

KNEBWORTH PARISH COUNCIL

MINUTES of Meeting of the Annual Parish Meeting held on the 1 May 2024 at Knebworth Village Hall at 8.00 p.m.

Present: Councillors Roger Willcocks (Chairman), Adrienne Charter, Charlotte Cosson, Steve Hemingway, Alexander Hurwitz, Paul Jobling, Colin Stringer, Paul Ward

In attendance: Jodee White (Clerk) plus around 75 members of the public

1.	<p>Apologies</p> <p>Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Paul Jobling.</p>
2.	<p>Chairman's Welcome</p> <p>Good evening, ladies, and gentlemen, I'm Roger Willcocks and I'm the Chairman of Knebworth Parish Council.</p> <p>This is the Annual Parish Meeting for the Knebworth voting district; the Local Government Act, 1972 says we must hold a meeting every year, and if the area has a Parish Council, its chairman will take charge. It does, and here I am.</p> <p>This is a Public Meeting for the people of the Knebworth, not a council meeting; but the council members are here to hear what you have to say and to answer your questions.</p> <p>We also have representatives from some other local groups who will say a few words about their activities later.</p> <p>But before we get started, there's a small amount of administrative paperwork we need to do.</p>
3.	<p>Minutes</p> <p>Proposed by Cllr Ward, seconded by Cllr Stringer and</p> <p>Resolved: that the minutes of the meeting of the Annual Parish Meeting held on 3 May 2023 be approved as a true record.</p>
4.	<p>Chairman's Report</p> <p>Before I start, can I thank the Link-up-lunch club group for serving tea and biscuits this evening.</p> <p>I hope you all got a copy of our Newsletter. I'll try not to repeat too much of what it says.</p> <p>The Parish Council employs a Clerk, an Assistant Clerk, a groundsman who looks after the recreation grounds, and two cleaning staff. The Clerk is the person who gets things done, following regular discussion with the councillors, usually at monthly council meetings.</p> <p>There are twelve councillors who are elected, but unpaid, volunteers. They're elected for a four-year term. The last election was in 2022 so the current council still has two years to run.</p> <p>They are Parish Councillors, members of Knebworth Parish Council; they shouldn't be confused with our District Councillors, who are up for election tomorrow, although sometimes there's some overlap.</p> <p>Let me introduce your Parish Council Members:</p> <p>Adrienne Charter, Alexander Hurwitz, Charlotte Cosson, Colin Stringer (Chairman of Amenities committee), James Cameron (who only joined us a couple of weeks ago), Jeremy Godfrey, Lisa Nash, Paul Jobling, Paul Ward (Chairman of Planning committee), Phil Farr, Steve Hemingway.</p>

The job of Councillors is mainly to listen to and advise the Clerk. If you were at last year's meeting, you will remember me telling you we had just employed a new Clerk, who had a vertical learning curve ahead of her. Sadly, that didn't work out, and the following months were a difficult time for the Council; we didn't do a lot of things which we hoped we'd do.

Happily, we've since found Jodee White, who has a background in local council administration; she is doing a great job of bringing our operation into the second quarter of the 21st century. Thank you, Jodee.

What we, as Councillors, would like to get from this meeting is an idea of what you think about various things, because it's the Council's job to represent you and make decisions on your behalf.

People often think the Parish Council makes decisions about planning applications; it doesn't, we can't, it's out of our hands. Planning decisions are made by North Herts Council. All we can do is comment in the same way as you; and we must stick to things that are relevant to the planning process. Paul will talk some more about the planning situation shortly, and tell you about our Neighbourhood Plan, which does give us a small amount of persuasive power.

The Council makes some of its income from renting out the village hall and the football pitches; It also receives about four percent of your Council Tax from which it pays its staff, maintains the village hall and pavilion; maintains the recreation grounds including the football pitches; runs a small blue tractor - which is turning out to be a bit of a money sink - and maintains sundry items such as the toilets behind the Co-Op, and various benches around the village. As I said before, the Councillors themselves are not paid.

Knebworth Parish Council also owns the freehold of the Station Pub, which it bought in 2020, and rents out the building to a professional landlord. The pub covers its costs; it isn't paid for through your Council Tax.

You might have picked up a written financial summary for last year. I'm not going to go through it line by line, but if you have any questions, we'll do our best to answer them when we get to Q&A.

