

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF WICKEN PARISH COUNCIL

at 7.30pm on Wednesday 3rd May, 2023
in Wicken Sports Club

Attendance

Cllr. Neil Gordon-Lee: Chair
Cllr. Philip Ivens
Cllr. Petra Spencer-Jones
Cllr. Ian Howett
John Westlake: Clerk
Ken Pritchard: Councillor, West Northamptonshire Council

43/23 To elect a Chair for 2023/24

Councillors were asked they would like to put themselves forward for the office of Chair. All indicated that they were very happy for Cllr. Gordon-Lee to continue. This was formally proposed by Cllr. Howett, seconded by Cllr. Ivens and unanimously approved.

44/23 To elect a Vice Chair for 2023/24

The Chair asked councillors if any of them would like to put themselves forward as Vice Chair. In the absence of a response he deferred this item until the next meeting on 5th July, when the full council should be in attendance.

45/23 To formally appoint a Responsible Financial Officer

The Chair explained that although John Westlake had been acting as Responsible Financial Officer since his appoint as Clerk in September 2023 he had not been formally appointed; the Internal Auditor had pointed out that it was necessary for the Council to approve his appointment. Therefore he proposed that John Westlake be appointed as Responsible Financial Officer. This was seconded by Cllr. Howett and duly approved.

46/23 To receive and accept any apologies for absence

Apologies for absence had been received from Cllr. Andrew Stockbridge and Cllr. Rachel Sithole.

47/23 To approve the minutes of the Parish Council Meeting held on 1st March 2023 and the Extraordinary Meeting of the Parish Council held on 25th April, 2023.

The minutes of the previous meeting were approved and signed by the Chair.

48/23 Members' interests: Councillors are invited to declare disclosable pecuniary interests and other interests in items on the agenda as required by the Wicken Parish Council Code of Conduct for Members and by the Localism Act 2011

The Chair referred to the recent meeting with the Internal Auditor when it was explained that information on changes to the parish council, including members' interests, sent to the Monitoring Officer at WDC were not being actioned. The auditor's

Chairman's initials

comment that the Register of Members' Interests should be published on the Council's website was acknowledged, but it would be preferred if this was a copy of the WDC register.

49/23 To consider filling a vacancy on the Council by co-option.

The Chair reminded the meeting that there is a vacancy on the Council and encouraged all to identify individuals who may be interested in becoming a parish councillor.

50/23 To receive a report from WNC Councillor Ken Pritchard.

Cllr. Pritchard reported to the meeting as follows:

- WDC should achieve a balanced budget for the year 2023/23. This is remarkable considering that in December there was a £30m deficit and that significant extra resources had been allocated to Adult Social Care (£10m) and Childrens' Services (£9m). In response to a question from the Chair he explained that the balanced budget had been achieved by "rationalisation" within WDC; not by cutting services. This did not necessitate redundancies.
- The application for the Furtho Pit AL5 development has been rejected by the Environment Agency. He explained that this was not necessarily the final position which may not be finalised for three or four months.
- A proposal to build 67 homes in Deanshanger has been rejected. This did not proceed to inquiry, the application being withdrawn. Two further applications have been made for 190 and 187 homes in Deanshanger. These will come before the Planning Committee in June.
- The construction of Sponne Car Park in Towcester has commenced.
- WDC have purchased the BHS and Marks and Spencer buildings in Northampton for redevelopment as residential flats.
- The Market Square renovation in Northampton is underway.
- Planning Committees are being reformed. The three current committees for South Northants, Daventry, Northampton Town will be reduced to two.
- Recommendations have been made to the Boundary Commission. With respect to Deanshanger Ward the number of councillors is likely to be reduced from three to two.
- The Strategic Care Initiative was set up by Government in July 2022. It is a local area partnership between local health authorities, the police the voluntary sector and the care sector; seeking to have a co-ordinated response to relevant issues.
- Central government has donated £1.6m to fill in pot holes. WNC has set aside a further £1m for this purpose.
- The possibility that the black bin collection will be at three weekly intervals, rather than the current two weeks, is still uncertain.

Cllr. Howett asked for an update on the construction of the A5/Towcester link road. Cllr. Pritchard explained that it is still not decided how the road will join the A43 near Towcester. The latest estimate is that the link road will be completed in mid 2024. Cllr. Howett also enquired about planning for construction, e.g. housing either side of the new road. There are no firm proposals on this.

51/23 Public Forum

No further points in addition to those discussed at the preceding Annual Parish meeting were raised

52/23 To consider and formally re- adopt certain policies and procedures

The Chair referred to the policies and procedures listed on the agenda. The first three are legal requirements and should be reviewed at the beginning of every new council year:

- Financial Regulations
- Member Code of Conduct
- Standing Orders

Danny Moody of NCalc has advised that these are in the process of being reviewed. In the meantime the Chair proposed that these are re-adopted unchanged.

The following internal policies are considered still to be fit for purpose:

- Freedom of Information Act
- E Mail Policy

The Chair proposed that all policies and procedures listed above should be re-adopted unchanged. This was approved.

53/23 To consider Internal Audit Report

The Chair reported that the Internal Audit, which had been circulated to all councilors, did not highlight any major issues; just a few minor changes to implement. He proposed that the audit be adopted; this was approved. He highlighted the fact that the council's expenditure in 2022/23 exceeded £25,000 which will mean that there will be a more detailed external audit (which will take place in June/July) than in the past.

54/23 To consider and approve Governance and Accounting Statements for 2022/23

The Chair explained the nature and purpose of the Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR), which had been circulated to councillors. He asked for approval from the council, which was duly granted.

55/23 To note update on standing items.

The Chair referred to the update which had been circulated to all councilors. He mentioned that the new Wicken signs had been installed and thanked Giles Butterfield and Fenlon Dunphy in this respect.

56/23 Finance

- The Clerk explained that he had, some months before, applied to Lloyds Bank to be granted authority to have sight of accounts and set up payments, but not to authorise payments. (The relevant financial regulations preclude the Clerk from authorising payments.) Authorisation of payments by two councilors is necessary. However the Bank had granted him full delegated authority, including the power to authorise payments, explaining that there are only two levels of authority i.e. full delegated authority and "sight only". After several lengthy telephone conversations, including with the Bank's "Head Office Complaints Department" he is applying to reduce his powers to "sight only". This will leave Cllr. Howett and Cllr. Spencer-Jones to set up and authorise payments.
- The Chair pointed out that the internal auditor mentioned that councillors should be aware of the bank balances, therefore they have been documented in the agenda.
- The Chair asked if there were any queries on the payments and receipts listed on the agenda; there were none.

57/23 To consider planning issues.

The Chair referred to the recently circulated planning application for development at Folly Fields Farmhouse, which does not appear to be problematical. However, Cllr. Ivens could not remember receiving details of this so the Clerk undertook to forward them to him again.

He stated that there appeared to be an inconsistency with the planning decisions. He used for examples the cases of a property at 11 Church Close, where the application was declined because of the size of the proposed development, and a property, within the conservation area, at 24 Cross Tree Road where WNC had raised issues on a retrospective application for a new porch because of the proximity to a listed building, but subsequently approved the application. He asked Cllr. Pritchard to look into the rationale behind this decision. He pointed out that residents often seek the advice of the Parish Council before submitting an application so more clarity is required. Cllr. Pritchard agreed to make the necessary enquiries.

The Chair stated that there had been a tendency for the Parish Council not to make any comment on planning applications unless it had a problem with the proposal. He recommended that in the future the council should respond to all application. This was agreed.

58/23 To consider action on playground maintenance

Cllr. Spencer-Jones referred to the council's previous decision that only competent professionals should be engaged on maintenance of the playground she has obtained quotations from RPM as follows:

- To replace missing bolts and caps, and to remove algae etc. £828 inc. VAT. This would be within the budgeted sum of £1000, and was approved.
- To clean tiled surfaces £546 inc. VAT. Cllr. Spencer- Jones asked if this could be carried out more economically Cllr. Ivens undertook to investigate.
- Remedial work on basketball net: £588 inc.VAT. However she queried if this would be money well spent bearing in mind the playing surface is not fit for purpose. It was decided not to proceed with this because the condition of the net does not represent a risk of injury.
- Noticeboard displaying names of responsible parties to contact in the event of a problem: £450 inc. VAT. It was decided that these could be erected by the Parish Council at less cost.

59/23 To consider tree planting project.

The Chair referred to a risk assessment he had produced. The main obstacles to the project proceeding are:

- No written permission from Paul Ward, who farms the land on which it is proposed to plant the trees, has been produced.
- There is no viable maintenance plan e.g. for watering the trees.

He recommended that unless these issues are resolved before the July meeting of the Parish Council the project cannot go ahead this autumn, as envisaged. Instead, alternative ideas should be considered. This was agreed.

60/23 To consider maintenance of trees on Village Green.

Cllr. Howett expressed his concern at the state of the trees on the Village Green, e.g., ivy infestation, ground growth. The trees need "tidying up" with the canopy level starting at about six feet. He offered to undertake the work, but requires somewhere to deposit and burn the debris, which could be on the grass verge, beyond Pound Close, on Whittlebury Road. Alternative sites for this were suggested, and this work will now proceed in the autumn.

61/23 To note future meeting dates

The next meetings are scheduled for 5th July 2023, 6th September 2023 and 1st November, 2023.

62/23 To note/consider items for next meeting

The Chair had been approached with respect to cars being parked on the triangle on Cross Tree Road. He suggested that an approach is made to the Solar Farm Committee to formulate a costed proposal to resurface the tarmac area in the triangle, and erect a barrier to prevent access by motor vehicles. This would enable an assessment to be made of the cost viability of that and various other solutions discussed.

Councillor Neil Gordon-Lee
Chair, Wicken Parish Council