

WIDFORD

ANNUAL MEETING OF THE PARISH

Minutes of the Annual Meeting of Widford Parish
Tuesday 1 March 2016 at 7.15pm in the Village Hall

PRESENT: Parish councillors Jill Buck, Babs Edwards, Glen Parcell, Paul Riddle, Neil Rogers, County Cllr Roger Beeching, Police Sgt Duncan Wallace, and 20 other members of the public

Cllr Jill Buck, being present and the Parish Council Chairman, chaired the meeting

Minutes taken by Colin Marks, Clerk to the Parish Council

- 1 The Chairman welcomed everyone and opened the meeting at 7.20pm. She said how delighted she was to see such a good turnout.
- 2 **Apologies for absence**
District Cllr R Brunton, Jenny Miller, Carmel Holland
- 3 **Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Parish, 3 March 2015**
The Chairman noted that the Parish Council had agreed at its Meeting in May 2015 that the Minutes were an accurate record. It was then agreed by those present that the Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Parish held on 3 March 2015 were a true and accurate record. The Chairman signed the Minutes.

4 **Review of the year 2015/16 by Cllr Jill Buck, Chairman of the Parish Council**

This last year has been one of considerable change, and perhaps the most important change was the retirement of our long term Parish Clerk, Mrs Beryl Hollylee, She has left us a very powerful and important legacy, after some 40 years of devoted service to the village and its residents. The Parish Council that she took over after the sudden death of her mother was considerably different to the Parish Council as it is constituted today, for following the Localism Act of 2011, more and more duties are being passed down to the Parish Councils and much less money is forthcoming nationally or from the County making it difficult to fulfil these duties faithfully. Examples of the cutbacks that affect us all are services such as Highways and buses.

The present Parish Council has worked hard to make all we do and say more transparent. We strive to acknowledge openly what we can and cannot do, and to make sure that all enquires and worries are answered as quickly as is possible. To this end, we have totally rejuvenated the Village Website, making it a "go to site" for all the latest news, and I would like to thank Cllr Paul Riddle for the many hours devoted to this. This is a long term but rewarding project, and we are delighted by the response. Many residents are looking at it regularly, and using it to report pot-holes, litter and viewing local planning applications.

In order to keep up to date with the many new roles and responsibilities, we have successfully applied for a grant (available for small villages with an income below £25,000) to purchase a computer and printer and the necessary software. All the members of the Council communicate by email and are now regularly undertaking training through the HAPTC (the award winning Hertfordshire Association of Parish and Town Councils). We also continue to work with the East Herts Association for Town and Parish Councils, which is a voluntary organisation combining the small villages in East Herts. Working together we helped the East Herts District Councillors; compiling the new District Plan; to instigate a new method of rating the facilities available in rural villages. Widford has benefitted from a lower point score, but is still scheduled to become a Group 1 village when the Draft District Plan is ratified in 2017/2018. This can only have an effect on our financial budgeting and may well lead to real concerns about the amount of housing we may have to accommodate, and the lack of suitable housing that will be available for young families and the elderly.

In the last year we have looked at our Financial Budget in great detail led by our new Clerk, Colin Marks, and we have laid by reserves in specific areas as well as continuing to support Community activities and amenities wherever possible. We have made grants to the school, the playing field, God's Acre (the new Churchyard), and maintained the care for the closed churchyard. This last has meant undertaking some necessary work to the trees behind the church on health and safety grounds. We work with the Parish Paths Partnership and have acquired two new kissing gates and one new flight of steps down a steep slope in Nether Street. Our village Litter Picker (Mrs Jo English) has continued her sterling efforts to keep the village clean and tidy; but we all despair with the amount of

dog fouling that owners do not clear away. To that end we are hoping to install a second dog refuse bin in the centre of the village, as the large bin on the permissive pathway at Priory Farm seems to be making a difference to that regular dog walking area.

Cllr Babs Edwards has been working with the all the Plot holders on the Allotments, to reorganise the site so that each plot is a reasonable, workable piece of ground. The very wet weather this last year, has meant that much the field is wet, boggy and unusable. Together we are looking at ways to make the site more self-supporting. This is an ongoing operation, and another long-term project.

I should like to end this brief summary by personally thanking all my fellow Councillors, Paul, Babs, Neil and Glen for their help, support and patience; our County Councillor Roger Beeching and District Councillor Robert Brunton for their advice and financial support. The local gardening firm of Busy Lizzie's, which cares for the closed churchyard, and Mr. Jim Turner who cuts Benningfield Green. But especially Mr. Colin Marks who over the last twelve months has worked so hard to introduce the Widford Councillors to all the many changes in 2015/2016.