As I said, we didn't get to do a lot of things we wanted to do last year, so there was an underspend compared to our budget; and because the village hall brought in more than we expected the Council has been able to top up its reserves to a sensible level. The reserves were depleted during the covid shutdown when the hall was shut for several months but we're getting back to normal. We do, however, expect costs to rise over the upcoming year so we've had to increase the Precept by a relatively large amount in percentage terms, although it comes to about pound per household per month in absolute terms.

The Parish Council has very little real power. It has objected at every opportunity to land around the village losing its Green Belt protection: it's paid for expert representation at the planning inquiries; but the Local Plan boat has sailed. The land to the East and to the West of the village no longer has green belt protection.

The Council has also objected to the outline application for the land East of Knebworth; Paul will, I think expand on that.

The Council wants to get the best outcome it can from new developments; it has working group which is in regular contact with local landowners and uses its soft power as best it can. But as I said earlier, it has no decision-making powers.

Another thing that's out of its hands is the train system. Before the covid shutdown there were a small number of fast trains in the morning and evening, some of which were first stop Kings Cross. These were Thameslink-branded services. Many people have asked if they'll be coming back; our understanding is the East Coast mainline timetable for trains to Scotland -- which pass through Knebworth -- needs to be finalised first, and that's been held up because some northern stations would get a reduced service.

	<p>It looks like a planned timetable update at the end of this year has been postponed; we have no further information right now.</p> <p>Parking is a perennial issue; the Council has been trying for several years to arrange (and pay for) half an hour's free parking behind the Co-Op. That's stalled because North Herts are having an election, but there's a good chance something will happen this year.</p> <p>All in all, it's been a quiet year, the major planning applications didn't arrive as expected, but they're going to be here soon, and we'll probably hold some number of Public Meetings over the coming months. The Council will also need to pay for expert help in responding to the applications in an effective manner.</p> <p>I'll now hand over to Colin, to let us know what the Amenities committee has been up to. projects.</p>
5.	Committee Updates
5.1	<p>Amenities Committee - Colin Stringer</p> <p><u>Village Hall</u></p> <p>The Hall continues to be well used, including recently taking on a few new regular hirers. We have made improvements to facilities, including a new freezer, fridge, and microwave.</p> <p>A set of second-hand but serviceable chairs was gifted to the Council in the past year but, frankly, these are a good example of the fact that the mouth of a gift horse should be examined as they are very heavy and are more of a hindrance than an asset. We will be looking at other 'seating solutions' in the coming year.</p> <p>We plan to improve the interior and exterior of the Hall in the coming months or so. The Clerk has requested that, where required, all windows and wooden surrounds are repaired and repainted.</p> <p>The external lights on the hall were causing an issue with neighbours but I am pleased to report that these problems have now been resolved.</p> <p><u>Recreation Grounds</u></p> <p>Residents in roads adjoining the rec should have noticed an improvement in parking on days when there are football matches. This is a result of discussions between the Council and the Football Club, who are now staggering the timing of matches.</p> <p>Most of you have probably visited the main recreation ground off Watton Road but you may not be aware that the Council is also responsible for the Lytton Fields Play space and the King George V Playing Field in Old Knebworth. Anti-social behaviour in all three sites has improved but we are still seeing a considerable amount of litter, as people seem unable to use the bins provided.</p> <p>The Council recently paid for the replacement of the bench on the corner of Station Approach and Gun Lane, and we will also be looking to replace any bench in the recreation grounds that has fallen into disrepair. If any resident would like to sponsor a replacement bench, with a plaque in memory of a loved one or friend, do, please, contact the Clerk.</p> <p>Personally, I keep well away from Facebook but those who frequent it tell me that there has been a lot of chatter about the possibility of a skate park in the rec and I thought it would be helpful to clarify the position. At a meeting last year, a member of the public shared his aspirations with the Council at one of our meetings. There is, currently, no proposal on this topic and so it has not been on the agenda of any meeting and so, as a result, has not been the topic of any formal discussion.</p> <p>There are many factors that will have to be considered, should any formal application ever be made, not the least of which will be planning permission and insurance.</p>

