

BERNERA COMMUNITY COUNCIL

Minutes of Meeting held Thursday 10 September 2020

Present: Joan Macaulay (Chair, JM), Cllr Norman Macdonald (NMD), Calum Richings (Treasurer, CR), Chrissie Macdonald, Madeleine Macaulay (MM), Norman Macdonald (ND), Rhiannon Teather (Secretary, RT).

Apologies: Cllr Ranald Fraser, Cllr Angus Morrison, Neil James Macaulay.

Matters Arising

We received an email from some new residents in Valasay introducing themselves to the community; a copy was read by everyone present and it was commented that this friendly introductory message was appreciated.

Previous Minutes

The minutes from the meeting held on 6 August 2020 were approved by Madeleine Macaulay and seconded by Calum Richings.

Finance Update

The current balance is 4819.82.

Berner Bridge

NMD provided an update. CnES are currently establishing the details regarding landownership for the new temporary bridge/possible replacement bridge, as more space will be needed. They are awaiting title deeds to prove ownership. The island landowner may need to sign off the use of croft land for the purpose.

CnES have released drawings, including one of the proposed temporary bridge and one of a new deck for the current Bernera Bridge. NMD reported that the new type of decking, if this goes ahead, will likely be more substantial than that indicated in the original drawing. Regardless, the temporary bridge will be installed first; estimated time frame for this is three months.

ND enquired about the letter mentioned at the previous meeting (bridge update, to be sent to all residents). NMD responded that this had been delayed due to significant changes to the prices (likely now 2m) and details. A letter will be issued in due course.

On the process, the temporary bridge will be installed first, and then the decking from the current bridge will be removed to assess the pillars. If the pillars will only last a decade or so, a new permanent bridge will need to be built.

There was a discussion about what would happen to the old bridge if the decking is removed to assess the pillars; some members were concerned this would mean the iconic Bernera Bridge would then have to be removed if CnES were unwilling to fund tarring it again. NMD assured members that the cheapest option for CnES would be to leave the existing bridge rather than dismantle it. It is most likely that it will remain as a footbridge, closed to traffic.

Gas and Oil Deliveries. JM reported that she had had a query from a resident about gas deliveries and when these would be happening. It was advised that the individual would need to contact the gas company. If they have a contract, legally, this will have to be honoured.

Scottish Fuels have been making oil deliveries. Several members reported that Highland Fuel customers were experiencing delays and were without oil; from phone calls, it was reported customers are being advised to pick up drums of oil themselves (same price).

Benera School

Former Chair Fiona Douglas raised the issue of the Benera School via email prior to the BCC meeting and requested BCC input. NMD provided an update from the meeting he had attended, and also stated that there would be another parent–council meeting the following week. Unfortunately it does seem likely that the school will be shut; the children will have to be sent to other schools and transport for them will be provided. The school building will be ‘mothballed’ for a few years, and in the event it cannot be reopened, the building will be offered to the community for an alternative use. A current proposal, to retain the community link, is that the children will return one afternoon a week for an intergenerational meeting.

There was some discussion about the logic of the decision, and in essence, this was stated to be that only three children in the school would be a hindrance to their learning. It is important for there to be enough children in a school to aid proper socialisation and the best possible education.

JM asked what the BCC could do to help the situation. It was suggested that a BCC member attend meetings or establish a group to work on this issue. Ultimately the solution, as put forward by parents in the meeting according to NMD, is that the community does more to help young families move to Benera. Everyone was in agreement that housing and jobs were the key to this. The Glebe land was discussed as a possible plot and an update was provided that this is now being handled by the Free Church in Breasclete. Members queried whether there were any plans by HHP or HIE to build in Benera. NMD reported that currently plans include building 100 homes in the Stornoway area and another 100 across the Lewis, Harris, Uist and Barra. Last month there were five people interested in social housing in Benera.

Members queried how we can facilitate the building of new homes in Benera. NMD explained that land identification is the main obstacle but it would also be possible to compulsory purchase route if Common Grazings are in use. The conclusion was that people in Benera will have to lobby for new homes if they want them.

RT suggested writing a letter to the housing organisations with all three committees on board (as with the Crown Estate Funding earlier in the year). This option received approval; JM and RT to organise.

Funding (Bosta; Crown Estate)

JM update. At stage two with funding for Bosta works.

NMD update on Crown Estate. CnES have received 2.3m for this year; the money will be allocated to local projects in the same way as previously. Alice Murray (Community Learning Development Worker for CnES) has been in touch with an Action Plan for local projects. NMD encouraged the development of new funding projects – many of the applications were for path improvements last year – if possible, come up with projects that fit the criteria more closely. All of the funding in the previous round was allocated to the Petrol Pumps. JM to put out a call for potential projects in BCC newsletter.

Petrol Pumps

JM updated that she had been corresponding with Robert Emmot at CnES; required confirmation that the Petrol Pumps project was fully funded. ND is working on sourcing the shed structure (needs to be cladded according to CnES), various options are available. Approval needed from CnES before works can commence but otherwise ready to go.

Little Bernera

ND provided an update. Archaeologists from Environmental Scotland will be sent to Little Bernera to rebury bones. Volunteers now have permission to install the gabion baskets, which should be done in the next few weeks; the only restriction is that they are prohibited from touching anything inside the walls. The owner of the island is aware of the situation and has been cooperating.

Date of Next Meeting: Thursday 8 October, 6.30pm.

Please write to berneracomcouncil@gmail.com to raise any issues or suggest ideas.