

Minutes of the Parish Council meeting held in the Community Hall on Tuesday 16 May 2023

Present:	Cllr. Emma Waltham (Chairperson)	Cllr. John Meischke (Vice-Chair)
	Cllr. Nicola White (Vice Chair)	Cllr. Michael Brooks
	Cllr. Christine Dinnin	Cllr. Catherine Hammon
	Cllr. Annabel Kirk	Cllr. Ian Knight
	Cllr. Helen McCash	Clerk: Jane Allsop
	District Cllr. Joe Thomas	

1. Apologies for absence

Apologies: None.

2. Public participation

Cllr. Waltham welcomed our newly elected District Councillor, Joe Thomas, to the meeting and congratulated him on his win.

3. Chair's/Clerk's report

One additional item.

- Mud on High Street footpath – refer to item directly after 5 b 9, Review of actions.

4. Declaration of interests

Cllrs. McCash declared a pecuniary interest in the following items.

- 5 c 5, Action points resolved - Deposit the Parish Council accounts for the year ending 31 March 2023 with Stuart McCash for auditing.
- 5 c 6, Action points resolved - Deposit the Community Hall accounts for the year ending 31 March 2023 with McCash & Hay for auditing.
- 8 a, Budget, and Finance Sub-Committee
 - Internal Audit of the Parish Council accounts for the year ended 31 March 2023
 - Approval of the Annual Return of the Parish Council accounts for the year ended 31 March 2023
 - Audit of the Community Hall accounts for the year ended 31 March 2023

5. Minutes of the last meeting.

a) Acceptance

- **Minutes of the Parish Council meeting held on Tuesday 18 April 2023**
Parish Councillors agreed that the minutes be approved and signed.

b) Review of actions

- 1. Remove litterbin post on the sportsfield when the weather improves and inspect bin by teen shelter**
Cllr. Meischke said that post has been removed and the hole in the ground filled in.
- 2. Fit parts supplied by Wicksteed Leisure**
Outstanding due to the wet ground conditions. **Action: J. Meischke/M. Smith**
- 3. Relocate junior football goal**
Cllr. Meischke said that he is trying to agree a suitable place to relocate the goal to. He has spoken with the Cricket Club who said certain locations would affect their sightlines. He will be speaking to the Tennis Club. Cllr. Knight suggested contacting committee members Chris Paxman or Sarah Dennison. **Action: J. Meischke**
- 4. Chase North Herts Council for litterbin map**
The Clerk has been unsuccessful in obtaining a litterbin map from North Herts Council. Cllr. Meischke suggested that the Clerk contact Jon Hart (EHDC). The Clerk said she had contacted him in the first instance and had been referred to North Herts Council. She agreed to contact him again. **Action: J. Allsop**
- 5. Source Rhododendron bush if Grassroots cannot find a suitable replacement**
Cllr. Meischke said he had spoken to Ben Storey of Grassroots and, as agreed at the site meeting, Grassroots will be sourcing all replacement plants for the War Memorial site, including the Rhododendron bush.

6. Inspect foundation of the Ornate village signpost

Cllr. Meischke said he had inspected the Ornate village signpost foundation. The foundation itself is strong and the post does not move. However, the concrete collar installed to protect the post from grass strimmer damage is cracked. As the collar serves no structural purpose, only protects the post, no action is required.

7. Contact County Cllr. Ken Crofton to find out when the resurfacing of this footpath will take place

The Clerk e-mailed County Cllr. Ken Crofton about the resurfacing of the footpath behind the George and Dragon. He replied on 20 April as follows.

'I am pleased to advise Councillors that I am on top of this one. At my Highways meeting on 12 April, I have authorised the expenditure from my personal Highways budget. Officers have been granted permission by the kind landlady at the George & Dragon to use the rear of the car park for all the heavy equipment. We will be given a start date fairly soon for fully resurfacing the section between the two pedestrian gates.'

