

KNEBWORTH PARISH COUNCIL

MINUTES of the Annual Parish Meeting held on 1 May 2019 in Knebworth Village Hall at 8.00 p.m.

Present: Cllrs Roger Willcocks (Chairman), Adrienne Charter, Philip Farr, Jeremy Godfrey, Stephen Hemingway, Colin Stringer, Paul Ward

In attendance: The Clerk and sixty eight members of the public

1. Welcome by the Chairman

Good evening ladies and gentleman. Welcome to Knebworth Parish Council's Annual General Meeting. My name is Roger Willcocks, and I'm Chairman of the Council. Thank you very much for coming out to see us this evening.

This meeting is an opportunity for you to hear what the Parish Council has been doing upon your behalf over the past year. It is also a chance for you to ask us questions, to hold us to account, and to give us a clear sense of how we can best represent you in the future.

2. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Mrs Conybeare and Mrs Nash. Apologies for lateness Mrs Harrison.

3. Approval of the Minutes - Annual Parish Meeting 2 May 2018

Proposed by Mr Ward, seconded by Mrs Godfrey and

Resolved: that the minutes of the Annual Parish Meeting, held on the 2 May 2018, be taken as read and approved as a true record.

4. Chairman's Report

The members of the parish council are elected, but unpaid; most of us also have a full time job. Our main responsibility is the wise spending of that small part of your Council Tax we get each year, out of which we have to maintain the recreation grounds and pavilion, the village hall, the toilet in the car park and various other bits and pieces, such as the Christmas lights.

We are also consulted on planning matters and we sometimes pay for professional assistance if we need to write a detailed response.

But first things first, let me introduce you to your council members:

Jenny Harrison - our vice chairman, Paul Ward - chairman of the planning committee
Colin Stringer - chairman of the amenities committee, Lisa Nash - who's also a North Herts district councillor, Rosemary Conybeare, Stephen Hemingway, Philip Farr
Paul Jobling, Jeremy Godfrey, Adrienne Charter, Chris Trowbridge

Councillors are elected every four years, and the next election is due in 2022. There wasn't an election last year because there were fewer candidates than there were seats available. Our job as councillors is too mainly to listen and advise; the clerk is the person who actually gets things done. Claire has been doing that for a long time now and she is very good at it. We would be lost without her. Thank-you Claire.

Looking back at last year's minutes, I said that it was the lull before the storm - the North Herts Local Plan Enquiry in Public had just finished and we were waiting to see what changes the inspector wanted. These have turned out to be relatively minor, although Knebworth is now described as a 'growth village', and it seems very likely that the Green Belt boundary surrounding Knebworth will be rolled back and we'll be on the receiving end of several hundred new homes over the next ten years. But we still have an opportunity to influence the finer details of the developments through our Neighbourhood Plan, which Paul will tell us about in a moment. Work has finally started at the Chas Lowe site on the High Street, where McCarthy and Stone are building more than forty retirement flats above and behind three new shops; and twelve flats are being built on the site of the old Billiards factory by the station. This is going to be taller than we would have liked - North Herts overrode our objections there.

And work has begun on the new surgery, on the site of the current library; the library is temporarily living in the church but will move back across the road when the new building is completed.

Some things have been predictably shambolic. North Herts decided they would charge for brown bin collection but didn't seem to know who had paid and who hadn't; Lisa did a fine job of chasing them to sort themselves out; and this time last year we had just got new trains and were looking forward to a new timetable with some trains going through St Pancras. That also turned out to be a complete disaster, although things seem better now. Another new timetable is due to start on the 19th May. Let's see how it goes.

Parking continues to be an issue; as ever we are open to any suggestions you might have.

And finally, there's the Station Pub. That's been sitting empty for more than two years now. As was widely expected the developers appealed against North Herts refusing planning permission, and the parish council, together with the SOS pub group, shared evidence and costs to oppose the development at a planning inquiry last December. There has been some speculation on how much we spent, the final bill was approximately thirty thousand pounds which was split 50/50 between the Parish Council and the SOS pub group. Sadly we lost the appeal, and outline permission was granted to build nine flats on the garden.

