

## **LITTLE BIRCH PARISH COUNCIL**

### **Minutes**

#### **Extraordinary Meeting held at Little Birch Village Hall on the Monday 15<sup>th</sup> June 2026 at 6:30pm**

**Present:**

Councillors (CA) Chris Atkinson (Chair), (SC) Steven Coles, (ND) Nick Deacon, (TP) Tom Palfrey, (KD) Kate Dillon

Molly Walters (Parish Clerk) and 14 members of the public.

- 1. To receive apologies for absence –** Ward Member Toni Fagan
- 2. To receive declarations of interest & written requests for dispensation –** None received.
- 3. To approve the minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Parish Council held on 6<sup>th</sup> May 2026 -** It was RESOLVED to approve the minutes as a true and proper record of the meeting. The minutes were signed by the Chairman.
- 4. Open session for members of the public -** During the 10 minutes allowed for this item, members of the public present may speak for up to 3 minutes each

Mark Haslam, representing CAMRA, addressed the Council regarding Planning Application 261211 (The Castle Inn, Little Birch).

Mr Haslam advised that CAMRA is routinely consulted on planning matters relating to public houses and expressed surprise that the application had not been supported by documentation such as a Planning Statement, Viability Assessment or Marketing Report.

He referred to Herefordshire Core Strategy Policy SC1, noting that the policy requires consideration of three principal matters where the loss of a community facility is proposed:

- whether the property has been appropriately marketed by a recognised commercial agent at a price reflecting its value as a public house rather than as a residential dwelling;
- whether the applicant has demonstrated that the public house is no longer, and cannot become, financially viable, recognising that a business may be unviable for its current owner but potentially viable under different ownership; and
- whether an alternative community facility exists or could be provided to mitigate the loss.

Mr Haslam commented that, based on the information submitted, it was unclear how the application demonstrated compliance with Policy SC1.

Mr Haslam also noted that a number of public houses across Herefordshire had successfully reopened after prolonged periods of closure, citing examples where premises previously considered commercially unviable had become successful businesses following investment. He suggested this demonstrated that closed public houses can remain attractive to prospective purchasers.

A resident advised that the property had previously been the subject of several sales which had not proceeded following the results of building surveys. It was noted that the surveys identified remedial works estimated to be in the region of £200,000. Members also noted the resident's understanding that the property had previously been marketed as a commercial property.

Residents also raised concerns regarding the property's Energy Performance Certificate, noting that whilst the official EPC records the building as achieving a rating of C, they understood that the condition survey suggested the property may not meet that standard.

Mr Haslam commented that the condition of the building should be reflected in its asking price if marketed as a public house.

A resident further raised concerns that no planning site notice appeared to have been displayed at the property, noting that Herefordshire Council would ordinarily erect a yellow planning notice in a prominent location.

Residents also expressed concern that the property had not been marketed at a price reflecting its commercial value as a public house, but rather at a value consistent with residential use.

- 5. Planning – To comment on applications for determination by Herefordshire Council –**
- 5.1 Planning Consultation - 261211 - Castle Inn, Little Birch, Hereford, Herefordshire HR2 8BB - Change of use of former public house (Sui Generis) with associated existing residential accommodation to a single dwellinghouse (Class C3), with no external alterations.

Councillor Coles highlighted the lack of supporting information submitted with the planning application. He referred to Herefordshire Council Policy SC1, which seeks to retain community buildings and allows for alternative community uses where continued operation as a public house may not be viable.

It was noted that the property is no longer designated as an Asset of Community Value, following an unsuccessful application by the Parish Council. This decision was not based on the property not being of community value, but due to insufficient evidence of its current use at the time of assessment. This was because the property has not been open/trading since Covid.

Members noted that there had previously been interest from parties wishing to purchase the property with the intention of retaining it as a community asset. However, it was understood that such interest had not progressed following receipt of survey information identifying significant repair works, which may have impacted perceived viability. Councillor Coles further noted that no evidence had been provided to demonstrate that the property had been marketed at a true open-market commercial value.

Councillor Dillon added that the property had not been marketed at a price reflecting its continued use as a public house, but rather at a residential value. She suggested that, had the condition of the property been reflected in its pricing at an earlier stage, it may have attracted purchasers intending to retain its use as a pub.

**Following discussion, Councillors RESOLVED to object to the planning application on the following grounds:**

The Castle Inn has historically served as the village public house and remains a public house in planning terms, notwithstanding that it has not reopened for trade since the Covid pandemic. The proposal would result in the permanent loss of a long-established community facility and its conversion into a private dwelling.