8. Reply to Stephen Skelhorn re Holly hedge and grass verge on Rectory Lane

As agreed at the April meeting, Cllr. Dinnin e-mailed all Parish Councillors her draft response to Stephen Skelhorn. Parish Councillors agreed the draft letter should be sent.

Action: J. Allsop

9. Respond to Julian Humphreys re condition of footpath near the War Memorial roundabout

Cllr. White e-mailed Julian Humphrey's on 21 April (via the Clerk's e-mail address) as agreed at the April Parish Council meeting. Mr. Humphreys has since e-mailed on several occasions. It was agreed that Cllr. White e-mail again confirming that EHDC is the correct route for footpath clearance, expressing the Parish Council's sincere hope that his neighbour is making a good recovery and apologising for the late response due to all the recent local council election activities.

Action: N. White

• Footpath outside the Fish Factory

Cllr. Kirk has been contacted by a resident who is concerned about the condition of the High Street footpath outside the former Fish factory building which now forms part of Newmans Court. Rainwater from the roof of this building drains directly onto the footpath. On the other side of the footpath is a flowerbed. Earth from the flowerbed collects on the footpath, which when wet becomes muddy and very slippery.

It was agreed to e-mail EHDC asking them to clear the footpath to avoid someone slipping in wet weather.

Action: J. Allsop

c) Action points resolved

1. Write to EHDC re planning application for 30 Moorymead Close (3/23/0572/HH)
2. Write to EHDC re planning application for 14 High Street (3/23/0616/HH)
3. Write to EHDC re planning application for 44 High Street (3/23/0750/HH)
4. Draft a letter to Laura Guy (Principal Planning Officer at EHDC) for Parish Councillors approval
5. Deposit the Parish Council accounts for the year ending 31 March 2023 with Stuart McCash for auditing
6. Deposit the Community Hall accounts for the year ending 31 March 2023 with McCash & Hay for auditing
7. Arrange Parish Council payment for Microsoft 365 annual fee
8. Write article to be posted on Facebook and the Parish Council website re vandalism of the outside toilets
9. Give Cllrs. Kirk and White a set of keys to the Community Hall
10. Contact the Cronies Football Club (Stevenage) re use of Football pitch
11. Obtain quotations to repair the football goal mouths
12. Inspect wooden benches re refurbishment or replacement
13. Source Rhododendron bush if Grassroots cannot find a suitably large replacement
14. Post Parish Council Vacancy notices on the Facebook, the Parish Council website and notice boards

6. Planning**a) Applications**

Cllr. McCash reported on the following planning applications, which he had e-mailed to all Parish Councillors prior to the meeting and no comment responses were agreed.

ii. 14 High Street (3/23/0776/FUL)

Retrospective application for the partial demolition of the existing dwelling (retention of the principal elevation) and reconstruction of dwelling with an additional storey.

• 44 High Street (3/23/0751/LBC)

Replacement of shed with garden room

b) Decisions**i) 5 Lammas Road (3/23/0370/HH)**

Two storey rear and single storey front extension

- EHDC permission granted

7. Specific items

a) Neighbourhood plan

Cllr. Waltham said she had met with Thomas Abel Smith who is in no hurry to progress the 3G pitches but is still keen on the idea. It looks likely that the Woodhall estate land the A602 contractors have been using whilst roadwork improvements have been carried-out will now be restored to its former condition. The Woodhall Estate are also in no hurry to develop their Greenbelt land on the Stevenage end of the High Street.

Fairview New Homes remain keen to avoid completing a master plan policy. Cllr. Waltham and Jacqueline Veater will meet with Laura Guys of EHDC this week to discuss the possibilities of using the Watton-at-Stone Neighbourhood plan as their policy plan instead. Mehron Kirk is quite keen on a master plan being submitted. However, advise from Jacqueline Veater is that it is too onerous a task. The Parish Council support this decision. Cllr. Waltham said that she feels confident that the Environment Agency would soon be at the stage when the basis of an agreement can be made over the footbridge over the river Beane.

