

Minutes of meeting held on 4th April 2023 in the Village Hall.

PRESENT:

Cllr Walker (Chair), 8 Parish Councillors, the Clerk to the Parish Council and 6 members of the public.

1. Apologies: representative from Village Hall Committee, two new candidates for Parish Council

2. Minutes of Annual Parish Meeting held on 5th April 2022:

Copies of the minutes of the last meeting had been circulated and there were no matters arising.

3. Report of the Parish Council:

a) Chairman's Report

Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

We had hoped that our Chair, Paul Phillips would be back by now. As I am sure you are all aware he has not been well again this last year but he agreed to stay on as Chair at our last AGM and I agreed to cover him until the autumn by when we hoped he would be feeling better. Unfortunately, after the summer he realised it would take longer than he hoped to be strong enough to manage meetings so he stepped down from the Parish Council to give himself time to recover. However, I am really pleased to tell you that he is still involved with Speed Watch, so he is keeping up his contact with us and is still working hard for the village. I have continued to cover the chair until our next AGM in May after the forthcoming local election. In addition to Paul stepping down, Gerry Sansom also resigned so we have been holding two vacancies since the autumn. We have been advertising for new councillors since then and last month we were delighted to have 5 new people ask to join us. As the election was only a couple of months away there was not time to co-opt so we asked everyone to submit their nominations for election and I am delighted to say that they all have. We will now have a contested election for the Parish Council along with the Borough and Mayoral elections. The village will have the opportunity to vote for up to 11 people to form the new Parish Council. As some of the new and maybe even the existing councillors will not be known to residents, I would like to profile everyone on our Facebook page. Once we have the details of all our nominees I will ask the Clerk to contact everyone for a photograph and short profile so that we can let people put a face and some details to the names and we will post them online.

At the moment we are aware that we have 12 nominations for the 11 places and I would like to take the opportunity to thank the current councillors who are standing down at the election. They are Steve Nicolas, Michael Frampton and of course Gerry and Paul who stood down earlier this year. All 4 have been Parish Councillors for many years and have done a huge amount for the village both in Parish Council meetings and outside, on the Neighbourhood Plan (NDP) group, the planning advisory group, finance advisory group and helping with Parish Council events such as the annual litter pick. We will miss their experience and knowledge of the village. I hope they will keep in touch whenever something arises that their unique knowledge will be help us with.

For the first time this year, in the Borough Council election, you will be able to vote for up to two Borough Councillors for Oakley. The recent boundary changes have joined us with Clapham rather than Stevington and Pavenham, but we have been allocated two councillors instead of our usual one. One last point to remember about this election, is that for the first time, anyone going into the polling station to vote in person, will need voter ID. There are lots of forms of ID that can be used but if you do not have any of them you can register for a voter authority certificate by post or online at the .gov website up to 6 working days ahead of the election.

Turning to Parish Council matters, on the play area on the Green, we have replaced the slide with a new one and the roundabout is due to be replaced shortly. Both items had been in place for a long time and were beginning to rot. Unfortunately, the safety rules have changed since the originals were installed so the safety surface must be wider for the same height equipment. As we have limited space in the toddlers play area we were not able to extend the surface so have had to replace both with smaller items. Both were paid for from CIL money from the Parrott Close development.

The work continues on Brockwell meadow, where we are trying to increase biodiversity. We had a number of free, native trees from the Borough Council along with fruit trees purchased with profits from the Directory advertising. These have now been planted and wildflowers sown. The fence nearest Oakley Kindergarten will be replaced in the summer and we are working on granting a licence for the Kindergarten to use the meadow for organised forest school activities. There will be no access for parents/carers to drop off or collect children from the Kindergarten.

Last summer we celebrated the Platinum Jubilee of the Queen with a well-attended beacon event on the field near Browns Wood, in partnership with Clapham Parish Council. It was wonderful that we could do that in light of the Queen's death in September. We were able to mark the new King's accession with an official proclamation ceremony in St Mary's Church. Thank you to the bellringers who at very short notice were able to ring the bells which helped to make it a very moving and memorable occasion. This year the Coronation will be marked in the village with street parties plus organised events at the Sports and Social club and I am sure at the Bedford Arms.

It was also good to be back in St Mary's Church for the village Christmas lights switch on. Thank you to everyone who provided refreshments in the church after the switch on and to the village organisations who supplied beautiful wreaths to decorate it.