5 Parish group reports: There were no reports

6 Finance

Cllr Paul Riddle produced a pie chart showing the various areas of expenditure, copies of which were distributed along with copies of next year's budget. The Parish Clerk reported that the anticipated bank balance is £4,027 at year end, 30th March 2016, against an opening balance of £4,329. There had been a lot of unexpected expenditure during the year, including necessary safety work in the closed churchyard, and the Parish Council is therefore very pleased to have been able to maintain the bank balance. All finance documents are published on the Parish Council's website, including details of all expenditure, and a running accounts sheet reconciled against the bank statement. This detail is also recorded in the Minutes of every meeting, which again are published on the Council's website.

Noting that the 2016/17 budget included a second dog-waste bin, a parishioner asked if there was a record of how much the present dog bin was used. The Clerk said he would ask East Herts for that information. The Chairman said that the litter picker reported dog waste being deposited in litter bins, particularly at Benningfield Green, which would possibly be the location of the second dog-waste bin.

Also questioned was the budgeted expenditure for the allotment, particularly the difference between the 2015/16 budget of £750 and the actual spend of £262, and against that, a projected £500 for 2016/17. The Clerk explained that the Parish Council had not prepared a formal budget in previous years. However, this was a fundamental requirement of the auditing process, which has to take a three-year view. Therefore, in order to prepare that information for the audit, the previous year's expenditure had been used as a budgeting basis. The Chairman said that since the management and running of the allotment is being reorganised, as explained in her report earlier, it was necessary to budget for contingencies in the transitional period. Plans included the possible renting of plots that are unworkable for purposes other than horticultural and that would keep the area maintained and much tidier.

7 County and District Councillors' reports:

Report from County Councillor Roger Beeching MBE JP

My position at county council is that I am Vice-Chairman, so in this office I have to attend many functions such as civic services civic dinners, opening things, award ceremonies citizenship awards at Hatfield, lectures at Hertfordshire University and so on.

Committees that I am on or panels include the Adult Care and Health Scrutiny Committee, the Standards Committee, and the Monitoring Recommendations Topic Group. I also chair some of these panels.

Scrutinies that I have been involved in and chaired are the Public Health Integration group, Child Sexual Exploitation topic group, Autistic Spectrum topic group, HSCB HSAB Thriving Families topic group. I chaired IPP budget topic group - an investigation into the budget of public health localism and libraries. Also care pathways into diabetes and stroke.

Locality budget: I have again spent my £10,000 benefiting all types of community projects. There were approximately 15 of these this year.

Highways Locality Budget: here I have £90,000 to spend on various highway related projects. There were 20 of these, including TRO's resurfacing highways and footpaths, dropped kerbs, safety features consultations - these can be very expensive but they are democratically necessary, and street scene improvements.

Meetings there have been numerous: all full County Council meetings and all committees I belonged to; these are

approximately one a month sometimes full day meetings. Then the evening go to as many of the town council and parish council meetings that I can fit in. I rarely have an evening in during the week. Then, of course, there are the outside bodies which I represent on the County Council and have to attend their meetings as well. This leaves about a day and a half a week at home to prepare for meetings, reading papers and organising questions for other participants and witnesses. Sometimes it is difficult to decide what is important to read and what is not.

County Council finances

This year government grant was cut by £80,000,000 - this is 33%. Local government finance settlement has offered £7.8 million extra. To bridge this gap there will be a 1.99 % increase in council tax, meaning a band D property will pay £22.71 extra a year. This will help to pay for schools, roads, fire and rescue services, and so on. To meet the growing cost for care for elderly and vulnerable adults, our biggest spend at £311 million, we are taking up the government suggestion to raise an extra 2% on council tax, ringfenced to directly fund social care for adults. Even after all this we still have to save £124,000,000 over the next four years. This is on top of the £211,000,000 we have already saved since 2010 by being more efficient, innovative, and working more closely than ever with our partners.

Liaison

This takes place between town councillors and parish councillors by email or when I go to meetings. I try and give advice and cross fertilisation of ideas when this is required. I also will talk with District Councillors, especially those whose areas overlap with my division, and with the seven East Herts County Councillors; we all work together for the good of the district, particularly on the infrastructure, housing, roads, and transport.