Charles Clark has been in discussions with HCC about the re-routing of the fencing up by the school to enable a permanent access from the Gatekeeper estate to footpath 17 at the end of Glebe Close.

Cllr. Waltham said that the Parish Council pressed pause on the Neighbourhood plan because of Environment Agency issues, but she felt the time was now right to ask EHDC to appoint an examiner. This was agreed by Parish Councillors.

Action: E. Waltham

b) High Street traffic issues

Cllr. White said that the High Street working group met on Friday 28 April for a catch up.

Various issues were discussed including the fact that the buses are not stopping outside the Bull car park. This had been highlighted by Cllr. Waltham, who has a contact at HCC re installing a proper bus stop point. This could aid progressing passing bays/passing places. Cllr. White said she had already shown NP committee member Mehron Kirk her High Street plans and he had made no comments.

Cllr. Waltham to give Cllr. White the HCC contact details so she can progress this item. **Action: E. Waltham**

Cllr. White to share her High Street report and proposals with Joe Thomas and follow up with Cllr. Waltham's contact to see if we could leverage anything to cover all the High Street proposals while they look at the bus stop area.

Action: E. Waltham/N. White

Note: Dan Tancock is the HCC contact.

c) Co-option of a Parish Councillor to fill current vacancy

Cllr. Meischke said that the Parish Council had received an application from Clive Bell (member of the Neighbourhood Plan Committee) to fill the Parish Council vacancy. Richard Lewis and Mark Richardson have shown an interest in finding out more of what is involved in becoming a Parish Councillor.

Cllr. Waltham said that she supported Clive Bell's application as both her and Cllr. Hammon need him to support the submission of the Neighbourhood plan in its final stages. She said that some of the agencies will only speak to Parish Councillors and not to the Neighbourhood plan committee members. If she is to continue in her role as Chair of the Parish Council, she will not have sufficient time to deal with the Neighbourhood plan issues as well.

After debating the issue, all Parish Councillors were in favour of co-opting Clive Bell.

The Clerk to notify Clive Bell of his appointment and ask him to sign the declaration of acceptance of office as soon as possible.

Action: J. Allsop

Cllr. Meischke to contact both Richard Lewis and Mark Richardson.

Action: J. Meischke

d) Ferreting Licenses

Bob Adams was issued with the following ferreting licenses in 2022.

- The Lammas
- Allotment
- Watton Green
- Cottage site at Watton Green

It was agreed to issue new ferreting licenses to Bob Adams for 2023.

Action: J. Allsop

e) License across Cottage site

Parish Councillors agreed to renew the licence for Temporary Access across the Land known as the "Old Cottage Site", at Watton Green, to Mrs Pam Filer (of Brambles, Watton Green). The previous licences were issued to her husband, the late Mr. Denis Filer.

Action: E. Waltham/J. Allsop

f) **Flooding in the village**

The Clerk was contacted by a Rectory Lane resident (via Facebook Messenger) whose property was flooded during recent heavy rain. She forwarded the pictures and a video to all Parish Councillors. The homeowner said that the water was coming across the fields, over the school site and into her garden and that of her neighbours, with some flooding occurring inside some of the properties. Parish Councillors acknowledged that the drainage system, which is Victorian, was not fit for purpose, however this issue is an HCC and water authorities' responsibility and beyond Parish Council control.

8. Reportsa) **Sub-Committees****Budget & Finance**

Cllr. White reported on the following items.

