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UPPER MEDWAY INTERNAL DRAINAGE BOARD



MINUTES OF THE MEETING of the BOARD
held at **Zoom Conference Call**
on **Tuesday 24 January 2023 at 10am.**

Members of the Board Present

O Baldock
Cllr M Davis
Cllr Dixon
Cllr M Gillman
D Goff
C Hosmer
Cllr D King
Cllr H Rogers
W Thompson

In attendance

O Pantrey – Clerk
L Carey – Finance Officer
J Davis – Works Supervisor

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies received from C Wheeler, Cllr McGregor, Cllr Harper, L Young

2. ITEMS OF INTEREST DECLARATION

No pecuniary interests were noted by members for the upcoming meeting.

3. RATIFICATION OF CHAIRMAN AND VICE-CHAIRMAN

The Clerk opened the meeting by explaining that the last meeting ended with the voting in of the new Chairman. He said that he wanted to give those members not present in November the opportunity to pass any comments they may have about the vote and its result.

The outgoing Chairman said he wished Mr Goff all the best with the position and that he was entirely in favour of the decision of the Board.

The Chairman then thanked Cllr Rogers for his efforts in the role and thanked him for navigating the Board through such a turbulent time. He said that Cllr Rogers had needed to deal with an awful lot and that he should be applauded for the work.

All members **AGREED** that the outgoing Chairman had done an excellent job and collectively thanked him again.

4. REGISTER OF MEMBERS INTERESTS 2022/23

The Clerk said that he had now circulated the link to the register of interest form for 2023. He said that he had already received 8 responses which was a good start and offered his assistance to any member struggling to complete the digitised form.

5. MINUTES

The Chairman requested any alterations to the minutes of 15 November 2022. He then requested that these were approved as correct.

On proposal from the Chair, it was **AGREED** by all Members present that the minutes of the meetings held on 15 November be approved as a true and accurate account.

6. ACTION LIST AND MATTERS ARISING

The Chairman asked the Clerk if there were any issues arising from the action list.

The Clerk said he only had one thing that he wanted to update members about regarding the list. He said the resilience fund paper was now being moved to June as he was rolling out the new works plan and that had taken priority.

The Chairman said he wanted to bring up again the lack of response from council CEO/CFO's relating the letter from the Clerk to engage. He urged members to contact the Chief Officers within their councils and encourage them to accept the invitation for a meeting.

He continued by saying that the EA was now officially on industrial action. He said that combined with their lack of recruitment he was concerned about the future of the work being carried out. He continued by saying that the PSCA being worked on between the agency and the Board would likely prove vital, but the lack of maintenance on structures was bit of an issue.

It was asked where the project on the Alder Stream was relating to the IDB investment.

The Clerk updated members that there was an expectation that we would begin funding this in the coming months with KCC. He said that the money put aside still existed and would be ringfenced.

W Thompson said he offered his services to clear the gutters in the last meeting but had heard nothing.

The Clerk said he had now used a contractor to clean the gutters so we could avoid the need for a man cage, which he said posed a grey area in regards to health and safety.

7. CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

The Chairman said he had attended the appraisals of the office staff in the last month or so and that he was very happy with the work being done. He said that the staff were happy in their new surroundings and were prospering. He thanked the Finance Officer and Works Supervisor for all their efforts in the past year.

He continued by saying that he had attended a meeting with Innes Thomson, CEO of ADA, and the Clerk regarding the future of the industry and where there was potential areas for the Board to improve.

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He said a major point of interest raised was that legislation for the expansion of the district was underway and that it would be something that tied a lot of the Board's objectives together relating to flood management and conservation.

He said that Innes made it clear that the Board needed to start addressing water management and not just drainage going forward. This would include flooding, drought, and conservation.

He said he would be meeting with the Regional Director of the EA and the Chief Executive of the RFCC, Dr Martin Hurst, as a result of the meeting with Innes. He said this would allow him to understand where the IDB sat in the larger picture of water management in the region.

He finished by saying the subject of Board attendance had been brought up and that it was now time to discuss whether or not the Board needed to be reduced in size to improve attendance percentages. He confirmed DEFRA would be assessing attendances and questioning Boards with low attendance.

It was asked whether or not it would be best to reduce numbers or fill existing vacancies.

