

HEADCORN PARISH COUNCIL

The Parish Office, Headcorn Village Hall, Church Lane, Headcorn, TN27 9N

Tel: 01622 892496 Email: clerk @headcornpc.org.uk



HEADCORN ANNUAL PARISH MEETING 2021

Minutes of the Annual Parish meeting held on 28th April 2021, held virtually under The Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority Meetings) (England) Regulations 2020 into force to allow local authorities to conduct meetings remotely.

Cllr Lyn Selby presided and there were 10 present.

1. Introduction

Cllr Selby opened the meeting and warmly welcomed all attending.

2. Minutes

The Minutes of the Annual Parish Meeting of the 24th April 2019 were approved.

3. Report by Chairman

This time last year, I think we all thought “it will be all over by Christmas” – but here we are just slowly coming out of another lockdown and Covid 19 is still with us, though thanks to the vaccines we are in a much better position than some countries.

The past year has been possibly the strangest, and for many the most difficult since World War 2.

Certainly, it has been a strange year for Headcorn Parish Council (HPC), with “The Local Authority (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority Meetings) (England) Regulations 2020” still in force until May 7th, 2021. Many councils have pressed for an extension to this legislation beyond May 7th, in some cases because they do not have the rooms to use to enable social distancing (how quickly that phrase has become part of the language). However, the Government says it would need additional primary legislation introduced and they do not have the time given their already full programme. So the next Full Council (FC) meeting will be back in Longmeadow Hall (Covid secure) and the Cllrs will be *real* people.

Over the past year, HPC has continued to work - contrary to the resident who announced HPC had “shut down” because of Covid. The Parish Office may indeed have been closed, but Cllrs and Clerks were working on, using Teams, Zoom and even Sykpe on occasions. “Struggling on” may be a more appropriate phrase given the difficulties experienced, mainly by those living outside the built-up area of the parish. Lockdown certainly highlighted the poor quality of broadband in parts of this parish, and indeed in other parts of the county.

Last year it was decreed that we did not need to hold the legally required Annual Parish Meeting, we were just required to have the Chair’s Report on the website at some point. This year we *are* required to hold an Annual Parish Meeting with a Chair’s report – quite what has changed I am not sure as we are not totally out of lockdown yet and this meeting must be held before June 1st.

As there is an election on May 6th (postponed from 2020 due to Covid 19) with some Cllrs retiring and new Cllrs not signing in until May 12th, it seemed appropriate to hold the

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meeting in April as usual and hence virtually. So, no nibbles and wine again this year I am afraid.

The Annual Parish Meeting (APM) or the Annual Meeting for the Parish is only required to have two items on the agenda – agreeing the minutes of the previous APM and the Chair's Report. It is essentially a meeting for the parishioners to see/put a face to their representatives i.e. the Cllrs, and for the Cllrs to meet and speak to parishioners, either during a period for questions, or during the refreshment break (the nibbles and wine). So, in a "normal" year, it is to be hoped all Cllrs attend.

But this is not a normal year, so this will not be a normal report. I will not go through the mountain of issues that FC has considered but point you to the Chair's report for 2019-20 which contains many details about issues arising and the working of the HPC. It is one of the frustrating things about being a Cllr – the time it takes to resolve issues, especially in respect to planning. So many items from last year would appear this year and still not be resolved. To get the bureaucracy of the higher level of Local Government and even Central Government moving it is necessary at times to keep on asking, pressing for change, presenting the argument in another way or with more facts etc. If something is needed for the parish then the Cllrs should not necessarily take no for an answer.

However, I will report a few new items, changes, and any good moves forward.

Postponement of election

This was an unusual occurrence again because of Covid 19. Several Cllrs had been looking forward to retirement after years of service, myself included and had to make a difficult decision. Walk away from HPC at a time when there were already too few Cllrs or put aside their plans for retirement and continue as a Cllr. I need to thank here Cllrs Dungey and James who, against their inclination, agreed to stay on for a while and then in September, when expressly requested, agreed to stay on for the whole year. It would have been difficult to run the council without them. I decided to stay on but had resigned myself to another year away from my garden.

It was hoped that during an election period more candidates would come forward to fill the vacancies – HPC is currently allowed 13 Cllrs due to the size of the parish. The number of Cllrs allowed by the Electoral Officer is related to the size of the population of the parish and, with the recent growth of the parish, it will not be long before HPC reaches the level where 15 Cllrs would be allowed.

Unfortunately, only 8 parishioners stood for election so for the 3rd of fourth time in a row, the election is uncontested. Looking at the MBC Elections news, of 25 parish councils in the borough with Cllrs up for election, only 3 appear to be contested. This is a sad state of affairs – it is not that long ago when such elections were fiercely contested with leaflets through doors etc, and now HPC has barely enough Cllrs to cover the work without massive strain on the other sides of their life. It is to be hoped that additional Cllrs can be co-opted swiftly.

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However, congratulations to all the newly elected Cllrs – 5 “old” Cllrs -Thomas, Thorogood, Pyman, Davies and Mather, Cllr Williams who joined HPC earlier this year, and two new Cllrs Glanville and Hammond.

A major feature of this year, Covid aside, has been the changes in the staff employed by HPC

Staffing Issues

As recorded in the 2019-20 Chair’s Report, Our Clerk, Caroline Carmichael, had intended to leave us in the Autumn of 2020 to go and live in her new house in India.

After advertising and interviewing a short list of candidates, Stefan Christodoulou was appointed Clerk, Designate and joined HPC in January 2020. The plan was for Caroline to train Stefan into the ways of a Parish Clerk who is both clerk and the Responsible Financial Officer plus give him time to work for his Certificate in Local Council Administration (Cilca) qualification from the Society of Local Councils Clerks (SLCC) and attend Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC) training sessions.