• **Monthly accounts**

Watton-at-Stone Parish Council		
Petty Cash - Receipts		Petty cash – Payments
None		None
Payments		
Grassroots	War memorial Maintenance – March 2023	50.40
Bidwells	sportsfield extension ½ year rent	125.00
Wages and salaries	April 2023	1,490.30
Microsoft	Microsoft 365	59.99
East Herts Council	Empty 3 x dog bins on 65 occasions between 01.04.23 – 31.03.24	554.14
BT	Phone calls – April 2023	24.28
Grassroots	War memorial Maintenance – April 2023	50.40
GoogleCloud	Google workspace - direct debit - May 2023	9.20
		2,363.71
Receipts		
Nationwide	Interest	98.80
EHDC	Precept – half year payment	21,272.50
Santander	interest on deposit account on 30.04.23	10.43
		21,381.73
Watton-at-Stone Community Hall		
Petty Cash – Receipts		Petty Cash -Payments
Tony Silverstri – Pavilion	30.00	None
Archery – Main Hall	70.00	
Table tennis -Main Hall	240.00	
Rosemary Brown – Pavilion & meeting	55.00	
		395.00
Payments		
British Gas	Gas	254.84
Wages	April 2023	275.00
British gas	Electricity	101.22
		631.06
Receipts		
Linda Evans	Pavilion hire	18.00
Begonia Garcia	Meeting room	76.00
Post Office	Cash deposit	10.00
Santander	Interest	9.84
HNM Ramblers	Pavilion	40.00
Rachel Lawrence	Main Hall Pavilion 2nd 50% MH = Pav 13.05	33.25
		187.09

Parish Councillors approved the payments.

• **Internal Audit of the Parish Council accounts for the year ended 31 March 2023**

Stuart McCash has completed the internal audit of the Parish Council accounts for the year ended 31 March 2023 with a clean bill of health. Parish Councillors approved payment of Mr. McCash's invoice for £283.

Action: J. Allsop

- **Approval of the Annual Return of the Parish Council accounts for the year ended 31 March 2023**

The partially completed AGAR form was e-mailed to Parish Councillors on 15 May.

The Parish Council went through the annual governance statement and the following questions were answered as listed below.

Section 1 – Annual governance statement	
We acknowledge as members of the Watton-at-Stone Parish Council our responsibility for ensuring that there is a sound system of internal control, including arrangements for the preparation of the accounting statements. We confirm, to the best of our knowledge and belief, with respect to the accounting statements for the year ended 31 March 2021 that,	
1. We have put in place arrangements for effective financial management during the year, and for the preparation of the accounting statements.	Yes
2. We have maintained an adequate system of internal control, including measures designed to prevent and detect fraud and corruption and reviewed its effectiveness.	Yes
3. We took all reasonable steps to assure ourselves that there are no matters of actual or potential non-compliance with laws, regulations and Proper Practice that could have a significant financial effect on the ability of this authority to conduct its business or manage its finances.	Yes
4. We provided proper opportunity during the year for the exercise of electors' rights in accordance with the requirements of the Accounts and Audit Regulations.	Yes
5. We carried out an assessment of the risks facing this authority and took appropriate steps to manage those risks, including the introduction of internal controls and/or external insurance cover where required.	Yes
6. We have maintained throughout the year an adequate and effective system of internal audit of the accounting records and control systems.	Yes
7. We took appropriate action on all matters raised in reports from internal and external audit.	Yes
8. We considered whether any litigation, liabilities or commitments, events, or transactions, occurring either during or after the year-end, have a financial impact on the authority and, where appropriate have included them in the accounting statements.	Yes
9. Trust funds including charitable. In our capacity as the sole managing trustee, we discharged our responsibility fund(s) assets, including financial reporting and, if required, independent examination or audit	N/A

Parish Councillors agreed that the Annual governance statement detailed in section one (listed above) of the Annual Return, together with section two, the accounting statement 2022/2023, be approved and signed by the Chairman and the Clerk.

The Clerk will e-mail the completed Annual Return and relevant documentation to PKF Littlejohn (official auditors) on or before Monday 3 July 2023. She will also advertise the public inspection dates, which are 5 June to 14 July 2023.