	<p>We have recently put a time-activated lock on the toilet on the side of the pavilion. This means that it will now be open at weekends and when the groundsman is not available to open it.</p> <p>We have recently received an enquiry about CCTV for the main recreation ground, a topic much discussed over the past few years. In the coming year we will, again, be investigating the costs involved in implementing this.</p> <p>Finally, an issue that is perennial but, nonetheless, important as it can lead to serious health issues or death.</p> <p>Unfortunately, dog poo continues to be an issue in all three sites, and I would urge all residents to be vigilant and to report any ‘transgressors’ to the Clerk, with, if possible, photographic evidence. If you are a dog-owner and you think that it is acceptable for your dog to do its business at the base of a tree or in an unmown area, spare a thought for the groundsman, Andrew, who must strim those areas.</p> <p><u>Allotments</u></p> <p>I am delighted to report that all plots are now taken, and we have several names on the waiting list. Being a neighbour to the Allotment Site myself, I can report that the plots have never looked neater and better tended.</p> <p>The Council has established a good working relationship with the Knebworth Allotment Society and has two meetings a year, to which all plot-holders are invited. The Council recently gave a grant to the Society for a shed that will be located on the site. This will mean that plot-holders can leave their tools at the site, rather than having to carry them down there on each visit.</p>
5.2	<p>Planning and Environment Committee – Paul Ward</p> <p>Welcome – as ever planning is a hot topic for the community here. I will cover</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what we do and highlight major applications impacting the parish, • progress on the Local Plan from North Herts District Council and the new housing proposals, • explain what we are doing now on our separate Neighbourhood Plan for the parish. • talk about other relevant consultations and applications. <p><u>What the Planning and Environment Committee Does</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • North Herts Council is the Local Planning Authority. They decide upon planning applications. • We are a statutory consultee on planning applications in the Parish, so we have a degree of influence and “soft power”. • The planning applications we saw range from many smaller residential property improvements through to larger developments. • We listen carefully to what neighbours and other residents tell us. • If there are no objections from neighbours, and we see no obvious breach of planning guidelines in an application we are unlikely to raise objections. • We are available to be contacted, and all our meetings are open to the public if they wish to present their views in person. <p><u>What has been going on over the last year?</u></p> <p>I’m going to start with the things with biggest overall impact.</p> <p><u>North Hertfordshire District - Local Plan update</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is the most significant planning matter impacting the future of the village. • The Local Plan for North Herts District was approved in November 2022.

- This has already changed the boundary of the main village and removed green belt status from three sites to the West and East of the village, to help meet the district's overall housing needs.
- The Local Plan allocates land for approximately 600 new houses plus a new primary school on the west side.
- Old Knebworth is identified limited in-filling only.
- The rest of the parish remains designated Green Belt.

There are three main sites.

- KB1 – west behind Deards End Lane
- KB2 – west, behind Gypsy Lane: homes & primary school
- KB4 – east of the village, homes, and secondary school allocation

Over the last year, I and other Parish Councillors have been talking to the landowners, developers and NHC to understand their plans. We hope to influence them in how the houses get built, for good outcomes for the village.

This is one of the reasons our Neighbourhood Plan is important, because it lays out how we would like development to look going forwards.

KB4: Site KB4 to the East is now subject to a formal planning application, which is still in progress.

We objected to the previous two sets of proposals due to access issues including such as the impact on Swangley's Lane and Watton Road, because the impact on the school and then the impact on the Watton Road and village from updated plans. There is a revised planning application for this site – reference 23/01552/OP – it has just been updated. The Parish Council has not yet agreed a response, but we will do so.

The key dates for everyone to respond are 23rd May for neighbours that have been written to by NHC and 18th May for everyone else.

From what we have seen, updates have been made following completion of a Site master planning process with NHC and a body called Design Southeast review panel. However, the Parish Council has not been consulted during this process. Based on the previous submissions, we are concerned that the design of this site should reflect the character and heritage of Knebworth, which we have already got agreed in our Neighbourhood Plan and want to see followed.

Sites KB1 and KB2

- These two were subject to informal consultation by the developers in 2022 but no planning applications have been made.
- From our discussions with the landowners and developers we expect the following rough timetable.
- There will be another public consultation in the Summer.
- This will be followed by formal outline planning in the Autumn this year, and more detailed planning application in early 2025.

Local Plan sites and traffic issues

One of the key points being discussed about these sites is the access routes in and out of them, and how this impacts traffic in the village centre.