The Clerk said that in practical terms it would be easier to improve the attendance percentage with fewer members. He did say that there was a caveat to this because we risked losing important members from the appointed ranks. He said that it was possible to move some of the councillor members to elected members, should they be nominated, and in turn not refill the appointed seats left vacant. He said that either way DEFRA were willing to work with us, and that he felt it would be beneficial to reduce the size of the Board slightly.

There was a comment that farming was now a job that required more time commitment from younger landowners and that management of farms was less common. It was suggested that landowners could be incentivised to attend through reduced rates with 100% attendance.

The Clerk said he would put a working proposal to the Board in June and then perhaps they could make a decision in October/November ready for next May.

Action: Clerk and Chairman to present paper to the Board regarding potential reconstitution.

8. CLERK'S REPORT

Groundwater and Weather

The Clerk said that since the last meeting in November further information from the EA has been released regarding rainfall and recharge for the area. He said the 3-month period from October to December has been above average in terms of rainfall with the South East receiving 125% of the long term average. This has led of course to localised flooding around Peshurst, Lamberhurst, Collier Street, and Paddock Wood in the main. He continued that as a result of this weather the soil deficit continues to fall and recharge is occurring across the area with only the furthest west displaying above normal recharge for the time.

He said reservoirs are filling again with Bewl at a normal level for the period (85%), although Bough Beech is now full and as such capacity will be limited should we receive further events.

The long-range forecast is for more milder weather with increasing likelihood of heavy rain events until at least March.

Staffing

He reported that after a month long advertising campaign he and John carried out interviews before and after Christmas to bring out numbers in the depot team from 3 to 5. He was delighted to say that we have now filled the two vacant roles and will be inducting the new members of the team during February.

He said he had spoken with John's replacement at length and decided that they were not best suited to the role from an office base. He said that as such we will be returning them to the depot team and instead opening up a new role of Depot Leader. This aims to bridge the gap between office based Supervisor and

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works based ganger. With the upcoming retirement of John, we are confident this offers a better solution in the long term by having a supervisory role within the works team actively monitoring the increased works carried out. He informed members that this will also make room for a Technical Advisor role to come into the office to aid him with plans for the upcoming PSCA and catchment expansion roles.

Office Admin

He said that after a year of effort, the new works plan is live and allows for more precise and detailed collection, dissemination, and display of works completed than ever before. By taking our watercourses into reaches he said we should also be able to more accurately cost our works in the years to come by understanding better how long each section takes to complete and to what extent.

He confirmed that the new system utilises Esri's FieldMaps which allows for better quality mapping and information presentation while also allowing for offline and poor reception areas which have been a major issue in the past. As with everything this will take time to iron out the bugs but the initial tests are positive.

He said the audit will be commencing in the next few months, and we are aiming for an improved performance over last year as we continue to become used to the expectation of the auditor.

EA Partnership

The Clerk continued that the PSCA groundwork is complete and the recommendation to the procurement team is that we are awarded a full potential contract over 5 years. This should hopefully allow us to begin working on some previously unmanaged sections of watercourse that would be defined as critical to either homes or industry.

He said there has been a request to the EA for a presentation on key asset maintenance and long term plans to which there should be more information in the coming months.

He reported that he and Carol also held meetings with the EA at Bullen Court before Christmas to outline conservation and flood management opportunities. This was a very positive meeting that should open up better links to geomorphology and conservation partnerships going forward. Key areas are at Frittenden and Cranbrook at this time although we will be moving across the district as projects arise with Collier Street/Marden another area we hope to work in.

Local Issues

He finished by reporting that there was flooding again at Green Lane in Collier Street/Marden in recent months and this continues to be a major area of concern for the safety of road users. As above, there are discussions about how to best manage this going forward, although the Plain Road end of Marden is also seeing issues so some joined up thinking might be required.

Generally, although wet, he said the office had not received a lot of calls regarding blockages and flooding, but with the new plant coming we should be better prepared than ever to respond to minor flooding/rain events.

It was asked how the recruitment process had gone.

The Clerk confirmed there had been a few dozen applications, of varying quality, and that 6 interviews were offered. He said that of the 6, 4 attended and of the 4, two people were offered positions in the company with start dates in February.