Action: J. Allsop

- **Audit of the Community Hall accounts for the year ended 31 March 2023**

All Parish Councillors were e-mailed (on 15 May) a copy of the audited Community Hall accounts for the year ended 31 March 2023. Parish Councillors approved the audited Community Hall accounts and agreed that Cllr. Waltham sign a copy of the accounts, one of which will be returned to McCash and Hay.

Action: J. Allsop

- **Parish Council and Community Hall insurance renewal on 1 June 2023**

In 2022, the Parish Council renewed the BHIB insurance policy for a three-year deal until 2025. This policy covers both the Parish Council and Community Hall. BHIB are insurance brokers and are the official partner of the National Association of Local Councils (NALC). Our policy is with Aviva who are the UK's largest insurer. The renewal premium is £1,637.22 compared to £1,555.24 last year, an increase of just over 5%. Parish Councillors approved payment of the renewal premium.

Action: J. Allsop

- **Bank signatories**

It was agreed to make the following bank signatory changes to the four Santander accounts.

- Remove former Cllrs. Michael Smith and Stephen Block.
- Add Cllr. Nicola White as a signatory.

Action: J. Allsop

Community Hall Trustees

Cllr. Meischke reported on the following items.

- **Junior Football Goal post**
Refer to item 5 b, Review of actions - Relocate junior football goal. **Action: J. Allsop**
- **Car Park side doors paint**
The doors on the car park side of the Community Hall need painting. Cllr. Meischke to ask Mark Blacktin to quote for doing this work. **Action: J. Meischke**
- **Next season Football usage**
Cllr. Meischke was pleased to report that it looks almost certain that Youth Football will be using the sportsfield next season. It is expected that the eldest group, under 16 years of age, will be using the facilities.
- **Appoint 2 new Trustees**
Cllr. Meischke said that two new Trustees need to be appointed to replace Steve Block and David Stock. These appointments will be made later this year.
- **First Aid kit**
Cllr. Dinnin said several items in the first aid box are either missing or out of date. She has given the Clerk a list of items that need purchasing. The Clerk said she will order these items from Amazon. **Action: J. Allsop**

Environment Sub-Committee

As Cllr. Kirk was only elected earlier tonight as Chair of the Environment Sub-Committee, Cllr. Dinnin reported on the following items.

- **Sportsfield**
Cllr. Meischke said that the new grass contractor, Nick Darter, has weed killed around the Community Hall building but not removed the dead weeds yet. Nick has been asked to weed the flowerbed as a one off, which was not in the specification of grass cutting and maintenance work given to him. Hopefully once the shrubs grow up again the weeds will no longer be a problem.
Nick has also been asked to quote for improving and reseeding the football goal mouth areas. The Clerk to chase Nick for his quotations. **Action: J. Allsop**
- **War Memorial Garden**
Grassroots will be purchasing and planting all the shrubs required for the War Memorial Garden.
- **Riverbanks on the Lammas**
Cllr. Dinnin said that the riverbank area with brown netting looks very bad. Affinity Water have said that they will be carrying out hydro-seeding in these areas and on the newly installed gabion baskets. They have agreed to reinstate the footpath opposite the gabion baskets, which was damaged when heavy equipment was taken to the site.
- **Allotments**
Cllr. Dinnin said that the last vacant allotment plot has been let.
She and Michael Smith attended the Allotment and Garden Association's AGM on 2 May. The association is financially settled and will have a stand at the Church fete on 29 May.
Cllr. Dinnin to inform the Allotment and Garden Association that Cllr. Kirk is now Chairman of the Environment Sub-Committee. **Action: C. Dinnin**
- **Wooden benches**
Cllrs. Dinnin, Kirk and Meischke to inspect the five wooden benches and make a recommendation to either clean and paint all the wooden seats or replace one with a recycled plastic bench. **Action: C. Dinnin/A. Kirk/J. Meischke**

