



COLNEY HEATH PARISH COUNCIL

Highfield Park Office
Hill End Lane
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83 High Street
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Tel: 01727 825314 Email: clerk@colneyheathparishcouncil.gov.uk

MINUTES OF THE 2019 ANNUAL COLNEY HEATH PARISH COUNCIL ELECTORATE MEETING HELD AT COLNEY HEATH SCHOOL, HIGH STREET, COLNEY HEATH ON THURSDAY 23 MAY 2019 AT 7.30pm

1. ANNOUNCEMENTS & DECLARATIONS

None received.

2. APOLOGIES

Received from Clerk of the Council who is now unavailable unexpectedly and at short notice.

3. APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES ANNUAL PARISH MEETING 2018

The minutes were noted with no changes and were duly proposed, seconded and accepted as a true record of the meeting.

4. MATTERS ARISING FROM 2018 MINUTES

There were no matter arising raised from the agreed minutes.

5. ANNUAL REPORT FROM THE CHAIRMAN OF THE PARISH COUNCIL

Good evening and welcome. As this is my final Annual Parish Meeting as Chair, this review will cover the 2018/19 year, but as this is also the end of the four-year electoral cycle I shall also look back on that period.

The Annual Parish Meeting is a meeting of all the local government electors for the Parish, which the public are entitled to attend and participate in.

This meeting acts as an annual democratic point of communication enabling the Parish Council to explain what it has been doing over the last year and providing an opportunity for the electors to have their say on anything they consider is important to the people of the Parish.

Any registered elector may ask questions of the Council, which will usually be answered by the Chair, the Clerk to the Council, or a designated Councillor. An elector may also make suggestions and comment on anything relevant to the residents of the Colney Heath Parish.

The purpose of the meeting is to enable the ordinary electors to have their say. Councillors will listen with interest and as electors themselves, also have the opportunity to raise questions and make comments if they wish.

A written record of the meeting will be taken and presented at the next Full Council meeting for approval.

There will be lots of personal thanks from me and in a few places a personal look forward



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As a start I thought it would be helpful to remind the electorate of the make-up of the Council. The Parish Boundary is as shown
Colney Heath Ward has 4 Councillors has 41% of the electorate made up of:
CAA, CAF is Colney Heath Village which makes up 26% of the electorate with.
CAB, Smallford & Sleafshyde making up the remaining 15%.
CAC known as Hill End although in Neighbourhood Plan terms is Oaklands and Alban Way South and totals 17.5% of the electorate
CAD & CAE make up Highfield Ward totalling 41.5% of the electorate and includes Tyttenhanger

Turning to the last 12 months.

I would like to thank the staff for their continued commitment, Michele Gilbert as Finance Assistant and the Common Ranger, Charlie Nash.

I would like to thank the Parish Gardner, Hilary Garner, for her service following her resignation on 15th October 2018. The Council agreed to her request to give a months' notice, rather than the three required

I am very proud that for first time ever the Parish Council has a fully qualified Clerk, Lisa Chaplin.

Since joining in August 2016, the Clerk has ensured we put excellent governance arrangements in place, and this has been evidenced by the most recent Internal Audit reports which are now seen by all Councillors who undertake a detailed review of the Action Plan

The Council has also established a series of Committees covering HR, Finance, and the Environment to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the Council meetings and decision-making processes.

I think that all would agree that the changes to governance have taken time for members to adjust to. Previously Members were heavily involved in day-to-day decision making, and some decisions and actions were not always documented. The change in governance, where Councillors make decisions, with the Clerk implementing them, has taken time to bed in.

The new Council will have the benefit of having a fully qualified Clerk who can ensure that the Council will be fully compliant with the law, and correct processes are in place to ensure that this remains the case.

Fully transparent decision making over tax-payers funds means compliance with the Local Government Act to obtain best value in everything we do. As Cllr Crump reminded us recently the Council does not have the power to "give things away that belong to the public purse".

To encourage public involvement, I moved the public questions, which now follow the process in standing orders, to the start of the meeting. After then the meeting is only the elected Councillors who may speak, and they do so on half of their electorate



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It was mentioned during the election period that the Council conducts business in private - the only occasions of going to private session is when members resolve to due to commercial or legal confidentiality such as litigation at the Lands Tribunal or potential Court cases and of course all HR matters are discussed in private session

Turning to Councillors I must start with thanking the 29 years' service given by Derrick Crump. He has been Vice Chair for the last three years and with his particular interest in Green spaces and the Environment has been Chair of the Environment Committee since its establishment.

His paper on the Common and its future was an excellent basis for going forward. I would like to see if possible that we establish a Friends of the Common group for those residents who want to give an input without having to join the Parish Council

Another stalwart of this period has been Margaret Nash who was in the Chair in 2015-16. She dealt with the extremely challenging and time-consuming issues following the death of the late Clerk in July 2015 with commitment & dedication.