9. WORKS SUPERVISOR REPORT 167

The Works Supervisor framed the report for the members by saying that we were now really drilling down into the specific watercourse requirements and improving the way we operated by making single bank cuts a recognised practice where at all possible. He said on a personal note he was grateful for the Board's support with the plant being bought and hoped it would show in an increased production for 2023.

The Clerk said that the report showed an increase of 20% in terms of works completed for this past year against 2021. He said this was down to 100 hours of additional working hours allowed by the weather and the improved management and crop chase.

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He then demonstrated the new works program for 2023. He said they had now remapped the entire district including tracking routes, access points, hazards, and most importantly, reaches. He said that each reach had unique requirements for works and that they were now able to accurately identify areas of improvement and the associated costs on a much tighter basis for each reach.

He said that the downside was that we had gone from 60 watercourses to 320 reaches, which puts additional pressure on, although he said this was a positive pressure as it allowed us to identify failings and shortfalls within the works programme and allowed for much better contractor targeting.

He said that each access point and landowner were assigned unique identifiers with codes and details kept entirely separately. He said this would ensure that we didn't fall foul of GDPR should there be a lost device.

He went on to display the new works dashboard which gave up to the hour information on the works that had been completed, ongoing, or not started. It also allowed for snapshot reports of works completed per task, down to the metre, at any given time.

He finished by saying that he thanked the staff and the work force for their patience and adaptability while this change was rolled out.

The Chairman thanked the Clerk and said he was very impressed with how the system looked. He said there has never been this level of information provided before and that the Clerk and the staff had done an excellent job getting this together.

There was a question about why the GDPR system was necessary.

The Clerk said it was so the gate codes and landowner details were not kept in the same place at any one time.

There was a question about where the codes and names were kept.

The Clerk said the mapping was done through ESRI and that codes were kept on Google Drive or DRS.

It was asked who had access to this information and whether or not it would become an issue in the event of absence.

The Clerk said that 4 people would have access at any given time and that as the works programme was now planned ahead of time on the Friday, codes could be requested then too.

There was a comment that with trespass an ever increasing risk, the Clerk had done an excellent job in ensuring the security and trust of landowners with these measures.

10. FINANCE REPORT

The Finance Officer said that the bank balances were healthy and that total money for the Board was at £1.4M. She said this was a mix of ring fenced funds and money that was due to be spent in the coming months. She also said that we now had all special levy returns in.

She said that 4 CCJ's were issued as part of the credit control system now in place.

The Finance Officer said that we had received 99.9% of the monies expected but that this included debt collection too. She said that we were at 91% for the year as an actual against the levied amounts.

The monthly budget report was then shown to members and she indicated that we were well on course with the expected spend for the year. She said that the expected loss for the year was tracking right with the cashflow and that there were unlikely to be any surprises.

The Clerk then displayed the Financial Risk Assessment and asked members if they had any thoughts or concerns about the recommendations in the document.

There was a request to remove the mention to Albion Place within the Damage to Property By Fire section.

Action: Clerk to update Financial Risk Assessment and remove mention to old office.

11. ESTIMATES AND SPECIAL LEVIES

The Clerk said There has now been a change in the staffing arrangement due to the upcoming removal of the Works Supervisor position.

He said it was originally hoped that we could bring through a member of the ground team and so keep the vital local knowledge in place while promoting from within. However, it has now become clear that is not possible due to the increased technical and computer based position that the role would have entailed. He said he was of the opinion that replacing John is considerably trickier than first thought, mainly due to the fact we just do not have the administrative support network in the office to shoulder the load once John leaves, but also because knowledge of the work we do is so niche that recruiting appropriate people is incredibly difficult.

He explained to remedy this issue, he had instead created the Depot Leader position. This would reduce the administrative demand on the role while still retaining the local and working knowledge. He said it also has the added benefit of being almost entirely ground based which means that supervision will be constant during the working days. Furthermore, as a practical based role it allows the depot leader to push from within the ground team and set the example in a way that is much easier than the admin role that John was asked to balance.

