

FINCHINGFIELD PARISH COUNCIL

REPRESENTING FINCHINGFIELD AND CORNISH HALL END



Minutes of the Parish Council meeting held at Finchingfield Village Hall on Tuesday, 27th. January 2026 at 7.30 pm

Present: Cllr J. Strange, Cllr J. Berry, Cllr J. Braithwaite, Cllr D. Bide, Cllr R. Duffin, Cllr R. Stanger, Cllr A. Stanger, ECC Cllr G. Butland, BDC Cllr M. Ault | 24 members of the public and the Parish Clerk Mark Nicholls

001/2026 Apologies for Absence

- a) Apologies were received and accepted from Cllr R. Gill.
- b) A message from Cllr Gill was read to the meeting, thanking those who had given their time and support in organising and delivering the village's Christmas festivities.
- c) Ratification of Parish Clerk Appointment
Resolution that the appointment of Mr Mark Nicholls as Parish Clerk from 1 January 2026 be ratified.

002/2026 Declarations of Interest and Dispensations

No declarations of interest were made, and no dispensations were requested.

003/2026 Minutes of the Parish Council Meeting held 25 November 2025

Resolution that the minutes of the Parish Council meeting held on 25 November 2025 be approved as a true and accurate record and signed by the Chair.

004/2026 Co-option of Parish Councillor

The Council considered written applications received to fill the vacancy for Councillor with The Parish Council. Each candidate was invited to give a short verbal statement and respond to questions from Councillors. A vote was then taken.

Resolution That Lara Holliday be co-opted as Parish Councillor, having received the majority of votes and having confirmed eligibility under Section 79 of the Local Government Act 1972.

005/2026 Public Participation

- a) Sluice Gates – Inspection and Funding

Questions were raised regarding the sluice gates. It was noted that the structural engineer, Colin Murphy, has been contacted and will inspect the base of the gates once the pond can be drained (anticipated in summer), and will advise on remedial works. Funding for the repairs was noted as available, with a further repair requirement identified and anticipated to be affordable within existing budgets. A carried-forward maintenance balance of approximately £5,000 was also noted. **Agreed. Matter to remain under review.**

- b) Village Signage, Litter and Parking

Concerns were raised regarding damaged/unclear signage, litter, and visitor parking, including unsafe parking near the bridge and on verges/green areas. **Deferred. Signage options and associated measures to be explored. For the next meeting**

006/2026 Essex County Council Report – Cllr G. Butland

- a) County Council elections deferred from the previous year will now take place on 7 May, with those elected serving until 31 March 2028. Elections to the new unitary authorities are expected in May 2027, followed by parish elections in 2028.
- b) Essex County Council considered its budget earlier that day, with the net cost of services reported to be approximately £1.1325 billion, a significant proportion of which relates to adult social care and children's services.

c) It was noted that Essex County Council has resolved to increase council tax by 3.95%, comprising 1.95% for general costs and 2% for the adult social care precept. Councillor Butland also reported that Braintree District Council is recommending a council tax freeze for 2026/27.

007/2026 Braintree District Council Report – Cllrs Staines and Ault

a) BDC's report is on the PC website.

008/2026 Finance

- a) It was noted that total receipts to date amounted to £99,661, payments to £85,461, leaving a balance of approximately £90,901. Bank statements were presented and reviewed, confirming balances as at 30 December 2025.
- b) The budget forecast for 2025/26 was outlined, showing anticipated income and expenditure of £106,000. A VAT refund of £8,119 is expected.
- c) The January finance report was presented, including income from bank interest and VAT, and expenditure covering salaries, PAYE and NI, mileage, phone costs, cleaning and other routine payments.

Resolution: That the bank reconciliations, budget monitoring report and payments for December 2025 and January 2026 be approved as presented, and that the transfer of funds to meet the Council's financial requirements be agreed.

