

Wicken Parish Council

Chair's report

2020/2021

The impact of COVID on every resident of Wicken Parish has been significant and the pandemic has affected the pace at which normal Parish Council business can be conducted. Elections should have taken place in May 2020 but were postponed for a year and new rules were introduced which permitted meetings to continue virtually.

It would be appropriate to thank all of the Councillors who continued through this period for a year longer than expected. The recent uncontested election highlighted that three Councillors had decided to step down and not seek re-election. I offer my personal thanks to Celina Francklin, Marcus Rixon and Andrew Edmondson for everything they have contributed to the community over the years and I am sure you would all wish to join me in thanking them for their service.

Conducting our usual meetings by Zoom and latterly Teams has had many challenges with the July meeting being gate-crashed by individuals aiming to cause offence as well as the general difficulty of the public having access to the event when technical difficulties arise. At the time of writing, the law no longer allows Parish Meetings to be held virtually to ensure better public access. As the imminent danger of COVID begins to recede it should be possible to hold public meetings once more whilst adhering to whatever regulations are in force.

At the start of the pandemic, several individuals within the Parish stepped forward to volunteer to help residents and although not everyone has been called upon, there are those who have been steadfast in helping their neighbours particularly those who have had to shield. Particular mention should also be made of the support provided by John and Viv at the White Lion in providing meals twice a week, for those that wished them, throughout the last year.

One of the key projects which were delayed by the pandemic was resolving the question of which type of light fitting residents preferred for the nine remaining streetlights yet to be updated. A questionnaire was devised by the Parish Council which went to everyone on the electoral register at the time of issue at the beginning of 2021. Half of the electors responded and showed a significant preference for a heritage light fitting. An extraordinary meeting was held this March at which decisions were taken that all nine lights would be assumed to have the heritage lantern installed. Not all of the funds are yet available to complete this project and the new Council needs to re-tender the requirement after the lapse of time to confirm our costs.

The regular payments received from the solar farm were published online this year so that residents can see how that money is being spent since inception. The Solar Farm Committee

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met in February 2021 to discuss existing projects yet to be completed and to consider new ideas which can be taken forward once funds have been allocated to the streetlight project.

An additional solar farm was given planning permission to proceed in March 2021 on land adjacent to the existing one. Wicken will receive a payment for this project as a lump sum rather than an annual income once power from the farm actually comes on stream which may not be until next year or later.

One of the key policy decisions made during this year was that the Parish finances should show clearer segregation between funds received from the solar fund source and those received from the local authority by way of precept. A policy document will be published shortly which explains this objective. This led to a decision in January to raise the precept for Wicken to £8,000 per annum to reserve for the clerk's salary and to hold a general reserve of between 3 and 12 months precept. This means we can start to comply with audit comments from previous years.

Work has also continued to rectify the legal structure for the Village Hall to permit it to be let commercially. A new structure has been set up and agreed upon by the Charity Commissioners. We await the final transfer of the asset into the new structure. There will be three trustees; Marcus Rixon, Philip Ivens and Ian Howett. The building is currently let to an organisation which provides music therapy and other activities to young people and they now have exclusive use of the building and car park.

During the last year, permission has been granted by the local authority and the diocese for work to be done to renovate the War Memorial. The top part of the memorial was cleaned which left work to be completed on the plinth. Funds are available to meet the cost of this work from the Solar Farm and our stonemason is currently awaiting delivery of the stone.

A memorial service was held on the anniversary of VJ Day in the churchyard and a re-dedication service was held almost 100 years to the day since the original dedication in October 1920 which was attended by many people including descendants of individuals named on the memorial.

Many individuals consider that the main purpose of a Parish Council is to have a say in the planning decisions which affect the character and rural charm of the village. It came to light during lockdown that the now-defunct South Northants Council had made changes to the village confines, a key planning restriction, about which the Council were not aware. Certain

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internal local authority documents were not shared with the Parish Council at the appropriate time and our request for the information to be re-assessed has been declined. The subject will be taken up with the CEO of the new authority, West Northamptonshire.

In February 2021, Wicken experienced a flash flood which briefly put several gardens underwater as the flow tried to get past the two road bridges. Climatic change may mean we should expect these more frequently in the future and further work by the landowners whose land borders the brook may well be necessary. The Parish Council will facilitate action concerning the road bridges with the local authority. The Parish Council will also be seeking a volunteer to act as Flood Warden to help us focus on this issue in the future. Anyone may apply and should contact the Wicken Parish Clerk.

Local Authorities are obliged to follow a code of transparency in the way that business is conducted. Whilst the basics in terms of financial data and the minutes of meetings have been published many other statutory or audit requirements should also be freely available to residents. Councillors can and should be held to account for their actions and it should be clear what policies and procedures they are following. Work has been undertaken to devise specific policies for Wicken which will be taken forward and implemented by the new Council.

In the last few weeks, there have been several reports of rats being seen in the Deanshanger Road and Church Close areas. The responsibility to keep vermin under control rests with the Local Authority who have Pest Control Officers who can advise and eradicate infestations when located. Visits have been made to Wicken to establish what action can be taken but it has not been possible to identify specific nests. Advice has been given to try and eliminate any food sources which will encourage them to relocate.

It is fervently hoped that 2021/2022 will prove to be a more "normal" year for everyone within Wicken Parish and we can adjust to the new challenges which will surely come.

I look forward to continuing to serve the Parish Council in the future.

Neil Gordon-Lee

May 2021