We are very lucky in this village to have a large number of volunteers who make village life so special. We have a huge variety of groups who are run by amazing volunteers as shown in the annual village directory, which in itself is produced by Parish Councillor Sara Fardon and a group of volunteers. Thank you to everyone who gives their time in this way to run these groups.

On behalf of the Parish Council, we have Bill Chalker who does a magnificent job of producing our quarterly Village news; Dave Ursell who took care of the war memorial and Patrick Knight who has taken over from him; Dawn Pither and her team who ran the Youth Club which has now been taken over by Sonya Playford and her team; plus all of the litter pickers who have a never ending job helping to keep our village tidy. We will be arranging a community village litter pick sometime after Easter but at the moment we do not have a date because we are waiting to confirm whether it will start at the Scout Hut or the Sports and Social Club.

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Further on the environment, we adopted new Environmental and Memorial Furniture policies this year, which are available on our web site. We have also written to the Environment Agency to object to the sewage discharge into the river and the speed indicator sign, which moves around the village, is being converted to solar power rather than battery.

Over the year, we have been working with the Borough Council to try and resolve the parking issues in The Furlong along with the drainage issues in Highfield Road and Pavenham Road. We also supported the Borough Council's request to turn off the lights on The Furlong between midnight and 5:30am, in line with the rest of the village.

On East West Rail, the Parish Council is a member of the local representatives' group and councillors have attended each meeting and reported back. We are now told to expect a decision in May on the route option that has been chosen.

The Parish Council has been approached by many residents on various aspects of the activities of the Sports and Social Club over the last year in particular. Unfortunately, we have no power to intervene in the running of the Club so we cannot insist that they change anything. We have two representatives on the committee who will continue to voice villagers concerns and opinions as they are told to us. We were very pleased however, to see that some of those concerns have been addressed with the classic car meeting going back to monthly rather than fortnightly. We will continue to ask for the re-opening of the tennis court and repair of the boule pitch, both of which were funded with public money from 106 agreements to create additional sports facilities in the village.

We have been involved in several large planning consultations this year. The NDP was reviewed to give us stronger evidence to object to large developments. We hope that the Planning Inspector recognises this at the forthcoming planning appeal on land which we know as the farmer's field on Station Road. We have objected to the 40 houses proposed as it is over the 30 that we have included in the NDP. We will be submitting our evidence to the appeal in support of our objection. We have also been involved in consulting with Lincroft and Oakley Primary to ensure that the schools can develop their facilities without causing detriment to residents around.

Recently we joined with Clapham Parish Council to discuss the new development of 500 houses on Milton Hill, which is in their NDP. The developer there has offered to enhance the footpath between Clapham and Oakley, along Lovell Road but both Councils are also asking for a footpath along Highfield Road between the villages. We were told at the meeting that the developers have costed it at £200,000 which they are unlikely to fund, but both Councils are continuing to press for this.

The Parish Council has limited funds available to local organisations which can be applied for from the Clerk. Last year, the Parish Council gave grants to the Village Hall, the ORA, Country Days (for local children to access a nature project at Felmersham), Oakley Day Centre, Oakley Kindergarten and the Youth Club. A poppy wreath was also purchased from the Royal British Legion. Finally, I would like to thank Ann for her work as Clerk to the Parish Council. She has stepped down from her full time role as a Parish Clerk but she continues to be available to support us whenever we need her.

b) Parish Precept 2023/24:

The precept for this year has been set at £56,860 which is a 1.9% increase in the precept amount and a 2% increase in the band D payment from £56.73 to £57.68 p.a.

c) Draft Accounts for 2022/20232:

In 2022/23 income amounted to £69,520.51 and expenditure to £80,679.09. Income decreased by approximately £25,046 largely because a £25,000 Bedford BC Rural Grant was received by the Parish Council for payment to Oakley Kindergarten in 2021/22.

Expenditure decreased by approximately £5,043. The Rural Grant of £25,000 was paid by the Borough Council to the Kindergarten through the Parish Council accounts in 2021/22 and this was offset in 2022/23 by an increase in spending on tree works of £5,068 following an inspection of all the Council trees; an additional £4,487 spent on salaries; £3,885 on the Newsletter and Directory as the printing costs for the final Newsletter of 2021/22 and the 2021/22 Directory were not invoiced until 2022/23; an additional £2,960 spent on play equipment as we replaced the slide on the Green, an extra £1,546 on grants to local organisations as the Youth Club had required less funding in 2021/22 following the 2020 Covid closure; an additional £965 on the playing field rent as both 2022/23 and 2023/24 payments fell into the 2022/23 financial year and £564 more on VAT payments largely because of the purchase of the new slide.

