

Wicken Parish Council

Chair's Report 2023/2024

In last year's report there seemed to be a lot to include with changes to the village but this last year has been quieter.

We have had further changes to the Parish Council in that we lost the services of both Andrew Stockbridge and Rachel Sithole for personal reasons but have been lucky to co-opt Chris Martindale, a long-time resident of the village, and Viv Kime has agreed to rejoin given that her place of business remains within the village. We welcome them both and look forward to their contribution to our work.

This just leaves one vacancy and we would be pleased to hear from any resident who might like to be considered for co-option which would run until the expected elections for the whole Council in May next year. If anyone would like to find out more about what is involved then please do contact the clerk, John Westlake, or myself.

The finances of the Council remain stable and we are moving closer to ensuring that the precept which we receive from West Northants Council out of your Council Tax is closer to covering our annual maintenance expenditure. This leaves the money received from the Solar Farm for capital projects which benefit the community. The Council has a financial policy which is published online which states how we intend to use public money.

During the course of the last year, there was much activity around the Local Plan proposed by West Northants Council which included significant housing developments in and around Deanshanger. We understand that some 11,000 objections were received by the planners which means that they have decided to re-plan the requirements taking account of public opinion. That consultation process has just opened and we urge all residents to study the revised proposals and provide feedback where appropriate. The expectation is that new house building will concentrate on existing urban hubs within the county rather than greenfield sites. Positive feedback, if you think the proposals are better, is as equally valid as objections to aspects of the plans.

The application to build a distribution hub at Furtho Pit instead of additional light industrial buildings has not progressed as yet because the Environment Agency has objected to some key aspects. There has also been a request to provide a traffic study reflecting the current situation. The previous one had been taken during the COVID pandemic so was not representative.

Part of the Local Plan also includes creating a settlement hierarchy to define the scale to which any town, village or hamlet can absorb new residential buildings. Wicken has always been in the lowest category, defined as "Small Village" and there is no cause, we believe, for that to be modified.

In addition, we have also been asked to comment on the Village Confines and our experience of the application of this principle. A line is drawn on a map of each village tightly around the built-up area. Land within the confines which is suitable and available for building (taking into account the Conservation Area) is potential for the building of new homes. Land outside the confines line is regarded as "open countryside" where the presumption is that new building would not take place. The Parish Council believes, acting on behalf of its residents, that it should have more control/input into where that line is drawn and any proposed changes to it.

More details of our responses on both topics have been posted on the Wicken website.

The Council has received comments and complaints from residents over the last year concerning overhanging trees, speeding and parking on pavements and verges. The Council has limited powers in most areas and can only persuade rather than enforce. The speed monitor has reduced the incidence of speeding in the village overall but has not eliminated it. Calls for a 20mph limit are understandable by Central Government has indicated a desire to curtail additional 20mph zones across the country.

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Equally, despite there being legislation in London to prevent parking on verges and pavements this does not extend to the rest of England & Wales and the last attempt to introduce a ban in 2019 did not get a second reading in the House. We would ask all residents to avoid parking on verges because of the damage it causes and also not to obstruct any part of the pavement. Thought also needs to be given to ensuring that vehicles parked on the roads have left sufficient room for emergency vehicles to pass. This has created problems in the past.

The Solar Farm Committee has reviewed current projects and although funds are now almost fully committed at present we do expect to receive the next tranche in June/July 2024. The major projects to which funds were allocated over the last year included urgent repairs to the Sports Club roof which was leaking badly and the planting scheme for trees on Whittlebury Road which you can read about in the last Wicken News, Details of income and expenditure are published under the Solar Farm Aide Memore which is available on the village website.

Following suggestions from residents, the Parish Council does now post information on its Facebook page.

Finally, we continue to do battle with potholes on behalf of residents. Once a serious pothole has been identified we photograph it and place a report on Fix My Street Northamptonshire. Our track record of getting potholes filled in has been fairly good but additional reports from residents will help speed up the repair process.

I look forward to serving the Council for a further year.

Neil Gordon-Lee

May 2024