bell.

A parishioner said that she would like the parish council to commission another valuation for public inspection and added that the poll question should be worded, *'are you in favour of selling the land even if the parish council were to incur a significant loss'*. There was further debate around this wording.

A parishioner asked whether the extent of the parish' dissatisfaction is a matter of public record. Mrs Bell explained that the parish meeting had been called to address this, adding that this meeting is to agree the wording for a poll. She added that previous minutes do not reflect the extent of public opinion. The parishioner added that he has lived in the village for 9 years and has never witnessed anything like this.

Mr Davison said that you can't draw any conclusions; this is why we have elections and polls. He explained how the parish meeting had been called and said that the parish council are not immune to public feeling around the purchase of the land but there may be

hundreds of people who would like to retain the land for the parish. Another parishioner added that the poll will ultimately provide reveal public opinion about the purchase of the land at Star Fen. He commented on the inadequacy of the original survey conducted earlier in the year.

The Chair stated that in her opinion, the parish council minutes do not accurately reflect the extent of public dissatisfaction.

A parishioner made comments in favour of developing the land, planting trees and promoting it for wildlife. Mr Davison said that this would be determined by the first question in the poll, he added that he didn't think many people would share his view. He added that if the parish council decide to keep the land, further consultation will then take place with the electorate.

Mr Garlick offered a change to the second question by removing the words, 'public amenity'. There was further general discussion about the second poll question.

A parishioner asked about the timeline of the poll. The Chair said she thought a valuation before the poll would be beneficial. She suggested new wording for the second question stipulating that the parish council must consult with the public about the development of the land. Some debate followed and it was deemed that this wording would not be appropriate.

Mr Wayne said we must agree on the wording of the poll questions this evening to be able to proceed.

A parishioner left the meeting.

A parishioner asked to hear from the parish council members present at the meeting. The Chair said she would finish taking questions from those with hands raised.

A parishioner added that everyone seems to have forgotten that the parish council have wasted public money; it is how it was done, *'just the two of them. These people here on the parish council didn't know anything about the land. They' just went ahead and did it'*. The Chair agreed with these comments.

A parishioner said that earlier in the meeting, the Chair had stated that NK would need to approve change of use. She asked how easy that process would be. Mr Thorpe said that he thought any change of use unlikely due to the dangerous nature of the road.

Mrs Fiona said that this has been talked about as an amenity for the village, but the parish council would need to be certain that all parishioners could access the facility safely; it would be a 2.5 mile walk to get to Star Fen on foot along a dangerous road. He added that he had discussed the land with some local farmers who have indicated that grade 2/3 agricultural land can fetch £12,000 per acre, but his personal opinion is that Star Fen isn't grade 2/3 quality. His third point was that he had read from NK that the poll could contain two to three questions.

A parishioner said that she agreed with the former parishioner, she added that having spoken to most of the farmers in the area, the land isn't worth more than £9,000-10,000 per acre, but it is worth more to the people who live next door if they want to add it to their land.

She said that the Parish Council have paid well over the odds for the land, and she expressed her surprise that Council members allowed the motion to be passed. Mr Garlick said that some Councillors did express their concerns and raise objections. The parishioner added that her opinion is that it was valued as amenity land. The Chair was in agreement.

A parishioner said that if the decision is made to sell the land at a loss we are going to be out of pocket and if we keep the land we are still going to be out of pocket, either way, we aren't going to win. A parishioner added that her opinion was that there should be repercussions for those that made that decision.

The Chair said that Mr Higgs may have been correct when he said the land was purchased at a good price, but we won't know that unless we have a new valuation before the poll.

A parishioner added that retaining the land will lead to financial loss year after year.

Mrs Hill added that the location is wrong.

A parishioner said that he finally had confidence that the parish council will now make the right decision which met with a round of applause.

A parishioner added that he thought a yes and no question would suffice with some additional information about the land, he said there needed to be a better way to consult the electorate.

Mr Davison said that if there was an independent valuation with a communication to the electorate, his view was that just the first question would be sufficient. He said a major issue had been removed from the Parish Council which would inevitably lead to a more favourable outcome.

Mr Waine raised the issue of the statement to be issued by the parish council to the electorate; the Acting Clerk informed the meeting that the statement had been drafted but would not answer all questions, the level of detail being expected would not be met due to the confidential nature of some of the information. The Acting Clerk added that the Clerk and RFO should be the channel of communication to the Council.

A parishioner asked whether the parish councillors could make their views on the land known to the public via a statement. The Chair said that those in favour of selling the land or keeping the land could produce their own publicity to encourage people to head to the polling station and vote.

A parishioner asked what a reasonable valuation on the land would be now stating that a new valuation is required.

A parishioner added that there will be costs associated with both selling the land and keeping it.

The Chair confirmed that the current valuation provided by Will Barker will remain private and confidential. There was some discussion about the validity of this statement.

Mr Garlick added that if a new valuation is obtained, the new land agent might have the same stipulations in that the content is to remain private and confidential.

A parishioner asked whether there is a right of appeal through the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors. The Chair said this is something that may be explored.

Mrs Wright said that she wasn't a parish councillor at the time the motion was passed to purchase of the land, but she is now leaning towards the sale of the land. She appreciates that things have been done incorrectly and she is as committed as everyone else on the Parish Council now to move forward in the right direction. A parish councillor present showed his support for the comments and said he would like a further two valuations.

Mr Spencer said that he thought we only need to ask one question in the parish poll, the first question. We need to give provide the electorate with information so that they can make an informed decision to the question on the poll. We need to get a true valuation, the true cost of developing it and the true cost of selling it so that everyone understands what they are voting for.

The Acting Clerk was asked whether it is the Returning Officer as the North Kesteven District Council that decides on the date of the poll. The Acting Clerk said she did not know the timescales surrounding the poll, but it had been confirmed that they would not hold the poll and the by election on the same date. It was confirmed that the results of the parish meeting must be reported to the District Council as soon as practicable.

Mrs Bell asked whether the public now felt that they had their voice heard and talked about the way forward.

There was further discussion about a valuation of the land. Mr Garlick repeated that the public still may not be able to view a new valuation.

Mr Hill added that the valuation is inconsequential, the land is only worth what someone is prepared to pay for it. He said the purchase price of the land is going to have to be made public in the parish council accounts and he asked why this could not be divulged this evening. The Chair informed the meeting of the cost of the land, £71,500.00 with associated solicitors costs, she stated that she thought it was just shy of £74,000.00.

He added his opinion on the quality of the land.

A parishioner said that a simple way forward is to proceed with one yes or no question. He said that he was confident that the parish council will now act in the best interest of the parish.

Maintenance of the land was briefly discussed.

The Chair moved the meeting to discuss the first question for the parish poll.

'Should the Parish Council sell the 6-acre plot of land at Star Fen?'

The parish meeting voted unanimously in favour of the above question to be used in the parish poll.

The Chair asked the meeting if they were in favour of one or more questions.

The parish meeting voted unanimously in favour of just the one question.

The Chair thanked those members of the parish council present at the meeting and in turn the Chair was thanked for volunteering for the role.

The Chair closed the meeting at 9.10pm.

***If you would like the draft minutes editing to include your name next to your comments,
please contact the Acting Clerk.***