Additional item

- **Mill Lane bridge meeting held on 21 April 2023**
Cllr. Knight reported on the Mill Lane meeting as follows.
Present: Ian Knight, Steve Block, Michael Smith, Susan Perry (HMWT), Environment Agency, Chloe Bench (Affinity Water)
The meeting was called by Affinity Water to look at and discuss the various options for the River Beane at the Mill Lane bridge and the Lammas.
The various options were:
Cutting the weir at the Mill Lane bridge – this facility is to allow fish migration up stream - this is still under consideration but other options for improved fish movement will be investigated.
One option would be to cut a diversion to allow water from the river (at high levels/flooding) to go into the culvert under the buildings into the Mill Lane Pond. This was something considered by the Parish Council some time ago and not favoured by the Environment Agency at that time. Now a possibility!
Create one or several ponds on the Lammas. Currently in winter there is lying water in two or three areas on the Lammas. This is a relatively new happening. Creating a permanent pond facility was considered a good idea from a biodiversity point of view. The pond would probably dry up in summer.

The Parish Council will receive full notes from Affinity Water in due course

Michael Smith has expressed an interest in continuing to have a role in the development of the River Beane on the Lammis area. Parish Councillors agreed that his experience was very valuable and that he should continue to advise the Parish Council.

b) Routine Reports

i) Emergency escape lighting tests and manual alarm call tests

Cllr. Meischke continues to carry-out the emergency escape lighting and manual alarm call tests monthly. He also continues to inspect the hall regularly including running the water every 2-3 weeks to prevent the risk of legionnaires disease.

ii) Gas and electricity meter readings

Although smart meters are fitted, Cllr. Meischke continues to give the Clerk gas and electricity meter readings at the end of each month. These readings are uploaded to the providers websites.

iii) Weekly reports - Fire Inspection and shower tests

Done.

iv) Monthly village-report

Cllr. McCash completed the report on 11 May 2023 and reported on the main items highlighted in the monthly village-report. All Parish Councillors have been e-mailed a copy of her report.

- **Sportsfield and play areas** – generally very good but very boggy in places after storm.
 - Rainbow multi-play and toddler area – very muddy.
- **Community Hall** – as previously discussed, door and window frames could do with a tidy up (refer to item 8 a, Community Hall Trustees).
- **Allotments** – some areas need grass cutting.
- **Culverts** - litter in culverts and bin very full.
- **Recycling clothes bin** – Area untidy but responsibility of Woodhall estates.
- **War Memorial** – very tidy. Someone has put a solar light by the memorial bench. Cllr. Dinnin agreed to remove the solar light. **Action: C. Dinnin**

Additional items discussed

- **Mill Lane** – Cllr. Knight reported that there is broken glass on the right-hand side after the Scout Hut area on the grass verge. Cllr. Joe Thomas said he would report this to East Herts Council and the recycling clothes bin area. **Action: J. Thomas**

v) Weekly sportsfield-report

Nothing to report.

vi) Weekly defibrillator inspection

Cllr. Hammon continues to do regular defibrillator checks.

vii) Website/Facebook

The Clerk to upload the annual reports to the website and Facebook page.

Action: J. Allsop

viii) Highway issues

Nothing to report.

ix) Dog fouling reports

Nothing to report.

x) Police reports

PCSO Sally Brooks e-mailed (on 3 May) the April Police report, which the Clerk then forwarded to all Parish Councillors.

9. Correspondence received

a) EHDC - Results of District Council elections

EHDC e-mailed on 5 May the District Council election results for the Watton-at-Stone Ward, in which Joe Thomas was successfully elected. Parish Councillors congratulated him on his significant win and look forward to a successful working relationship.

10. Village organisations

None.

11. Items for Parish News

The following item were identified for inclusion in the June 2023 issue of the Parish News.

- Website link to annual reports for the Parish Council and Community Hall Trustees. **Action: J. Allsop**

Meeting closed: 2112.

The date for the next Parish Council meeting is Tuesday 13 June 2023.