- So how do we try and influence what happens?
- We have been discussing this at the Parish Council a couple of times in the last year. We are trying to balance concerns including:
- Maintaining the viability of the shops in the village centre
- Not making the existing traffic problems worse
- Support improved cycling and walking within the village

- We have decided that the Parish Council supports the principle of creating alternative relief roads for local traffic through or around the Local Plan sites.
- This is to access the B197 avoiding the village centre, but whilst encouraging sustainable modes of travel within the village.
- Whilst we are not in charge of planning or own the developments, we are trying to influence the people that are to deliver on this principle.
- We do not know if we can make this a reality, but we are already trying.

There have also been some related developments with residents on this:

- There has been a petition to Herts County Council – who run Highways - about trying to solve the traffic issues in the village centre by widening the road. The feedback from HCC is that this is not feasible and expensive.
- However, we have already been trying to make things better for residents in the short term with two actions:
- We are awaiting a date for a Traffic Regulation Order to allow the Parish Council to pay for 30 minutes free parking in St Martins Lane car park.
- I have asked HCC Highways to investigate improving the layout of the parking spaces to try and help traffic flow better – they are looking into this.
- We are aware that a Deards End Lane Residents' Association has been formed and is making representations about the traffic impact on that lane.

Our Neighbourhood Plan

- Our Neighbourhood Plan is in force since 2022, after an overwhelming referendum vote of support of 83.9% vote of support.
- This means that officially planning officers must take it into account when assessing any planning applications in the parish.
- I'm glad to report that we have now started to see evidence of that happening as it has been referred to in the justification of Planning Officers deciding on several planning applications, including refusing housing proposals on Pondcroft Road for example – which the Parish Council also objected to.
- However, there were some policies that we had to remove from our Neighbourhood Plan on request of the Planning Inspector that reviewed it.
- We have now started a process to review our new Neighbourhood Plan with the intention of making limited changes to add back in some of the topics we wanted to cover.
- Our Neighbourhood Plan team and expert consultants have already assessed 15 policies from our current plan, and we are now working on draft amendments.
- These will be consulted on again and the process will take 12-18 months.
- If we get these agreed, it will add further policies to help influence the direction of all future development in our village.
- Whilst a lot of people will have subjective views on what should or should not be done, we need as many facts as we can get to help those in charge of highways budgets make sensible overall decisions.

Other planning matters

Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan

- The County and District councils together ran a public consultation in 2022 on a Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan – known as the “LCWIP”.
- The Parish Council has been raising awareness of this as there are some significant implications for Knebworth.
- This includes the B197 and some other local roads, with intent to improve access for walking and cycling facilities for our community.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After overwhelming feedback from residents, the Parish Council, shopkeepers, and others some of the proposed changes for Knebworth were removed. These mainly related to removing the parking in the high street to aide traffic. • However, we will continue to support improvements elsewhere to help sustainable travel – making is safer for walking and cycling in the village. • But we recognise people need to use their cars too in a semi-rural village. <p>Other developments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The build of the housing at the Odyssey health club is proceeding. • An outline planning application for the erection of up to 9 dwellings on Park Lane near the A1M bridge is in progress. The Parish Council supports the retention of the existing building but is concerned about the access proposals onto Park Lane, also considering the likely access for KB1 and KB2. We want to maintain the scene there as a key entry point to the village. Similar concerns have been raised by the develops in their comments. <p>Overall, it is a busy time, and we are expecting to see significant proposals coming forward in the next year. We will continue to do our best to raise awareness of these and represent the whole local community, working hard to make sure that development is fit for purpose for Knebworth and aligns to our Neighbourhood Plan.</p>
6.	<p>Short talk by the Knebworth Environmental group</p> <p>Knebworth Environmental group gave a short talk on their group and were also present at the back of the hall for further information if required.</p>
7.	<p>Questions</p> <p><i>Q: The mini roundabout at the exit to the Odyssey development has not been built. This exit is a dangerous route. Can the PC advise if there has been a variation to the planning application and if they have seen it?</i></p> <p>A: There have been no new planning applications, but the condition of the previous application will need to be checked. Graham Dormer advised that he had been in touch with Senior Project advisors at Croudace and that they were supposed to hear from the audit team at Hertfordshire Highways, but the developers are still awaiting, and they have no detail on creation of the roundabout. Cllr Ward agreed to follow this up.</p> <p><i>Q: The LCWIP is in the minutes from last year's Parish meeting can the Council advise on what progress that has been made on this from last year.</i></p> <p>A: Cllr Ward advised that this went to cabinet at NHC, and changes were approved that included not removing the London Road village centre parking, but they had not heard anything further and there was no further update.</p> <p><i>Q: Will comments already submitted on the KB4 planning application need to be done again or will they still be taken into consideration?</i></p> <p>A: Cllr Ward said that there had been 25 changes to the application and that there was only a need to comment on the changes but that this was worth doing and that comments would need to be submitted in the next 3 weeks.</p> <p><i>Q: Proposals from a member of the public show a possible relief road but what would be better is a master plan for all the developments as the Eastern development has no provision for a relief road. Have the Parish Council approached the landowners regarding co-operation on a relief road?</i></p>