From September 2015 a significant number of financial and process irregularities were uncovered driven in the main part because no Internal Audit reports for the 12 years from 2003/4 to 2014/15 were shown to or made available for Councillors to review. Councillors had therefore been unaware of the significant governance issues which have since been addressed.

The amount of detail meant lengthy meetings. One key item commissioned was an independent review of all employee arrangements - this had been highlighted in every Internal Audit report over the 12 years - reported in November 2015.

The initial HR review established a full time Parish Ranger was no longer required and thus the role was redundant. Following the appropriate consultation, the full time Parish Ranger left 7th May 2018. It also recommended salary levels for all staff.

By January 2016 evidence was uncovered, which resulted in Pam McDonagh and Cecilia Hathaway, who with the benefit of their respective career experiences, pressed fellow members to make the tough decision of unfortunately having to report the issues to Hertfordshire Constabulary

As Cllr Hathaway has said she was horrified by what was uncovered. At the meeting she arranged on 26 Jan 2016 – when DCI Townsend confirmed no one else had brought the matter to the attention of the Constabulary - her knowledge was invaluable in setting out the factual evidence clearly and concisely

After receiving specialist legal advice from Hedleys LLP, the February 2016 meeting noted Treasure Tots was operating under the management of the Parish Council without the appropriate statutory. Margaret Nash and Derrick Crump produced a plan that resulted in the satisfactory conclusion of the operation continuing in private hands to the benefit of the preschool users and the relevant authorities.



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Throughout Treasure Tots operation the parish Council had not recovered the costs of its operation. This had resulted in the separate bank account being in 'surplus'. It was unanimously agreed this would be invested into youth projects in the Parish. This helped fund the MUGA installation at Roestock Park and new play equipment and play surface installed in Tyttenhanger.

The new Internal Auditor required payments to only be made with back up evidence for liability such as a formal legal agreement as payments were made without supporting documentary evidence – effectively by “custom and practice”. The Internal Auditor was also concerned at payments spent on land which we did not have a legal interest in and advised they cease.

As part of the 2015/16 reviews we discovered that the Clerk's own salary increases had been made without the authority of Councillors as well as self-approved overtime and self-awarded unjustified allowances. We also established that employees undertook work on the instruction of Councillors, not via the Clerk as the Proper Officer

I am pleased to say that the overall staff budget has reduced since 2015/16 and the roles now meet the needs of serving the needs of the electorate.

Coming back to Margaret Nash. She was a consistent contributor on planning matters and extremely valuable in moving the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group (NPSG) forward. Even if she & I had diametrically opposing views we enjoyed strong and respectful discussions – not always easy in current political environment! I wish her well and look forward to seeing her at future Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group meetings.

Mark Ouzman, a Colney Heath Village Ward Councillor along with Cecilia Hathaway, were both each committed to and focused on particular local issues of interest to them. Following their resignations, in February and March 2019 respectively, they have returned with their experience as two of the four unopposed Ward Councillors

Susan Devi's experience on the Parish Council encouraged her to stand for the Colney Heath Ward District Council seat earlier this month. She campaigned tenaciously and diligently in a tough environment locally and nationally ultimately being unsuccessful. She also stood in the first contested election in Highfield Ward of the Parish since 2003 and was unlucky to be part of strong campaigning. I wish her well in her future.

Turning to Russell Solts who has been the stalwart on ensuring transparent governance as Chair of the Finance and HR Committees through the very challenging times. His commercial acumen and focus on bringing clarity to any issue under discussion has been of great assistance to the Council as a whole

Kevin Barnes' balanced and measured input on where the key issues of debate has been of great assistance. He is our representative on Highfield Park Trust which, like the Common, is a wonderful open green space used by our electorate and others beyond



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As you will all be aware, we are all volunteers. At this stage I would also make a special thanks to our partners and support network without whom we would not be able to contribute so much time and effort.

The local Police attend Council meetings to update us on crime issues across the Parish and provide relevant crime prevention advice. One highlight for me was the work of residents who self-organised their own group, including using WhatsApp, following a spate of burglaries. The police achieved two convictions with the majority of the evidence coming from this group.

Another band of volunteers is the Neighbourhood Plan and its seven area groups are looking to the future incorporating ideas generated in the local groups. These have been slightly in abeyance whilst our District Council concluded its Plan for submission in March - at the second attempt in this phase.

This combined with Welwyn Hatfield having to find land for an additional 4,000 homes, on top of the 12,000, and Hertsmere looking to build up to 6,000 houses between Colney Heath Village and Junction 22 of the M25 has been time consuming.

I presented the details of the Plan to the three meetings in the Parish for the initial phase of the St Albans Plan and one each for the most recent consultation and for the Hertsmere Garden Village proposal.

Along with our Project Officer Mike Rawlins I have attended every St Albans Planning Policy Committee in the last four years asking questions on behalf of the Parish and all Parishes. We also have met all land promoters with the Clerk present who takes notes of the meetings' outputs. This is to ensure transparency of the Neighbourhood Plan processes.