He continued by saying that with this in mind, he had altered the budget to reflect the change in recruitment strategy and this is summarised in A6. He said he had now decided that as we will be focusing on both traditional works and PSCA that the workforce would need to go to 5 members, and as you have been informed, this has already been actioned with 2 staff coming in on lower wage steps. To compensate for the technical increases we will also be recruiting a Technical Advisor who, in short, will provide additional engineering advice, guidance, and a means to start looking more intently at planning and development. They would also be required to manage contracts, with a particular emphasis on PSCA with the EA and councils, with some timesheet and standard administration moving into Lorna.

He explained that the increase in revenue expenditure for this change will be £9,383. He showed his revised thoughts on the income from Highland Water (EA Section 57), as he expected an increase will be necessary and had upped this expectation by £5,000. There will therefore be an additional shortfall of £4,383 taking the expected loss for the year to £46,484, which is up from the previously demonstrated £42,101. He said he felt this was still entirely acceptable under the constraints set out in November for a managed reduction of held sums and would not change the requirement of the levy for Year End March 2024.

He continued by saying there was still an ambition to increase at 3% for the next two years and then to reduce it to 2% as a relative constant after that, assuming no major changes in policy or staffing requirement arise. This should mean the Board will have exhausted its excessive funds by year 5 where the budget will then come round to a balanced equation. There was of course a potential for change should the Board begin to generate funds from other sources that can offset recruitment or indeed ease the burden on the levy, but for the sake of prudence this will not be included until we have contracts in place.

There was a comment about the use of the word revenue within the expenditure section.

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The Clerk said he felt it was suitable wording but could alter as needed for the Board if it caused any confusion. He said that it was put in to make sure there was a clear separation between capital and general expenditure as this had been unclear in the past to members.

12. BIODIVERSITY REPORT

The biodiversity report was given by the Board Representative S Highwood.

S Highwood said that as this meeting is quite close to our last, there is little to report at this time that differs from November. He did say that it was a good opportunity to look back and reflect on the changes this Board has made in terms of biodiversity and conservation in the last year.

He surmised that the Board have entirely overhauled our works standards thanks to John and his team, and introduced not only 80% weed cuts as standard, but also alternate bank mowing and hibernacula creation as a general practice. This was a major shift away from the traditional maintenance works carried out and represents a more conservation minded approach that should work well in demonstrating to our partners that we are not stuck in our ways and will evolve with the science.

He reported that he had taken part in several meetings across the year to action and move forward the work of the Clerk and his team regarding conservation, and felt we are moving ever closer to a balance of drainage works and environmental responsibility.

He said that the study carried out by Carol this year represents a brand-new direction for the Upper Medway IDB and not only seeks to improve general practice but now actively creates partnerships that have long been lost, particularly with the EA and Natural England. By using this science to improve and enhance our working practice we created opportunities across a much wider spectrum of authorities to manage flood reduction and habitat creation and so tie together not only our environmental goals but also our base remit of flood risk management.

He finished by saying that with the ecology-based courses now being taken on by Paul from our works team, we are safeguarding our long term aims with regards to conservation. By creating environmentally aware and ecologically qualified staff, the Board is giving itself a far more informed base from which to look into the future as we face climate change, carbon neutrality, and nutrient neutrality.

The Chairman thanked the member for the report and said that it was clear we have done an awful lot this year in terms of conservation. He said that he had spoken with ADA about this and felt we needed to be far more vocal.

S Highwood said that the reports made by Carol were excellent and made very interesting reading. He requested that they were circulated to members.

Action: The Clerk to circulate Conservation Study Reports to members.

13. HEALTH AND SAFETY REPORT

The health and safety report was given by the Board H+S Representative O Baldock.

He said that as per the biodiversity report, there is little to come back with outside of the report from November, and that he would instead take this opportunity to recap the year in terms of the Board's Health and Safety achievements.

He said that he has been part of the Works, Health, and Safety Group for several years and this year saw us introduce all staff to the meeting to ensure we had as many voices as possible. He felt this gave us a much greater sense of collective input and the ground team particularly has seemed to enjoy and embrace the opportunity to participate.