Problems

These are continuous and ongoing. Unfortunately we do not always get the result that some residents might like to have, especially as rapidly as some would want either. I fully understand that any problem you're having is foremost in the resident's mind and the most pressing for them. As I have about 8 to 10 on the go at any one time I have to prioritise. Bureaucracy is not always the quickest in responding or in action, again unfortunately.

The problems I've had to deal with, in no particular order, have been in regard to housing, social services, school admissions, roads conditions, poor and illegal parking, speeding, dropping leaves in the autumn, blocked gullies, flooding, dog fouling, litter, noisy neighbours, contamination of water courses, various police matters, lack of services, planning matters, enforcement matters, badly placed signs, street signs both broken and stolen, and so on and so on. Your Highways manager is Raj Goutam.

No council services have been cut at the moment. The bus companies cut services that are not viable. For school admissions, 95% got their 1st - 4th choice.

It is a rich and varied life, never ever boring, and sometimes very tiring. It can however be very rewarding, especially when someone says thank you for what I have done for them, but this rarely happens.

I shall continue in the same vein for the next year. Thank you for your support.

County Councillor Roger Beeching

Report from District Councillor Robert Brunton

In Cllr Brunton's absence, the following report was read by the Chairman

I was privileged to be elected as your District Councillor last May and would like to thank all those who voted (for whatever party) as the turn-out was truly spectacular. I hope I've demonstrated that I serve all in the district irrespective of anyone's political preferences.

I currently represent the ward of Hunsdon on the following committees: Licencing & Licencing Sub-Committee, Corporate Business Scrutiny & Joint Scrutiny, Development Management Committee (reserve), Full Council, and serve on the District Plan Policy Group.

Licencing & Sub-Licencing: I have been involved in hearing and agreeing/not agreeing various licencing cases in regards to Taxis and Bars/Restaurants. All pretty exciting stuff and much formal training was involved.

Corporate Business Scrutiny & Joint Scrutiny: This involves our committees looking at and scrutinising the business of the council in regards to the accounting of various departments, reviewing budgets, seeking detail from officers and voting on whether any of this business should be 'called in' for our Executive to look at in a more formal manner.

Development Management Committee: This was a late calling due the resignation of a serving member. The Executive chose to appoint three reserve DMC members and rotate them on a meeting by meeting basis, or as

otherwise required. I've spoken on three occasions during the year and represented Hunsdon on two committees.

District Plan Policy Group: This group is set up to scrutinise the development of the wording/phrasing of the emerging District Plan although it has no powers of influence as to the areas affected/proposed within the actual plan.

The District Plan: This is due to go to public consultation in the second half of this year. The area at Gilson & Eastwick continues to form part of the emerging plan as does an area just to the North of Ware. The transport models are almost complete and will be fed into the emerging plan before public consultation. After the plan has gone through its public consultation and any adjustments allowed for, it will then be put to the Planning Inspectorate and hopefully be 'found sound' ready for adoption. Although I have my own reservations on major developments within the green belt I do intend to engage with any possible future provider to try and secure the best I can for our villages and residents.

In general I feed through the district information to the Parish Councils as and when I receive it from EHDC plus I've been able to help in releasing some old S106 monies and assisted where I can with a range of local concerns ranging from dog fouling to an out of hours bin collection. By far the most rewarding part of my role is helping any individual or groups with their grant applications and being able to endorse each of these as they come through.

I've attended as many meetings as I can on behalf of the ward and look forward to an exciting, interesting and challenging year ahead.

District Councillor Robert Brunton

Report by Police Sgt Duncan Wallace, East Herts Rural Neighbourhood Police Team

Sgt Wallace said that with 42 parishes scattered over a wide rural area, the ability to visit each parish even once a year with the limited number of officers available, presents a formidable problem. Rural policing in East Herts is extremely challenging due to the large area covered – East Herts being approximately 30% of the total area of the County - and there is a current compliment of just six Police Constables, eight PCSOs (with two vacancies), two Special Constables, plus three volunteers advising on specialist incidents and neighbourhood watch. Neighbourhood policing relies heavily on community support.

Widford remains a low crime area. There was an increase of five speeding offences over last year and two reported crimes so far in 2016 (one related to speeding and one to the keeping of horses). Recorded crime in East Herts as a whole was up 13.7% on the year to date, although it is unclear at the moment whether this is simply due to the government having changed the way crime is recorded. Reports involving off-road vehicles remains a problem, as does hare coursing, but the police continue to have some success in apprehending those involved, despite the difficulties of rural policing because, compared to urban crime, there are fewer witnesses, lack of CCTV etc. Operation Stomp has worked well as a means of raising awareness of potential crime risk and vulnerability and therefore crime prevention is an important key to success. The Neighbourhood Watch OWL system with online links and increased social media interaction prompts the dissemination of useful information. Reported incidents of fly-tipping are increasing across the whole district.