The Parish Council considers that the application fails to provide sufficient information to justify such a loss and is contrary to the objectives of Policy SC1 of the Herefordshire Core Strategy, which seeks to protect community facilities within rural communities.

The Parish Council's objections are as follows:

**Failure to Demonstrate Compliance with Policy SC1**

The application is not accompanied by a Planning Statement, Viability Assessment, Marketing Report or other supporting evidence demonstrating why the existing public house use should be permanently lost.

Policy SC1 requires that the loss of a community facility should only be supported where it can be demonstrated that the facility is no longer required, viable or fit for purpose, and where appropriate that reasonable efforts have been made to retain the use.

The Parish Council considers that the application fails to provide the information necessary to demonstrate compliance with this policy.

**Insufficient Evidence Regarding Viability**

No evidence has been submitted regarding the viability of the public house business.

Whilst the premises have remained closed since the Covid pandemic, no financial information or business appraisal has been provided to demonstrate that operation as a public house is no longer feasible or that the use could not be re-established by a future owner or operator.

The Parish Council therefore considers that insufficient evidence has been submitted to justify the permanent loss of the public house use.

### **Lack of Evidence Regarding Marketing and Alternative Uses**

The application contains no marketing report or supporting evidence demonstrating that the premises have been appropriately marketed and that no viable purchaser or operator could be found. The Parish Council is aware that interest has been expressed by prospective purchasers wishing to retain elements of community, hospitality, leisure and tourism-related use within the site. In particular, correspondence received by the Parish Council from prospective purchasers indicated proposals involving community activity space, wellbeing activities, hospitality uses and visitor accommodation whilst retaining the character of the village and providing community benefit. This correspondence demonstrates that there remains interest in acquiring the property for uses that would retain a degree of public and community value.

The Parish Council therefore considers that the applicant has failed to demonstrate that all reasonable opportunities for retaining a community, hospitality or mixed-use function have been fully explored and exhausted.

### **Prematurity of the Proposal**

Given the absence of supporting evidence relating to viability, marketing and alternative community uses, the Parish Council considers that Herefordshire Council does not currently have sufficient information before it to properly assess whether the permanent loss of this community facility is justified.

### **Conclusion**

The Parish Council considers that the application has failed to demonstrate that the Castle Inn is no longer viable as a public house, or that alternative community, hospitality or mixed-use options have been adequately explored.

Accordingly, Little Birch Parish Council objected to Application 261211 and requests that Herefordshire Council refuse planning permission unless and until sufficient evidence is provided to demonstrate compliance with Policy SC1 and to justify the permanent loss of this established community facility.

## **6. Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR) 2025/26**

6.1 To receive and note the Annual Internal Audit Report 2025/26 – Members noted the Annual Internal Report 2025/26

6.2 To consider, approve and sign the Annual Governance Statement 2025/26 - It was RESOLVED to approve the Annual Governance Statement 2025/26 and the Chair and Clerk duly signed the document.

6.3 To consider, approve and sign and Annual Accounting Statement 2025/26 - It was RESOLVED to approve the Annual Accounting Statement 2025/26 and the Chair duly signed the document.

6.4 To confirm eligibility for exemption from limited assurance review 2025/26 – It was RESOLVED to claim exemption from limited assurance review 2025/26 and the Chair and Clerk duly signed by Exemption Certificate.

6.5 To set the dates for the Period for the Exercise of Public Rights 2025/26 – It was RESOLVED that the commencement date for the Exercise of Public Rights would be 19<sup>th</sup> June 2026 and would conclude on 20<sup>th</sup> July 2026.

## 7. Finance

7.1 To note the bank balance as at 31/05/2026 - £10,462.47

7.2 To review and sign the bank reconciliation as at 31/05/2026 – Clerk noted no income or expenditure was outstanding as of 31/05/2026 and the bank balance was true and proper reflection. The Chair duly signed the reconciliation.

7.3 To consider the following invoices for payment:

7.3.1 Clerk Salary as per contract (June 2026)

7.3.2 Clerk June travel expenses (included in payslip) - £7.15

7.3.3 HMRC PAYE (June 2026)

7.3.4 FMS Hereford (25/26 Audit) - £210.60 (inc VAT)

**The Clerk advised that an invoice from Chris Fowler for £24.85 had been received after the agenda had been published and required payment before the next scheduled meeting. Members agreed to consider the matter.**

**All payments above were approved.**

8. To raise matters for the next meeting (no discussion):

9. To note the date of the next meeting on Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> July 2026

Signed.....

Date: .....