He reported that since the start of 2022 we have made some big changes aside from the personnel, and have taken steps to improve the depot from where it previously was. The main change was the laying of the new tarmac surface which has removed an issue that has plagued the safety of the company for years. This investment not only improves the ground conditions but gives a greater sense of professionalism to the depot and has encouraged the staff to stay on top of their maintenance routines. Near miss was a focus for the back end of this year and the reports doubled for 2022 over 2021. He reminded that although the figures are not massive it is an encouraging sign and shows that wider concerns are being sought by staff while working. This is of course vital to the Board as it shows an increased likelihood of catching issues early which defends the Board from potential fines and costs.

He said we had also taken the decision this year to ensure everyone is trained in all maintenance disciplines, which gives the Board far more flexibility practically and demonstrates a willingness to invest. While some training is outstanding, the general desire from the Board to support its staff with training, information, and inclusion will be a great draw for future recruitment and retention.

He said he was also pleased to take part in the annual depot inspection where we were joined by the Clerk's tutor for his NVQ. This gave him a great insight into the depot and the condition of what is a major Board asset. He was pleased to report that the staff are maintaining this well and, now that the electrics and the gutters have been brought up to standard, is an excellent representation of the Board's modern and forward thinking approach.

He concluded that 2022 has proven to be a successful year for us in terms of health and safety, and by continuing to offer funding and over arching direction on the expectation and quality of health, safety, and welfare provision the Board would continue to be a leader in the industry.

CLlr Gillman said that we should look at the near miss reports as a huge positive and that we should be pleased to see these come in as they are actively saving money by avoiding major incidents.

All members **AGREED** that near miss reporting was good to see and encouraged efforts to further this.

14. STRATEGY AND OBJECTIVE

The Clerk said that 2022 saw the first Board objectives ever published and said that this was a tremendous success that should be welcomed going forward. He said this offered us a chance to demonstrate exactly what we are hoping to achieve and measure that annually against that which has been achieved.

He then went through the objectives and the associated actions taken by the Board to cover and achieve those objectives either directly, indirectly, or collectively.

Climate Change

- UM16 Expansion Project
- UM28 NFM Investment
- Commenced discussions to be part of KCC tree planting scheme.
- Pre-emptive adoption of watercourses.
- Funds ringfenced for resilience funding schemes.

Education

- Board meeting at Ightham Moat – with NFM tour
- Depot health and safety inspection

Conservation

- Ecology study with Carol started.
- Single bank mowing practice initiated.
- Resilience Fund agreed in principle.

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- Strategic meetings held with EA regarding NFM and conservation opportunity.

District Management

- UM14 adoption at Pile Lane
- Extension to Pierce Mill Lane watercourse (outside IDD)
- New 100hp tractor and water pump purchased.

Funding

- Partnership with KCC and SERT
- EA PSCA agreed in principle.

Development

- Continued work with WLMA to ensure sustainable development within the district.

Public Interaction

- Instagram account creation – 1 post per week
- Engagement offered to all levy paying councils
- Increased staff presence and commitment to increased works opportunity.

The Clerk said that he felt the year had been very successful and that the Board should be proud of its achievements against the objectives set.

He said that if there was one area he hoped to improve on it would be in the area of development. He did say that he was very happy with the service provided by the WLMA, but he felt it would be best to have a more acute eye on this going forward and that the Technical Advisor would hopefully provide this.

The Chairman then opened the floor to members to comment on the Board's achievements and whether or not they were happy with its progress in 2022.

The opening comment said that the Board should thank the Clerk for all the work he had put into setting up, drafting, and then implementing the objectives. It was said that the Board was moving forward further and faster than ever before.

There was a thank you issued for the effort in watercourse network opening. It was also asked where KCC were with the Grave Lane project.

The Clerk said that it was ongoing but he was hopeful the Board could help push it over the line, assuming the flood risk assessment came back ok.

There was a request to improve the communication into the parish councils, and whether or not we could take on their maintenance too.

The Clerk said the idea in principle is great, but that as with everything it came down to how much we would be paid to do it. He said he wanted to try and create a precedent with Maidstone Borough Council first and then utilise those frameworks for services on a wider basis. He warned that we had to be careful we didn't take on too much too soon as there would be a need to invest in plant and staff.

It was highlighted that the Parish Councils would provide a vital link on a more local basis so the interest from them would be good. It was suggested that the Clerk visited the parishes once a year perhaps to give an overview of works within their area.

Action: Clerk to offer meeting with Parish Councils to update them on works and potential partnerships.

