

KNEBWORTH PARISH COUNCIL

MINUTES of the Virtual Annual Parish Meeting held on 5 May 2021 at 7.30 p.m.

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

In attendance: The Clerk and two members of the public

1. Chairman's Welcome

Good evening ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to Knebworth's Annual Parish Meeting (using 'annual' in its loosest sense). My name is Roger Willcocks and I'm Chairman of Knebworth Parish Council. Thank you very much for taking the time to attend this virtual meeting.

This is going to be fairly lightweight. We need to meet the legal requirement to have a Parish meeting before the end of May but Covid restrictions make it difficult to meet in person, and an exemption to hold virtual meetings will expire in a couple of days.

We very much intend to hold a normal, in-person, meeting in the village hall later this year when the Covid restrictions allow.

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

Paul Ward, Colin Stringer, Rosemary Conybeare, Stephen Hemingway, Philip Farr, Paul Jobling, Jeremy Godfrey, Adrienne Charter and Charlotte Cosson.

2. Apologies for Absence

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

2. Approval of the Minutes - Annual Parish Meeting 1 May 2019

Proposed by Mr Ward, seconded by Mrs Godfrey and

Resolved: that the minutes of the Annual Parish Meeting, held on the 1 May 2019, be taken as read and approved as a true record.

3. Chairman's Report – Roger Willcocks

The members of the Parish Council are elected, but unpaid, volunteers. 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 (about four percent), 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've also added the allotments to the list this year which Colin will talk about later.

We are consulted on planning matters and we sometimes pay for professional assistance if we need to write a detailed response. But we are not the Local Planning Authority. Planning decisions for Knebworth are made by NHDC.

Parish Councillors are elected every four years. The next election's are due a year from now. If you're interested in becoming a councillor, please contact the Clerk, Claire Graham, or me for some pointers.

Our job is to listen and advise; the Clerk is the person who actually gets things done. We are privileged to work with Claire. She's been doing the job for a long time and she is very good at it. We would be lost without her. Thank-you Claire.

Last year's Annual Parish Meeting was cancelled because of the Covid pandemic. The Council felt that it wouldn't be practical to hold a virtual meeting while people were still getting to grips with online conferencing, and the legal requirement to hold a meeting was waived.

That means our previous meeting was two years ago, in May 2019. Both a lot and very little has happened since then.

Looking back at the minutes from that meeting, I said it was the lull before the storm - the North Herts Local Plan Examination in Public had finished a year earlier and we were waiting to see what changes the Inspector wanted; Knebworth was described as a 'growth village' and it seemed very likely that the Green Belt boundary surrounding Knebworth would be rolled back.

That situation hasn't changed. The examination process was delayed due to the pandemic and the final decision is still up in the air - we are still waiting. But we believe the planning inspector will publish his findings shortly – it could be just weeks away.

The plan changes the Green Belt boundary around several villages to release land for new homes - more than seven hundred around Knebworth.

It's unfortunate NHDC took the approach they did, and we have, with other Parish Councils, spent a lot of time and money objecting to their reliance on Green Belt land.

But we're years down the line, and if the plan's not approved in some form soon, planning applications will use the shortage of land zoned for housing to justify building on protected land across the district, including around Knebworth.

So it looks like some development is inevitable.

The Parish Council can't change the land allocation and it doesn't build houses. But it can have a say in Knebworth's future through a legal route called a Neighbourhood Plan.

A team of volunteers has been working on the Knebworth Neighbourhood Plan as our community vision for the future. It aims to ensure that we can influence, and benefit from, any new development.

Thank you to the team who have spent so much time on this. The plan is almost complete and it's currently being examined by an independent inspector.

You have until 9 June to comment on our Neighbourhood Plan. I encourage you to take a look. There will be a referendum later this year. I hope you will support it.

Let's follow up on a few items flagged at the last meeting.

The McCarthy and Stone development on the Chas Lowe site on London Road is now occupied, although the entrance arch is too low for ambulances and delivery vans. We have raised issues about the archway with NHDC enforcement officers but we don't expect anything to happen. The three new shops facing the street are currently empty, and we have no idea what's intended for them.

The new Doctor's Surgery is now complete, but it can't be used as intended just yet due to the pandemic restrictions. Many medical consultations are now made on-line and it seems likely that that will continue even after the restrictions are lifted.

Ten flats have been built on the site of the old Billiards factory by the station, and an application has been made to convert the loft space into two more. That's interesting because when there's more than ten units the developer is meant to contribute money towards local facilities. The builder's incremental approach is obviously trying to get round that. The Council has pointed this out to North Herts - watch this space.

And nine flats have been built on the former Station Pub garden. The plans approved by the Planning Inspector included a public footpath running through to Deanscroft, but that seemed to have been quietly forgotten. We raised this with NHDC planning enforcement and happily the path is now open, although the gravel needs treading down.

The allotments off Watton Road were put up for sale last June, and following negotiations, the Parish Council bought the land in August last year - one of the Council's duties is to provide allotments. We are not, however, planning to register them as statutory allotments, at least for now.

We'd like to thank Knebworth Village Trust for paying the legal fees and agents commission.

And now we come to the Station Pub. The pub was put on the market two years ago at an asking price of £595,000. That was for the pub alone; it didn't include the adjacent Coach House and access way.