Donations totalling £6,618 were made to the organisations listed by the Chair.

d) Planning

During 2022/23 the Parish Council was consulted on and commented on a total of 35 planning and related applications, compared to 38 in 2021/22. As a general policy Council asks for trees and hedges not to be removed unless they cannot not be saved and, if they have to be felled, for replacements to be planted in their place.

Most applications were for relatively minor works but we objected to the application for up to 12 houses off Pavenham Road on the grounds that the application did not conform to the Neighbourhood Plan or Borough Local Plan since sufficient new houses were already allocated on the Parrott Close, High Street and Station Road sites.

Council also supported Clapham's objection to the development of 500 homes off Milton Road on the grounds that the developer is not prepared to put a path along Highfield Road as part of the works. Students would be walking to Lincroft School along Highfield Road which currently has no path or lights and would need to cross the bypass slip road or cross Highfield Road twice. The application has yet to be decided by the Borough Council.

The Pavenham Road application and the 2021 application for up to 40 houses off Station Road have recently gone to appeal and we have reiterated our objections to the Planning Inspector for the Pavenham Road site and will be doing so shortly for the Station Road site.

Council supported the fencing and MUGA at Lincroft Academy provided conditions were applied which prevented the MUGA being used as a sports pitch and outside of core school hours and that noise reduction measures were put in place. The MUGA was subsequently withdrawn from the application and the fencing has been granted permission.

A consultation was held on the Local Plan 2040 in June and we reiterated that housing numbers were too high and that EWR should be routed along the A421 as an EWR route alongside the A421 would support the new developments at Kempston and Little Barford and provide transport hubs for both road and rail links. We also suggested that water resources and sewage disposal for new developments had been insufficiently considered and that more information was needed on senior school places as Lincroft had little space to expand. The Plan has now been submitted to the Planning Inspector for examination.

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As the Neighbourhood Plan was two years old, the Neighbourhood Plan Group had carried out a thorough review during Summer 2022 and agreed that no changes were needed at present. The Plan would still conform to the 2040 Local Plan and the studies carried out by the Borough Council to support that Plan since no housing, in addition to that already identified, was needed in Oakley up to 2040.

4. Questions from the Floor:

Resident asked how much public money was spent on the tennis court and boule pitch at the Oakley Sports & Social Club (OSSC), what conditions were applied and why Council representatives at Oakley Recreational Association (ORA) meetings were not aware that the tennis court was to be converted to parking.

Chair advised that approximately £30K of S. 106 monies were provided for the tennis court and £7K for the boule pitch. Council had considered Brockwell Meadow and Lincroft School as alternative sites for the facilities but the access to Brockwell Meadow was unsuitable and facilities at Lincroft would not have been available at all times. Council had asked that the facilities were open to all residents and had no lights and on this basis were content for the ORA to run them. Clerk noted Council was not consulted on the terms of the S. 106 agreement between Bedford BC and the developers and that it did not include any conditions on future maintenance. Cllr. Abbott added that he had attended ORA meetings and the tennis court had not been discussed prior to the fence being removed. He noted that the OSSC was directly responsible for running the facilities and Council was not a member of that Committee.

Resident was disappointed that neither Council nor residents had been able to influence the ORA/OSSC. He commented that ORA/OSSC had a moral obligation to maintain the facilities and Council should consider carefully whether to provide funds to them in future. Cllr. Abbott noted that Bedford BC would enforce licensing and planning requirements on the site and Clerk commented that the organisations were ultimately responsible to the Charity Commission.

Chair reported that ORA had advised that moss on the tennis court, because of the surrounding trees, made it difficult and costly to maintain but Bedford Park tennis courts were also surrounded by trees. Cllr. Jones had attended the recent ORA meeting and had reiterated Council's desire for the tennis court to be re-opened, reminded them that the facilities were well used and that grants were available from Council if they completed a grant application. Cllr. White advised that the Village Hall had pressed ORA/OSSC to find alternative parking as their members/visitors were using the Village Hall spaces and the parking on the tennis court was an attempt to do so as more parking on Church Lane would also generate complaints. Resident also asked if the OSSC food tannoy could be turned down as it could be heard across the village. Council to raise at the next ORA meeting.

Chair thanked everyone for attending and closed the meeting.