The Clerk requested that the Board continued with its objectives as stated in 2022 and that they were still valid for the coming year.

On proposal from the Chairman, it was **AGREED** by all members to approve the continued use of the 2022 objectives for 2023.

15. GOVERNANCE AND POLICY

The Clerk asked members if they had any further changes to the amended policies which were:

Updated Policy

- Anti Fraud and Corruption
- Biosecurity
- Contracts
- Gifts and Hospitality
- Members Code of Conduct
- Pension Policy
- Procurement
- Whistle Blowing

On proposal from the Chairman, it was **AGREED** to approve the policies listed

Action: Clerk to update website with policies

Updated Governance Documentation

- Statement of Accounting Policies
- Statement of Internal Controls

On proposal from the Chair, it was **AGREED** to accept governance documents listed.

Action: Clerk to update website with governance documents

16. PLANNING AND CONSENTS REPORT

The Clerk said that this was largely for information. He said the only approval was for a site at Stilebridge although we have one consent being processed for discharge into the Eridge Stream.

The Clerk reported that the Board has had a consent submitted for the installation of a drop board structure at Gravelly Ways. He warned this structure is not in keeping with conservation advice we have received this year from Carol and KCC and so he was likely to request they amend the proposal to look at either leaky dams or low level deflectors. There is a claim that this will provide site security he didn't think it would currently serve as a wet fence in summer due to the lack of flows on the Gravelly Ways stream.

He said that his thoughts initially are that we should not be installing drop board structures unless it is for movement of water and even then should have some sort of fish passage designed within. He said he would welcome members thoughts on this.

Members said they would not want to set a general policy and should instead continue to look at this on a case by case basis.

It was also commented that these structures do exist and there is a need in some cases, mainly for abstraction.

Action: Works Supervisor to contact W Thomson about drop board structure on Haviker Street.

17. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Update on Depot Works

The Clerk said the depot had now received a new fuse board and has had its gutters cleared after the findings from the depot inspection identified failings. There is a chance that the gutters are damaged and so it may be necessary to contract someone to make repairs or fill gaps in the joins using mastic etc.

He said we will be getting the lines painted in the spring when the cold weather leaves, and also have some minor resurfacing blemishes fixed at the same time.

Update on New Plant

The Clerk reported that we had now taken receipt of the New Holland T4 and associated attachments. The machine has been tested as has the culvert jetter, to which I am pleased to say it is very effective.

He said the Board will be running further tests and demonstrations to KCC shortly as part of the bid to extend our working practice, however the initial signs are very positive. It remains a slightly contentious issue but we do now have the ability to clear land drains should members know of anyone how has the need, to which we would charge appropriately.

Installation of New Diesel and Rainwater Tanks

The Clerk said that we will be proceeding with the replacement of the diesel tank as agreed this time last year. We will offer the tank to anyone willing to purchase it, although he suspected it might be worthless and as such would be willing to release it should someone be willing to take it off our hands.

He said we will be replacing it with a new vertical tank that has a smaller footprint and more modern gauging. This will allow for better accuracy in our diesel stores check.

He finished by saying that to compliment the culvert jetter we would also like to install a 10,000-litre rainwater tank at the rear of the property. This will take water from the gutters and on occasion the river, to be used in the culvert jetter. The said that the Board would also be purchasing a small petrol engine pump and IBC as part of the setup. The cost will be around £7,000 for both tanks, the money of which will come from the surface water development collection.

It was asked whether or we could ask South East Water about their rainwater grants.

The Clerk said that as we were using money from surface development contribution it was already from a non-levy source but he would investigate anyway.

On proposal from the Chairman, it was **AGREED** by all members present that the Clerk should make the purchases as laid out.

It was asked if the new diesel tank was metal or plastic.

The Clerk confirmed it was 110% banded plastic.

18. PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL MATTERS

There was a private and confidential conversation relating to a previous employee.

The Clerk was then asked to leave as his remuneration was discussed.

19. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting was set as:

Tuesday 30 May	Finance EOY Committee – In person 10am
Tuesday 20 June	Board Meeting – In Person 10am

20. CLOSE

There being no further business, the Chairman thanked the Clerk and his team for their efforts, and closed the meeting.