A: Cllr Ward said that the Parish Council were in regular contact with the landowners but has no power to make things happen other than attempting to bring it to HCC Highways' and NHDC's consideration, but this may be better if it is a publicly driven initiative predicated by landowner agreement.

Henry Lytton-Cobbold said that Highways have not always agreed and are a potential barrier to providing improved access through the developments.

Q: Do you get any information given to you regarding developments from services such as the Fire Service as I have been told that they have not been consulted?

A: Cllr Willcocks advised that the developments and such discussions are the responsibility of HCC Highways and the Planning Authority (NHDC). The Planning Application for the KB4 site is an outline plan so only certain matters are decided at this stage i.e. regarding access roads etc.... and further details will come later. The Health and Safety Executive is a statutory consultee for Planning Applications so they would monitor emergency services requirements.

Q: Will the Parish Council consult with the community regarding a relief road?

A: The Parish Council will have to consider this at future Parish Council meetings. Cllr Ward noted that discussions have been started with adjacent Parish Councils. Following a further request from a member of the public, it was proposed by Cllr Ward and seconded by Cllr Stringer to hold a show of hands in support of the principle of creating alternative relief roads for local traffic through or around the Local Plan sites, as Cllr Ward described in his report. A show of hands was taken and a near unanimous support for the principle was given. One resident talked about the negative aspects of a relief road to the environment.

Q: What is the blocker re the relief road with the Highways agency?

A: Cllr Ward explained that there is a current Highways policy (LTP4) promoting sustainable transport and a hierarchy of road users. Whilst our adopted Neighbourhood Plan promotes sustainable travel, we have to recognise that we live in a semi-rural environment and some car use is necessary, but we want to encourage walking and cycling especially within the village. Henry Lytton-Cobbold noted that LTP4 makes it harder for car drivers that are essential for those in rural communities. LTP5 policy is due out and is set to have even tougher measures.

Q: Parking around the Recreation Ground area on football match days has improved somewhat due to the staggered start times but there is still an overlap and parking is still for longer periods. It has been noted that extra games have been granted, is this just for this season or longer?

A: Cllr Stringer advised that the Parish Council are currently trying to arrange a meeting with the football club to get clarity on this matter.

Q: The LTP4 policy conflicts with safety measures, common sense and money is being wasted on potholes.

A: Cllr Willcocks advised that this is a Highways matter at County Council level and that they are responsible. It was requested that someone from Highways attend the next Parish meeting.

Q: The PCSO report distributed at this meeting shows times when police have attended. Are concert events included in the data?

A: Cllr Willcocks advised that they check on this as they had not produced the report.

Q: Is the dredging of the pond going ahead?

A: Cllr Stringer advised that there is a need to do some work on the Northerly edge of the pond due to some erosion and blocks will hopefully be put in to shore up the bank.

The work has been delayed due to the recent wet weather, but it is hoped that it can commence soon.

Q: There is also a bus stop in Nup End that has no shelter, what is being done about this? There is also a hedge leading down to the KGV playing fields that needs cutting back.

A: We don't believe that this area falls in the Parish, but we will investigate it and raise accordingly.

Q: Is there a schedule for gully cleaning and road sweeping?

A: Cllr Willcocks advised that they ask Highways for a schedule but that any issues can also be reported on the Hertfordshire County Council website, and they will visit twice a year. The portal is called Fix My Street, and the issue is passed on to the relevant authority.

The Village Festival is on the 8-15th June with a Funday at the Recreation Ground on the 15th of June, and Cllr Willcocks encouraged people to come along.

The Parish Council will continue to work with our District Councillors following the elections tomorrow.

Cllr Willcocks thanked the public for attending the meeting

There being no further business. The meeting closed at 9.15pm.