The Chief Constable is very supportive of rural crime work. Converting the aspirations of the public into reality is a continued aim. It is understood that the apprehension surrounding development is a rural tension that contrasts with the racial and ethnic tensions in urban areas. The practice of holding a police surgery at a given time and location has been dropped since it was not an effective use of police time and the response based approach is generally more productive.

Sgt Duncan Wallace

8 Neighbourhood Plan Report by Cllr Paul Riddle

If we were to start now we would not be able to put a Neighbourhood Plan in place for at least 18 months. However at the moment, and until the Draft District Plan is in place, a Neighbourhood Plan would not help us in any way.

Like many District Councils, East Herts has not been able to deliver a 5-year supply of housing land as required by their 2007 Regional Plan. The NPPF (National Planning Policy Framework) has a central theme that in the event in the failure of the district plan there is a presumption in favour of sustainable development and many of the policies in the 2007 Regional Plan are therefore invalid. This has led to the over-development in Buntingford and the development behind Wicklands in Hunsdon which has been recently approved.

Any planning application which challenges accepted planning policies is likely to go to appeal and may be costly to undertake and as a result the NPPF tends to favour larger projects undertaken by property developers. At the

moment our status as a Group 2 village affords us some protection but developers know that this might change.

It is essential that all villages in East Herts accept some growth and East Herts District Council have been trying to increase the number of Group 1 villages so that the pain is spread fairly. The initial evaluation was based on Topic Maps but this was found to be unworkable. The Village Hierarchy exercise replaced Topic Maps but this too has been widely criticised. East Herts District Council is therefore in discussions with Parish Councils to find a fair way to achieve the development target.

The Parish Council has also been told that as a result of the Village Hierarchy study, Widford may not be reclassified and found to remain as a Group 2 village.

At a recent meeting with East Herts District Council we confirmed that Widford was not adverse to reasonable development, even if we were to remain as a Group 2 village, but we were very concerned that we could be in danger of aggressive over-development especially if this involved larger property developers.

It was suggested that a very small parish such as Widford could produce a very short Neighbourhood Plan that only covers the village boundary and perhaps some planning issues. This may be less work and less expensive, but these do tend to be the most controversial issues.

The decision as to whether or not to produce a Neighbourhood Plan is a community decision, and to this end a public meeting would have to be held to decide the matter. If the consensus was to go for a Plan, it would not be for the Parish Council to drive it, but rather it would have to be community led. The Parish Council would help facilitate as necessary.

Cllr Paul Riddle

9 Open Forum

- A parishioner asked if there was anything to the suggestion that the allotment could be moved to the playing field and that the present allotment, in whole or in part, would be turned over to the stables. The Chairman confirmed there was absolutely no possibility of that happening.
- A parishioner raised concerns about a property adjacent to hers that appeared to be being used as a dump. The Chairman said the Parish Council was aware of the situation and understood that Paul Dean, East Herts' Principal Planning Enforcement Officer, was equally aware. The Chairman said she would be in touch with the parishioner and the Parish Council would report back with any information it obtained.
- Concerns were raised about the mobile home that had been moved on to the stable site since its size was far in excess of what was considered necessary for comfort breaks for stables workers and had every appearance of being accommodation. It was said that East Herts had previously refused permission for a mobile home on the site. There were also concerns about a guard dog having escaped. The Chairman said that Parish Council had met with East Herts and it was understood that the Planning Enforcement Officer and members of his team had attended the site and that there was ongoing dialogue with the owner and his agent, who had been helpful and constructive. In response, it was commented that there is a lack of enforcement by East Herts. The Chairman replied that no breach of the law had been determined at the time of speaking, although the time frame in which certain actions had to take place was being closely monitored by EHC. The Parish Council has no powers to intervene directly, but was doing everything possible to represent the concerns of the community.
- It was commented that the village magazine's advertisement for the meeting gave the starting time as 8pm. There was an apology for any misunderstanding caused, but it was noted that all posters and notices had given the correct start time of 7.15pm.

The Chairman thanked everyone for attending and closed the meeting at 8.45pm. She announced a short refreshments break before the commencement of the Full Parish Council Meeting.

Signed.....Dated.....