The Parish Council formed a working group which put together a business plan and used it to apply for a Public Works loan from central government. It was essentially a backstop, just in case the independent SoSPub group's plans for a community-led bid were unsuccessful.

After a lot of legal wrangling and with help from Knebworth Estate in enforcing a century-old covenant, the Parish Council had an offer accepted for both the pub and the coach house in September 2019, for £100,000 less than the price originally asked for the pub alone.

But the sale didn't complete until January 2020. During that time the Working Group worked on detailed kitchen plans, decor and signage, and engaged a professional restoration company to bring the building back to life. They also interviewed prospective landlords, and ultimately selected Lloyd and Becky Willis to run the pub as a business.

The Station reopened on Valentines Day 2020. You know where this is going. It was forced to close due to the Covid pandemic just five weeks later.

The Parish Council firmly believes Knebworth deserves a pub and it has, through a rent reduction, supported the business during its very difficult first year. We're very much looking forward to a return to normal trading in the months to come.

I'd like to thank the Working Group for their professional handling of the pub's purchase and its refurbishment - Adrienne, Paul, Jeremy and Claire on behalf of the Parish Council, and Mark Rawling of Fullers, who does this in real life, and was amazingly helpful.

Almost everything else last year was cancelled. The Village Hall and pavilion were closed and the Council got no income from them – but they still needed maintenance.

The project to install CCTV in the main recreation ground turned out to be impractical due to power cabling requirements, and projects such as the Village Hall stage lights and sound system have been pushed back indefinitely.

Reserves are significantly lower than they were two years ago, mainly due to the purchase of the allotments and the refurbishment and fitting out of the pub, and currently stand at £103,000. That's still an acceptable level, and it should be weighed against our securing the future of two valuable social assets for the community.

At the last meeting I said we were going to get a new train timetable, which happened, and for a while we had the luxury of an occasional first-stop Kings Cross service.

The pandemic put paid to that.

But it also means there are now more people working from home, remaining in the village during the week. That's an opportunity for our local community and businesses.

All in all, it's been a very difficult year for many people. We've been forced to work from home with minimal social interaction. Parish Council meetings, like many meetings, have been held virtually and although it allows for dry discussion and decision-making, it's really not the same as engaging first hand. Let's hope things will ease up over the summer, even if 'normality' remains elusive.

Finally I'd like to mention that the Parish Council is not a Political organisation and we're looking forward to working constructively with whoever wins at tomorrow's district and county elections, regardless of their party.

It's also very important that we work constructively with the major landowners to the East and West of the village to get the best possible outcome.

New development doesn't have to be universally negative, it's an opportunity for Knebworth to thrive. We want Knebworth to be a vibrant and inclusive village community, with good environmental design that reflects our heritage and rural character.

The "new" main village didn't exist 150 years ago and with our Knebworth Neighbourhood Plan and your support we hope to use the growth to help achieve our vision. Thank you.

4. Amenities Committee Report- Colin Stringer

Clearly the restrictions, over the past year, have resulted in a substantial reduction in income from hiring of the Village Hall. Whilst the income from the Hall is not specifically allocated to improvements to the Hall facilities, one of the effects of this reduction in income has meant that the planned enhancement of the sound and lighting in the Hall has had to be deferred; the Council will now have to re-assess its finances and

determine when these improvements can be funded. On a positive note the lack of use has provided an opportunity to effect a number of outstanding repairs.

The Parish Council has also experienced a substantial reduction in income from the Recreation Ground, with group sports cancelled for many months of the year. This has now recommenced and we are pleased to welcome back Knebworth Football Club who benefited from a reduction in fees whilst they were unable to play.

The Council is delighted to welcome no fewer than five new residents to the Watton Road recreation ground in the form of five moorhen chicks who can be seen on the village pond.

In August the Council completed the acquisition of the Allotment Site on Watton Road. Over the past 50 years, or so, this had been in private hands and, as the owner lived in the North of England, the site had fallen a long way below the expected standard for allotments as the owner had not invested any money into it.

The Council has signed new annually-renewable individual contracts with each of the allotment-holders, where none had been in place before. A substantial amount of metal waste has already been removed from the site in a joint effort between Councillors and allotment-holders and another such exercise is planned for the summer to get rid of other unwanted rubbish that has accumulated over the years. Some plots have been split, to allow use by people who cannot cope with a large plot and new tenants have been taken on, where plots had not been cultivated for some time. The Council plans to improve the outer perimeter of the site and generally make it an asset of which the village can be proud. It must be appreciated, however, that the above-mentioned reduction in income may well mean that these improvements will take longer than previously anticipated.

8. Questions & Answers

There is a problem with speeding on Stevenage Road. There are speed detectors which frequently show 35-36 mph. I understand that data can be collected from these and wondered what Herts CC's next move is?

Mr Sprigge

The Council has asked Herts CC for the data, which they are now charging for. The Council doesn't have that data at the moment.

Cllr Ward

A police representative used to attend Parish Meetings, is one likely to attend future meetings?

Mr Sprigge

Due to Herts Constabulary rotas, it is highly unlikely that a police representative will attend any Parish meetings.

Clerk

The chairman thanked everyone for attending the meeting.

There being no other business the meeting closed at 7.50p.m.

Chairman _____

Date _____

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