009/2026 Budget and Precept 2026/27

- a) The Council considered the budget and precept for the year ahead.
- b) It was reported that forecast expenditure for 2026/27 is £96,002, with a proposed precept of £85,867. Using a tax base of 876.13, this equates to a Band D charge of £99.14 per annum, representing an increase of approximately £2.47 or 2.46%.
- c) Members confirmed that the proposal had been agreed in principle at the previous meeting.

Resolution: That the precept for 2026/27 be set at £85,867. The resolution was agreed unanimously. The Chair and Clerk signed the precept form for submission to Braintree District Council.

010/2026 Dedicated Digital Recording Device for Meetings

- a) The Council discussed the potential use of a dedicated digital audio recording device to support accurate minute taking and good governance.

Action: Cllr Bide to investigate available options and costs in consultation with the Clerk and report back to the February meeting with pricing for a vote to purchase.

011/2026 Digital Workspace for Council Documents

- a) The Council discussed implementing a secure digital workspace to support document control, audit requirements, and governance.
- b) It was noted that approximately £550 per annum is comfortably available from the contingency budget to fund this. Proposals have been prepared and are to be presented by Cllr Gill in conjunction with the Clerk at the next meeting. **Deferred to February due to Cllr Gill's absence.**

012/2026 Task Force Update – Cllr J. Berry

RoSPA inspection reports. The Council received an update.

a) It was **noted** that RoSPA inspections are due in May or June. In advance of this, Creative Play and Caloo will reinspect the equipment to address any issues proactively. These inspections form part of an annual contract.

b) Task Force working dates were confirmed, with the first session scheduled for Saturday 7 March. The council **agreed. Details will be publicised in the village magazine and on noticeboards.**

c) An incident involving damage to a planter by a lorry was reported. Witness details and dashcam footage were obtained and an application has been submitted to the DVLA to identify the vehicle owner. The planters were donated and valued at approximately £200 each. The Council **agreed that reasonable steps should be taken to recover costs.**

013/2026 Finchingfield Bridge Update – Cllr J. Strange

Highways licence and village green deregistration. The Council received a recap update.

a) It was **noted** that legal advice has been sought from Holmes and Hills. Correspondence indicates that further engagement with Essex County Council may be required, including a revised agreement and clarification of responsibility for legal fees. No substantive progress has been made.

b) The estimated cost of deregistering the village green was noted as approximately £4,900 and was not considered to be in the Council's interest to pursue at this time.

c) Concerns were raised regarding The Greedy Duck property remaining empty under a long-term lease and the lack of power supply. It was **noted** that Essex County Council's contractor is responsible for the property. **Deferred to the February meeting pending progress from Essex County Council.**

014/2026 New Village Hall and Community Centre Project – Cllr J. Strange

a) An update was provided following meetings with village hall user groups and residents. The architect is preparing several sets of drawings, including options relating to parking. Further information will be brought back to Council.

015/2026 Wethersfield Airbase – Update – Cllr R. Duffin

- a) On-site Home Office catch-up meeting, 19.01.2026, attended by Cllrs Jason Berry and Roger Duffin
- b) Currently, 620 residents are on site aged 18 to 65. This is low, and it's expected to increase as the weather improves and more immigrants arrive.
- c) When small boat immigrants come in, they'll typically be processed at Manston or the Western Jet Foil for 24 – 72 hours for handling initial health checks, identification, and asylum screening. A lot of the asylum seekers are told to discard their passports and documentation by the smuggling gangs before crossing the Channel, thus making it more difficult to confirm their identity and origin.
- d) When they come to Wethersfield, there are two induction courses per week (up to 30 people on each) Tuesday and Thursday, they'll be briefed in their own language, health checked in the medical centre and then taken through the tenancy agreement which they have to sign acceptance of the rules, If they violate this, it goes on their record. On the second day, they have a briefing from the police where they are given an introduction to the culture and what is acceptable behaviour. No standing and staring, different toilets and the use of these.
- e) They are then dispersed into their accommodation, 3 beds per room in the built accommodation and 4 beds per room in the Portakabin units. There is sufficient to hold 400 residents in these - though these are currently empty and are rented. There are a lot of other houses on the site built by the Americans and not to UK safety standards (asbestos etc), and there are no plans at the moment to bring these up to the standard required.
- f) There is quite a lot of exercise facilities on site. The football pitch was in full use when we were there, a morning running club (runs are on site not in the surrounding area) one resident has gone off to join Mo Farrah's coaching group there is a squash court (not much used) a gym with weights etc, and a large social room with a lot of pool tables, a shop, a barbers and also computers which can be used for education only. Cannot email on them. There is also a multi-faith worship building. It was emphasised to us that it was "multi-faith" and attended by an Imam and a Christian pastor.
- g) Charitable organisations come into the site to offer services, and Care for Calais distributes extras such as running shoes. Apparently, a lot of large companies have donated coats, mobile phones and SIM cards and other clothing to the charities supporting the asylum seekers – we were told that this was not funded by Government money. Also, charity shops in major towns hold events where goods are available on a first-come, first-served basis, and often free of charge for men. They have an allowance of just under £10 per week.
- h) The buses collect residents regularly each day and run residents to Colchester, Chelmsford or Braintree. Even on Christmas Day, the service ran.
- i) The Stop the Buses campaign is making itself felt, and residents are put off using the buses. They still come regularly, and most accommodate 15 travellers, but they are not as full as they used to be. The aim is to provide enough on-site facilities and groups so that they do not leave the site.
- j) The average stay on site is around 3 months (80/81 days). Residents go through an interview to determine their future, and after approximately two weeks they are then sent off for the next steps. In this new place, they learn if they can stay in the UK or not. They never learn this at Wethersfield. Apparently 50-60% of the "remain to stay" applications are refused and then they go to an appeal. The success rate of this was not disclosed, but if this first appeal fails, another appeal was granted. The impression was that the majority were granted "right to stay", but the process was lengthy and drawn out by bureaucracy. We weren't told where these future locations were.
- k) There is no information available currently regarding what will happen to the base in 2027 when the current arrangement ends. One guesses the immigration problem will not be solved by then, and one would expect the immigration centre to continue, but no evidence yet.
- l) The overall impression was that the site was well run. However, this was a pre-planned tour and the high level of security may not be a day-to-day experience. Also, we were shown only a small amount of the site. I suggested that it may be worth considering doing these tours to local residents to ease their minds about the asylum centre being on their doorstep – it was to be considered.

016/2026 Traffic Speed Monitoring and Signage – Cllrs A. Stanger and D. Bide

a) The Council discussed the use of speed radar equipment and the formation of a volunteer-led speed monitoring group. It was noted that such schemes require a significant number of trained volunteers.
Agreed to continue exploring the feasibility, subject to sufficient volunteer support. With an update on progress at the next meeting

b) Automated Speed Indicator Signs

The Council discussed replacing existing speed signage with a more visible Speed Indicator Device. It was noted that installation requires approval from Essex Highways and compliance with siting regulations.

Resolution: That the Council supports in principle the replacement of existing signage with a more visible SID in the interests of improving road safety. Cllr Stanger will bring forward further details and options for consideration.

017/2026 CHE Issues – Update – Cllr J. Strange

CHE Village Hall – ditch maintenance - The Council received an update.

It was reported that the CHE Village Hall AGM had been held and that the committee expressed gratitude for recent grant funding. A request for assistance with ditch maintenance on the playing field was made. It was confirmed that provision for this work is included in the next financial year's budget.

Action: Cllr Strange to identify suitable contractors and report back at the next meeting

018/2026 Neighbourhood Plan Responsibilities – Update – Cllr R. Duffin

a) The Council received an update on councillor responsibilities in relation to the Neighbourhood Plan. It was reported that work is ongoing and that progress continues to be made. Councillors were reminded to undertake any outstanding actions assigned to them in the action planner in order to support ongoing engagement with Braintree District Council

019/2026 Street Lighting – Update – Cllr R. Stanger

The Council considered the findings and recommendations of A and J Street Lighting.

It was noted that two lights in Cornish Hall End have been replaced with temporary 20-watt units and that a three-year programme of works has already been budgeted for.