The Parish Council set its budget in December 2017. The main capital project for the year was to install CCTV in the recreation grounds, due to a number of setbacks this did not happen but it is hoped that will be realised this year. The Council upgraded the Christmas Lights in the tree on St Martins Green; it was the eighteenth year that it has installed lights on the High Street and Station Road and costs the parish around £5500. It continues to maintain St Martins Road Public Toilets, which is subject to bouts of vandalism. The management accounts are showing a net gain of £34,026, bringing reserves to £302,676, draft accounts are available.

5. Reports from Committee Chairmen

5.1 Amenities Committee – Colin Stringer

This has been my first year as Chairman of the Amenities Committee and I must admit that I have been surprised by the disparate nature of the topics that are discussed at the meetings. There are two main responsibilities of the Committee: the Hall and the Recreation Grounds but 'Other' covers a vast array of matters.

Village Hall

The Parish Office is not large enough for the Clerk and her assistant and has no real space for storage. With this in mind plans were commissioned for a new Parish Office which will be located at the rear of the car park to the right of the Hall. Planning permission has been obtained and the Council will determine, within the coming year, how to proceed to finance the extension.

The lighting and sound systems in the Hall are inadequate for the demands made on them and the stage lighting, in particular, is well past its sell-by date. Quotes are being sought to revamp these systems entirely and progress should be seen within the coming year.

Recreation Grounds

Over the course of the past year we have had a number of incidences of people abusing the facilities. Dog fouling is a perennial issue but drone flying and golf practice are other examples. The aerial runway is currently out of commission yet again due to damage to the seat by dogs and the groundsman recently had to point out to one person that the children's play equipment at the Lytton Fields recreation ground is not intended as an assault course for their dog! The problem with common sense is that it is not always that common and, with this in mind, the Council has obtained quotes for the installation of CCTV equipment at the Watton Road Recreation Ground. We have invested a lot of money on behalf of the community and it is important that those assets are protected and that other types of Anti-Social Behaviour are discouraged. New notices have been erected at all three grounds, clearly setting out the rules for use of the facilities.

There has been more than one occasion on which people wanting to use the facilities have been unable to park alongside the access road as all places were taken by the cars of people parking there for the whole day. This is clearly unacceptable and we have now introduced a maximum stay of 3 hours between 09:00 and 18:00 on weekdays.

Other

Taking advantage of a grant that was available from Hertfordshire County Council, a group of Councillors put together a new booklet of walks within the Parish. The booklet includes three separate walks, one of which incorporates the new public footpath from Knebworth Park to Norton Green. Copies of this booklet are available from the parish Office and I am delighted to report that people have already been spotted walking the three routes, clutching a copy of the booklet.

5.2 Planning and Environment – Mr Paul Ward

Welcome – it is getting very busy in Knebworth with planning matters. I will cover what we do, progress on the Local Plan from North Herts District Council and the new housing proposals, progress on our separate Neighbourhood Planning for the parish. Some other applications impacting life of residents in the parish. I will also be inviting Clint Bull and Graham Dormer from the Neighbourhood Planning team to talk about progress and feedback from the recent Open Day

5.2.1 What the Planning and Environment Committee Does

North Herts District Council is the Local Planning Authority. They decide upon planning applications. They also develop the Local Plan overall for the district with all the housing proposals in it for expansion. We do not. We are consulted like everyone is. We are a statutory consultee on planning applications, so we have a degree of influence.

The planning applications we saw over the year range from many smaller residential property improvements through to large commercial developments. We listen carefully to what neighbours and other local 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 of our meetings are open to the public if they wish to present their views in person.