Mike and I have jointly monitored both Welwyn Hatfield and Hertsmere progress also asking questions at available opportunities to our neighbouring Councils.

Mike is an invaluable resource who working with Kieran McDonagh from Highfield and short-term Councillor co-optee Iain Grant produced the responses to Hertsmere in collaboration with London Colney Parish Council to 'Stand up for the Colneys'. Extracts were used by Hertsmere's consultants in their most recent site analysis. This group also produced responses to the County Council consultations which have a significant impact on local infrastructure other than housing on the infrastructure A414 Corridor & Minerals plan. These latter two have been complimented on their detailed analysis at County and District Council level.

The Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group with Craig Tallents from Smallford now chairing meetings the Group plan for the document to go to referendum in 2021. Other regular contributors have been: from Oaklands, Frances Wintle, who has now moved to Sheffield, as well as David Prowse; Steve Ross from Smallford, Rob Lines from Tyttenhanger

The Group has continued its commitment with detailed input & enthusiasm resulting in the first draft of Chapter one and half of Chapter two of the Plan being agreed. We will



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be reviewing the detailed work of this group protecting the best green and blue spaces – although the blue spaces are a shade quite grey in Smallford.

There are still things to complete such as registering our assets at the Land Registry - which is time consuming but will have long term benefit for the Parish Council as it will ensure we minimise disputes with other parties thus reducing legal costs to protect the interest of the whole electorate.

We also have the Fidelity Claim with Zurich seeking to recover costs which is necessary to bring the previous period of irregularities to a conclusion. This will also take time.

Throughout the last few years, I appreciate the Council could have been better at communication. The challenge for the Council since 2015 was having to focus on putting proper governance arrangements in place, while dealing with our complex legal obligations.

In the event, communication with the wider community was not given enough emphasis, but not that much of the governance work has been complete, communication can take a much higher priority.

I am pleased to say the new website is up and running. This has been developed by the Clerk despite the Communications Working Party not meeting. We are aware there will be improvements as we use it and we look forward to your feedback.

The 2017/18 internal audit confirmed the Council is obliged to adhere to the terms of all legal agreements and following which the Parish Council unanimously confirmed implementation of the approach. As background the Internal Auditor mentioned that from their inspection of the records it appeared to them that the previous Clerk's approach, and that of the Council's, was more relaxed towards agreements and relationship with the Parish Council.

The Internal Auditor noted a number of undocumented instances which had become 'custom and practice' rather than following the agreements in place and advised that until legally binding documented agreements were in place payment should not be made and advised that for prudent accounting relevant accruals should be made

The Parish Council must ensure the management of the existing leases and any renegotiation of future leases are fair and consistent around the Parish for good governance and transparency for the electorate.

I have enjoyed meeting Residents Groups, both formally and informally, when invited to attend their meetings and "get togethers". It hasn't always been easy as there have been 'grumbings' on lack of communication. Those in Sleapshyde and Smallford often feel there is a lack of visibility of most of the Ward Councillors. Also, the same has been said to me in Hill End – effectively Oaklands.

It has not been always nice for me to receive feedback from contacts across the Parish and from outside that a very small minority have been saying publicly that they "are at war with the Parish Council" and proud to be authors of 'poisonous letters'. This has



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resulted in some localised briefing against the Council when not all facts, especially the confidential legal ones, are known.

We have had good communication within the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group where all communities have representation and where decisions are made by consensus and collaboration across the Parish using all the available talents round the table.

I would also add that we have worked well with County Cllr Gordon with the highlight being the Highfield Lane crossing being installed, after lengthy prevarication and arrange of excuses for non-delivery.

With the help of County Cllr Hale questions were asked on why there has been delay in Ellenbrook Trust establishment, jointly with Hatfield Councillors. This is now in the public domain and being followed up - after almost a decade of inaction since 2009.

County Cllr Hale also arranged a public meeting for the A414 Longabout with the works in this financial year's plan – that is 2019/20.

Finally, I would like to highlight two key projects we completed in the last year. The play area and MUGA in Roestock Park is a real benefit. Looking forward we need a long-term vision for Roestock as a community hub. The local Ward Councillors will be key as well as working with architects or designers who want to give something back to the community

The playground at Charles Morris Hall Tyttenhanger is very popular with the residents. I was very pleased to receive feedback that it is a huge improvement. I have been complimented for arranging a meeting with the residents, that we listened to what they said and then installed an upgraded facility to meet the local need

Thank you for your time and I look forward to receiving questions from any registered elector and hope to be able to answer.

6. PARISH FINANCE 2017/18 & BUDGETS 2018/19

This item was unable to be covered due to the absence of the Clerk/RFO.

7. QUESTIONS FROM THE PARISHIONERS/ELECTORATE

The Chairman accepted several questions from the floor for over 30 minutes.

Meeting ended at 8.29pm