Resolution: That the recommendations of A&J Street Lighting be approved and the plan of works authorised, including acceptance of associated costs. The resolution was carried unanimously.

020/2026 Planning

The Council noted planning responses previously submitted to Braintree District Council within required timescales, including objections and no-objection responses as listed in the agenda.

a)26/00047/TPOCON - Land Duck End Finchingfield Essex

Notice of intent to carry out works to trees in a Conservation Area: Reduction of Willow Tree by 3m to the top and 2m to the sides. **Resolution: Finchingfield Parish Council has no objection to this application**

b)26/00016/TPO – 1 Primrose Cottages, Duck End, Finchingfield

Application to carry out works to trees protected by Tree Preservation Order TPO 02/2025 – T1 Pine Tree: Fell. **Resolution: Finchingfield Parish Council has no objection to this application**

021/2026 Planning Decision/s made by BDC

None received

022/2026 Pond, Sluice Gates and Footing Foundations – Cllr J. Strange

The Council received an update. It was noted that the base of the sluice gates is deteriorating and that structural engineer Colin Murphy will inspect once the pond can be partially drained. Dredging is anticipated in June or July, subject to conditions. New winding gear is required and is currently broken.

Resolution: That £14,400 be earmarked from existing reserves together with £5,000 for dredging, that a working group be appointed to obtain three quotations, and that the structural engineer be engaged, with all costs to be brought back to Council for approval. Winding gear costs to be presented at the next meeting

023/2026 MACAR Homes – Land Behind Freshwell Health Centre

No update has been received from Braintree District Council and no planning permission has been granted.

Decision -Deferred to February meeting

024/2026 Winter Salt – Cllr J. Strange

It was noted that approximately 25–30 bags of winter salt remain in stock at Balcomber Hall Farm. Salt can be delivered to the Pavilion if required. **No further action required at this time.**

025/2026 Tractor Run Event – 10 May 2026

The Council considered a request to use the Village Green and erect a gazebo.

Resolution: That permission be granted for the use of the Village Green and a gazebo for the Tractor Run event on 10 May 2026. The Clerk to confirm approval with the event organisers.

026/2026 Clerk Training Needs

The Council considered the Clerk's identified training needs. It was agreed that training be booked on a rolling basis. It was noted that the current Responsible Financial Officer intends to step back at the end of March and that advice from the Essex Association of Local Councils confirms that the Clerk can assume responsibilities. Attendance at the EALC finance course on 16 March to be booked. **Resolution: That the Clerk's training plan be approved, including attendance at the EALC finance course on 16 March, and that all the associated costs be approved.**

027/2026 Items for Next Agenda

a) May Day Fête – 4 May 2026

To discuss a proposed May Day Fête to be held on Monday 4 May 2026, including the use of a Maypole and the provision of stalls, and to consider whether the proposal should be developed

b) Finchingfield Windmill – Proposed Transfer to a Community Interest Company update Cllr J. Strange

To discuss Essex County Council's proposed transfer of the Windmill asset to a Community Interest Company and consider any required next steps, including whether to support the proposal in principle and agree further actions. There will be guest speakers, including Essex CC, representing the Windmill for this item.

028/2026 Date of Next Meeting

The next Full Council meeting will be held on 24 February 2026 at 7.30pm in Finchingfield Village Hall. Future meeting dates were noted.

029/2026 Exclusion of Public and Press

Resolution: That the public and press be excluded in accordance with Section 1(2) of the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960.

The Chair thanked everyone for attending and closed the Parish Council meeting at 20:57.

030/2026 Trust Matters

- a) The Council noted that a Trustees' meeting was held regarding the Village Hall and Sportsfield Trusts.
- b) Trust governance and the potential adoption of CIO status were discussed.
- c) It was agreed that further clarification and legal advice are required.
- d) No decision was made on changes to the trust structure.
- e) A further update will be reported to Council.

031/2026 Closure

The Chair thanked Councillors for attending and closed the meeting at 21:20.