5.2.2 North Hertfordshire District - Local Plan update

It is the most significant and controversial planning matter impacting us. Knebworth is part of the Local Plan for North Hertfordshire. It is a plan for future development to 2031 drawn up by the District Council. The Local Plan is now at an advanced stage of development, and is likely to come into force over the next year, although this is not certain. The Local Plan has been going through review by Planning Inspectorate.

Reminder of Impact on Knebworth

The new part of Knebworth was classified as a Category A village. And is now called a "Growth" village in the latest Local Plan. This means that general development will be allowed within a re-defined settlement boundary i.e. Knebworth will be expanded by changing the Green Belt boundary to allow for more housing. Old Knebworth is identified as a Category B village – limited in-filling only. The rest of the parish is designated Green Belt.

There are four main sites, three of which are currently Green Belt.

- KB1 – north west behind **Deards End Lane**: 200 homes
- KB2 – west, behind **Gypsy Lane**: 184 homes & primary school
- KB3 – the **Chas Lowe** site in the village centre, which is already being developed for a retirement home.
- KB4 – **east of the village**, 200 homes and space for a potential secondary school as part of the Local Plan proposals

The total of proposals in current Local Plan is 736 homes, of which 598 new.

This is an increase of 73 from the previous proposals, but this is due to the passage of time and additional approved planning applications in the Parish.

However this does not mean this is exactly what gets built

As an example, In the Local Plan it still states the Chas Lowe site

KB3 is for 14 homes. However, this just means that land can be used for housing. The latest Local Plan also says that the land use must not impact parking on the High Street as a condition. However, the reality is that NHDC have already approved the planning application for a residential home creating just under 50 apartments instead. And this is being built now.

There are other redevelopments taking place too, for example the old Hamilton's business, the old Surgery, and Station House (not pub). In the case of Hamilton's there have been repeated planning applications with changes in and we have been objecting to what we saw as excessive and unreasonable development with a degree of success in getting changes.

There is more nearby development likely to impact Knebworth. This is due to proposals in the north end of Woolmer Green (220homes), Bragbury End (770 homes) and Codicote (315homes). All told we expect there could be well over 1000 new homes in and around Knebworth over the next 5-10 years. This is over 50% increase.

Changes in the Local Plan impacting Knebworth

During the last year the Parish Council has been working on your behalf to make our views known:

We have used professional help in writing responses to the proposals. This followed an Examination in Public where we presented our case. Our position remains that we believe that alternatives are available to so much use of Green Belt land, and we have serious concerns about the lack of hard safeguards to provide all the infrastructure to support the growth. Unfortunately many of our concerns have not resulted in changes.

Some things we have successfully lobbied for change are:

- Proposals for new sites will have to consider the cumulative impact on the village for traffic, as well as improvements for walking / cycling access under the railway line.
- The proposed location of a new Primary School on Gypsy Lane site KB2 is moved away from immediate vicinity of the A1 (M).
- Visual Green Belt impact on KB1 is also to be minimised.

Our concerns

The Parish Council still has a number of overall concerns which we have made representations to the District Council and the Planning Inspector on.

Unnecessary use of Green Belt land around the village when alternatives are available without demonstrating exceptional circumstances.

Disproportionate scale of the cumulative developments relative to the current village, when including the adjacent proposals by NHDC & WHBC.

Lack of specific infrastructure policy proposals for Knebworth to make this development sustainable. There is a risk overall that delivery of the all the Local Plans may fundamentally change the character and identity of the village.

What is next?

We now await the planning inspector's final findings. It is likely that in some form it will go ahead and be approved possibly within a few months to a year from now. At that point we may expect to see specific planning applications for the sites as they will no longer be in the Green Belt area. We may not have agreed with the district's approach but if and when it is set, we have to cope with it. This is from many perspectives including design, infrastructure and funding for social good in our community.

5.2.3 So what are we doing about it for Knebworth?

There are two specific, related actions we are taking about this:

Firstly, this time last year I said it was very important that we start to work collaboratively with the major landowners to the East and West. We have started this process and have had positive initial discussions. We will keep on doing this to seek the best outcomes for the parish with these potential developments and potential planning gains that may arise.

Secondly, we have made great progress this year on the Neighbourhood Planning activity. This is different to the district's Local Plan and housing proposals. It allows parish councils to take the lead in creating a plan containing specific policies for an individual community. However it is different from the Local Plan, this is only about Knebworth. A Neighbourhood Plan can influence the type of development that should happen in the neighbourhood. It can also define certain policies, for example design standards. However a plan cannot conflict with strategic policies in the district Local Plan or be used to prevent housing development in the Local Plan. It has to be considered in planning applications once created.

I'm now going to hand you over to Clint Bull, who chairs the Neighbourhood Planning group and Graham Dormer, who has been working on its proposals. Clint is going to provide a short overview of progress. Graham is going to cover the feedback from the recent public open day. They are both great examples of the huge effort many volunteers have put in over the last couple of years to help our community and help you. So I would first like to say a big thank you to everyone involved and hand you over to Clint Bull.

6. Neighbourhood Plan – Update

Clint Bull explained that the Neighbourhood Plan is sponsored by the Parish Council but is being prepared by a group of volunteers. The team is researching what local people want. The plan cannot stop the Local Plan but it can try to get sites well designed, sustainable and make great places to live. The group has engaged with various people, undertaking surveys and public exhibitions. Funding was obtained for AECOM, to produce a report on design and master planning. Draft policies have been produced and consulted on. He thanked all committee members and everyone who has contributed to surveys and feedback.

Graham Dormer reported that over 200 people attended the Open Day and 75% were supportive of the policies. From the feedback there will be some minor modification to the policies. However there still appears to be some confusion between the Local Plan and the Neighbourhood Plan. The NHDC Local Plan has been consulted on over last two years with hundreds of responses. It has identified that Knebworth will get 736 homes not Knebworth Neighbourhood Plan.

Comments from the Open Day flagged the inadequacy of the road and rail infrastructure to accommodate this amount of development. The Neighbourhood Plan can only make representations. The Neighbourhood Plan policies are trying to strengthen the Local Plan policy around the High Street so retain retail on the shop frontages.

There were a number of comments which cannot be implemented by the Neighbourhood Plan. e.g. a number of comments were made about wanting a wine bar. The NP can say where commercial units should be but cannot influence what type of business goes into them. He thanked everyone who provided feedback on the policies.

7. Station Pub

The Station pub has been sitting empty for more than two years now. The Parish Council registered the pub, with its garden, as assets of community value and we are committed to defending those assets to the best of our ability.

The Parish Council worked with the SosPub group to oppose a planning appeal by developers who wanted to build flats on the garden and convert the first floor of the pub into separate accommodation. That escalated into a full public inquiry and expert witnesses and barrister were appointed. However Developer won the appeal and was granted permission to build on the garden. But it was made very clear the pub itself must remain a pub, and it's now been put up for sale. And, because of the asset registration, there's a six month window during which it can only be sold to a local community group, or the parish council, although after that it can be sold to anybody. The SOSPub group have said that they intend to make an offer for the pub, and possibly, the garden and run it as a community venture.

But it's important to realise that the vendors could simply reject every offer. So the parish council are very seriously considering making a well-researched bid for the pub ourselves because, even if every offer's turned down, we would still be able to, in the words of the planning people, 'demonstrate viability' at any future inquiry.

The pub committee, which includes two external specialists, has inspected the building, arranged for an independent valuation, and is putting together a business plan. The Council can borrow money at low interest rates so we think it is do-able. It also needs to consult the community to make sure we're doing the right thing. I may ask for a show of hands.

The Council would not run the pub but lease it out, free of tie, to a local operator and use the rental income to repay the loan and interest. A couple of people have already told us they might be interested; and if you know of anybody, speak to one of us or send me an email. It will help us to show that there's real commercial interest out there.

It's also important that you understand that if the pub lost money we'd still have to pay back the loan and the precept would have to increase. In the worst case, if the building was just sitting empty, your council tax bill would need to increase by one or two pounds a month.

The way I look at it is if we didn't have a village hall, and this building came onto the market, the Parish Council would try to buy it. At the moment we don't have a pub, and the Station Hotel has come on the market. It's a local asset and it should be saved.

8. Questions & Answers

How much money would you have to spend to buy the pub and what projects would not proceed as a result?

We currently do not have a valuation. There will be negotiation with the owner, borrowing from central government, refurbishment costs and it would be leased out. It would be a separate venture so nothing else would be sacrificed, if we can get support, money and negotiate.

You mention a show of hands, how can we decide without all the information. You didn't tell us about spending money on the appeal.

The Parish Council registered the pub as an Asset of Community value. The Council made a decision to fight the planning appeal and was a joint rule 6 party with the SOSpub group to try to prevent Market Homes from building on the garden. The owner is currently asking £595,000 for the pub site, excluding the garden and unit 10. Some people consider this to be over inflated, and there is a need to renovate it.

I am confused, the SOSpub group is putting a bid in. Does it make sense for the Parish Council to raise funds through government borrowing to make a competitive bid?

The Parish Council is not the SOSpub group and the proposals are different. The Council is looking to operate it commercially, so it is fundamentally a different model to try to protect it to keep it for the community. Market Homes do not have to sell to anyone, but we do not intend to get into a bidding war.

Both parties want the pub, it is waste of money competing, you should join forces.

Commercially the more people who show interest, the higher the price, which could bankrupt it. How does this benefit the village?

We are not going against the SOSpub group. The Council is in a position to put forward a bid and buy the pub before the moratorium period expires. If the SOSpub group do not go forward, we would then be in a position in the village for best interest to go forward.

We have been co-operating with the SOSpub group, we are not trying to fight them. A community group and the Parish Council want to be in a position to submit a viable offer. It is an insurance policy if the SOSpub group do not submit a bid because it will be on the open market from the 19 August.

It there is not the support will the Council not buy the pub?

The Planning Inspector states that it must remain a pub.

Market Homes could try to hold onto the pub and try to convert it to residential by trying to demonstrate that it is not viable.

The price quoted is £595,000 plus VAT. Can you clarify if the council will have to pay VAT? The Public Works Loan board maximum borrowing is £500000. The only security to offer is only income revenue if this is insufficient from renting the burden will fall on the Council. Are there any other parish councils that have purchased a pub?

The Parish Council is VAT registered. Reed Parish Council has obtained borrowing approval to purchase the Cabinet at Reed.

If the show of hands fails it will be used against you.

The face of the village is changing. The Parish Council should be applauded. I think it is great that it is trying to protect the village community which is being diluted by more development.

Is there an argument for the Parish Council and the SOS PUB group to agree beforehand not to put the same bid forward?

The Chas Lowe site was identified in the Local Plan to have fourteen dwellings, but obtained approval for around fifty flats. Does this mean that the numbers will decrease on the rest of the sites?

No. In the Local Plan land is set aside for development with arbitrary numbers of dwellings per hectare depending on if it is a town or village. The planning applications will determine the numbers which could be considerably higher.

You mentioned that you are trying to limit the parking on the access road. Will this be monitored by the traffic wardens?

The Council will not use NHDC traffic wardens, it is investigating a company that can issue fines, similar to St Martins Church car park.

Two years ago I asked about additional seating in the village. Please can I have an update?

A seat has been purchased and is waiting to be installed on St Martins Green.

If there are going to be all these houses can we have more secure cycle racks in the village to ease traffic?

We are getting a cycle rack for the village hall. It sounds like a good policy for the Neighbourhood Plan.

There was no show of hands.

The chairman thanked everyone for attending the meeting.

There being no other business the meeting closed at 9.22 p.m.

Chairman _____

Date _____