However, Covid19 changed that plan. Caroline is stranded in England with all her furniture and possessions in India and it was a difficult year to train a new clerk, with so much closed and so many other Covid related issues happening and training courses ceasing to run. In addition, the Clerk’s office played a very useful part as a covid centre of information for the various bodies coming to Headcorn and for introducing residents to centres of help, as well as making the odd emergency delivery.

In the interest of duty of care to our staff and of keeping HPC running efficiently in difficult times, it was agreed that Caroline should remain with us until such a time it seemed likely India would let her enter. This decision has been reviewed over the months and currently the situation in India is bleak. During the additional time she has been with us, Caroline as well as training Stefan and providing him with written aids for the future, has taken on projects such as sorting out the actual number of Gypsy and Traveller (G&T) sites in Headcorn and the actual status of their planning applications. From experience I would expect this to be more accurate than the MBC planning department information!

For some time before Caroline was thinking of leaving, due to the amount of work, Cllrs had been discussing the idea of an Assistant Clerk, working around 16hrs a week. To aid Stefan in the future, after advertising and an interview process, Susie Barkess has been appointed and joined us as Assistant Clerk.

Our team of lengthsmen is also changing. Health issues and ano domini have been creeping up on our lengthsmen and a reduction of hours has been agreed. A Head Lengthsman, Jason, has been appointed and will take over the role of managing the work of the lengthsmen from the Clerk. It cannot be stressed too much the value Malcolm and Peter have brought to the work of HPC, with their hard work, inventive skills, and concern to keep the village

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looking its best. It is not quite clear what hours they will be working in the future, but the situation is under review.

Departures and Arrivals

During the year, very sadly we lost Cllr Simon Evenden, at an early age, due to a long-term illness – he will be missed, not least for his smile! He was particularly interested in “Access for All” and had been campaigning for a lift or similar at Headcorn Station. It is to be hoped that in the not too distant future Cllrs will be able to achieve this aim for him.

Cllr Hancock also left the HPC this year shortly after taking over the Staffing and Open Spaces Chairs. We thank her for her contribution to HPC and wish her well.

On a positive note, Cllr Williams was co-opted onto the Council.

A notable sad public loss was the passing of Prince Phillip, Duke of Edinburgh – parish councils have a specified part to play in the loss of a national figure but as with his funeral, this was curtailed by Covid19. However, a letter of condolence was sent to The Queen, flowers were placed on the war memorial and instead of the specified book of condolence, parishioners were directed to the national online link. In addition, at the following FC meeting, Cllrs observed some moments of silence whilst we remembered his achievements and service to the nation.

Some recent random items of Interest

- The Methodists have sadly had to put their church up for sale due to the running costs overcoming the active members. As it is a unique building in the conservation area, it is of importance to Headcorn and even more so as HPC owns the burial ground at the back and has right of way across the grounds at the front of the building. Cllrs have been seeking ways in which to support the Community Group seeking to purchase it and run it as a community hub. Currently the “Community right to bid” option is being explored.
- The burial ground extension through Longmeadow is well under way though it has been looking very bleak as trees were removed and the ground prepared for the next stages. MBC planning are involved and the land has to be consecrated which all takes time.
- The Lych gate at St Peter and St Paul’s Church is owned by the HPC having been commissioned by HPC to celebrate the Millennium. Some repairs are needed but then it should last for many years. In the meantime, as it is on church land the permission of the Diocese has to be obtained.
- After waiting many years, it looks as if the Planning Inquiry on The Meadows, G&T site is going ahead this year. A planning consultant has been employed to make and present the case on behalf of HPC. The result is important as if permission is granted it will leave the way open for a large additional area of greenfield land to be used in a similar fashion.
- The Planning Committee having deliberated on the first contentious licence application since the HPC began to be consulted on licenses, it looks as if a micro pub selling only wine and craft ale will be opening in the High Street.

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- Despite the difficulties with virtual meetings, due to work by both Clerks and Cllrs, links have been maintained with MBC, KCC our MP, The Police and various developers etc etc which should be useful going forward.

Finally, I must thank the Clerks, in particular Caroline who has been a tremendous support over the past years -helping to open and establish the Parish Office, always there with mines of information and willing to find out if she did not know an answer. Her concern for Headcorn and its parishioners will be missed.

Also, my thanks to all the Cllrs especially the Chairs of Committees Cllr Thorogood (Staffing), Cllr Pyman (Planning), and Cllr James (Open Spaces). Special thanks to Cllr Thomas who has been Vice Chair for the past year after the previous Vice Chair Cllr Dungey stood down to allow Cllr Thomas to shadow the Chair, allowing him some insight into what it might be like to be Chair.

Special thanks to Cllr Dungey who is retiring after 20yrs and to Cllr James retiring after 8yrs - both have been Chairs of committees and have worked hard for HPC.

I will not be returning in May other than to open the May Full Council Meeting. After 45years as a part of HPC I will finally be retiring to my garden. During my time on the HPC ,I have served as the first Chair of the Planning Committee , Vice Chair for several years and finally Chair for 9yrs. Frustrating though it may be at times, I shall miss being a Cllr after all those years -it will be very strange. Although it is difficult to highlight one thing, I can see many ways in which HPC has actively stood up/worked for Headcorn with positive results. It is viewed by many as a professional, caring council open to the parishioners it serves, which is as it should be – HPC will continue and successfully I am sure -good luck to all the new Cllrs who will take it forward.

Meeting closed at 7.53 pm

Signed By:

Date: