

HALSTEAD PARISH COUNCIL

MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL PARISH MEETING HELD ON FRIDAY 19 MAY 2006 AT 19.30 IN THE PARISH ROOM, CHURCH ROAD, HALSTEAD

PRESENT: Cllr. Paul Armstrong, Chairman of Halstead Parish Council
Cllrs. Jeff Baldwin, Tony Bent, Terry Brooker, John Cooke and Christine Halliday.
Inspector Adrian Allen, PCSO Dennis Glasspool, County Cllr. Richard Parry,
District Cllr. Gary Williamson, 19 parishioners, the Clerk

- 1 **APOLOGIES** were received from Cllr. David Taylor, PC Jonathon Wilkinson and Mr Geoffrey Kitchener – parish council representative on the Knockholt and Halstead Sick Poor Fund.
- 2 **RESOLVED: THE MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL PARISH MEETING HELD ON 18 MAY 2005 WERE APPROVED AND SIGNED AS A TRUE RECORD**
- 3 **CHAIRMAN'S REVIEW OF THE YEAR – CLLR. ARMSTRONG**

I am pleased to see a number of parishioners here tonight, as we are not only going to review the year, as is normal at the annual meeting, but also want to hear your views as we discuss the future of the parish room.

However, before we do so, I will, briefly, review some of the highlights of the past year.

Planning

As ever, planning matters have been one of the main items occupying the parish council this past year. Although the district council has decision-making power, in the first instance, over planning applications, we on the parish council have an important advisory role, and we are consulted formally by the district on all applications in our area. In responding to those consultations, the Planning Committee has considered approximately 38 Applications over the last year.

Each one of those applications is important to those making them and to those affected by them. I cannot comment on all the applications that we have addressed this year. However, I would like to mention, briefly, one that has aroused considerable interest. It is also one that I personally regard as very important, since it could lead to an increase in the number of houses in the village by around 10%, and would be the biggest single development in the village since the building of Meadway.

This is, of course, the proposed housing development at Halstead Place School site. As you know, Barratts have applied for planning permission to build 61 houses at the site, and the parish council has sent its view on the application to Sevenoaks, in the last few days.

I cannot comment on the substance of the application. As many of you are aware, this is because I have what is known as a prejudicial interest, under the local government code of conduct. This has also prevented me from participating in substantive discussions about the site. Similar interests have also restricted the participation of Cllr Mrs Halliday and Cllr Cooke, and also District Cllr Williamson. In all cases, we, or our relatives, have property near the site.

Some of you have said that in a case like this, where there is a major development, councillors who have been elected to represent the interests of parishioners should be allowed to do so. Ironically, the Government has now accepted that the code of conduct is unnecessarily restrictive, and that it should be changed. Unfortunately, this change will not happen in time for us to be able to have a say in Halstead Place.

Affordable Housing

Last year, we carried out a survey to determine the potential need for housing in the village. We received 186 responses, a response rate of 28%, and indicated a demand for about 17 properties in the affordable category. Around 60% of respondents said they would not oppose new housing development to meet needs revealed by the survey, though 40% would. The responses seemed to be in line with

previous indications that the level of opposition to any new development depends on its size, and also on whether new homes could be reserved for those with a local connection

We have currently deferred any consideration of potential sites for affordable housing, while we wait for clarification of what will happen at the Halstead Place site.

Crime & Policing

Once again, I have to report that one of the problems facing us over the last year has been the continuing incidence of vandalism in the village. This has occurred despite the village having a Police Community Support Officer.

At a meeting last November, representatives from the police talked about policing in the village, including vandalism. It was alleged that the authorities knew the identities of the handful of teenagers who were said to be responsible for most of the vandalism. A number of parishioners at that meeting asked why action was not being taken to deal with the matter. Not unreasonably, the police pointed out that they could not take action on the basis of hearsay, but only if they received official complaints, and if people were willing to give evidence.

Soon afterwards, three youths were indeed arrested for criminal damage last year, when the victims of an act of vandalism did report this to the police. They were due to appear in court in late December. Since then, we have had great difficulty in getting any information from the authorities on the progress of the case. I must make it clear that I am not commenting on the guilt or innocence of the individuals in this specific case. However, what I find very annoying is that, having asked those affected by vandalism to "stand up and be counted", the authorities now can't seem to be bothered to keep us informed.

Youth activities

The village youth club that I talked about in last year's report is now up and running, with 24 members. It was launched with a disco on 17th March. Thanks should go in particular to Lewis Grey, Lionel Hayes and Ann Hayes, who have volunteered to run the youth club on a regular basis, and to other parents and helpers who assist on a more informal basis. The parish council was also pleased to have supported the youth people's golf initiative last summer, working in partnership with Broke Hill Golf Club and the village PCSO Dennis Glasspool. This was open to all village youth and eleven boys enjoyed six lessons at the golf club.

Open spaces and amenities

Maintenance of the recreation ground continues to be a major item of expenditure for the council.

For the current financial year, we have had, regrettably, to increase the fees that we charge to the football and cricket clubs by more than inflation, at around 7%. Having reviewed expenditure on the recreation ground, we found that the costs we face to maintain the facilities have also been going up by much more than inflation. Utility bills in particular have risen sharply. We do want to see vibrant sports clubs in the village, so we hope that the increases in the licence fees will be manageable. To put them in context, they work out, for each player, at less than the price of a couple of after-match pints over an entire season.

While on the subject of open spaces, I would also like to mention the flowerbeds, which really brighten up the village. I would like to thank our sponsors, the Rose and Crown Public House, and Robinson Escott Planning, the volunteers from the Horticultural Society who maintain the beds, and Polhill Garden Centre which has donated plants.

Finance

Finance matters are covered in the separate report from the Chairman of the Finance Committee. However, I do just want to mention that, for the third year running, we have managed to achieve no increase in the Halstead Parish Council precept.

Parish Room

I would now like to turn to the future of the parish room.

Many of you will recall the background to this discussion. A few years ago, we had two very large increases in the precept in successive years, in part as a result of the cost of repairs to the parish room.

Some parishioners therefore questioned whether we needed to keep it, since the village also has the pavilion and the village hall available.

The parish council felt that we should certainly look at this, as we would be failing in our duty if we did not examine whether we could reduce a potentially large burden on parish funds. However, since meeting facilities like the parish room are important to the community, we also felt that we should take no decisions on its future without full consultation with regular users of the parish room and with the village as a whole. This meeting is an important part of that consultation.

I would now like to turn to the actual costs of maintaining the parish room, and the options available to us.

First, the costs.

Over the last eight years, maintenance costs have amounted to £62,387 in aggregate. Income over the same period has brought in only £39,542. This is a deficit of £22,845, or nearly £3,000 a year. In an average year, the room is hired out on 105 occasions, though of course it is also used for parish council meetings. It is therefore used on around 130 occasions.

Second, the options.

We seem to have three broad options.

- One is to keep things as they are now. We would continue to have the parish room available as an amenity for the village. However, it would entail an ongoing annual cost to parish finances, keeping up the level of the precept and/or restricting our ability to invest in other areas.
- The second option would be to lease it, probably for office use. This would produce a small net income for the parish, which could be used to keep down the precept and/or be invested in other projects. At the same time local clubs and societies, as well as individuals, would still be able to use the village hall or pavilion. The income this option would produce would not be huge. But it would not be insignificant, and we would continue to own the freehold on the parish room.
- * The third option would be to sell the building outright. This would provide a lump sum, which could also be used to keep down the precept and/or be invested in other projects. And local clubs and societies would also still be able to use the village hall or pavilion. The lump sum would be much more than we would gain by the leasing option, but it would be a one-off.

We are keen to hear parishioners' views on these options.

Conclusion

Before opening the meeting to discussion, I would like to thank my fellow councillors for their efforts on behalf of parishioners over the past year, and would also like to thank Gillian King Scott, our Clerk, for all her hard work.

I would also like to thank all those parishioners who take the trouble to attend meetings, or let us have their views by writing or telephone. We really do try to listen to the views that they put forward, as well as listening to what parishioners tell us at other times. We should never forget that the parish council is here to serve the community, not to impose our own views on parishioners.

4 PRESENTATION OF THE END OF YEAR ACCOUNTS AND FINANCE CHAIRMAN'S REPORT – CLLR COOKE

As Chairman of the Finance Committee, I am delighted to report that we have managed to avoid any increase in the precept for the third year in a row.

As you will see from the accounts, total income in 2005/06 was £45810.29 and total expenditure was £39687.03, giving a surplus of £6123.26

Expenditure

As ever, the largest single item of expenditure in our budget is “general administration”, including salaries, which in 2005/06 accounted for £13835.29 . Much of this is attributable, directly or indirectly, to statutory obligations.

Other major items of expenditure were: maintenance of the Pavilion (£3269.50); the Recreation Ground and other open spaces (£5358.91); the Parish Room (£1382.49; and insurance (£3598.99) These are major items of expenditure every year. The financial year just ended also saw full year costs for our contribution to the provision of our local Police Community Support Officer. This amounted to £4925.90 should add, in the interests of clarity, that these figures are not the PCSO’s salary, but rather the costs of providing a PCSO. Half of the total cost of the PCSO comes from central government, with Halstead & Knockholt Parish Councils each providing a further 25%.

Reserves

We have also, over the past years, maintained our capital reserve. This is in part to guard against future emergencies; and in part to act as a reserve fund in case we wanted, at some time in the future, to fund a major project that could not otherwise be financed. It amounted to £28,000 at the end of the last year. We will continue to keep the level of reserves under review. However, I would not consider it prudent to allow the reserve to fall below the current level for the foreseeable future.

Income

Income for the Parish Council comes from a variety of sources, including fees for hiring the Pavilion and Parish Room, and from the fees paid for use of facilities by the village cricket, football, and netball clubs.

The largest element of income is, however, the precept. It appears as a separate item on your council tax bill, where it represents a meagre 4% of the total. This is clearly only a small element in your overall council tax bill. However, I do not believe that this should lead us to be anything less than rigorous in managing the parish finances on your behalf - as the advertising slogan for one major retailer says “every little helps”. In 2005/06, the precept amounted to £37595.00, which works out at around £35 for each adult in the parish. As I mentioned at the beginning of my report, we have had a zero increase in the Halstead Parish Council precept for the third year in a row. Before the current council was elected in 2003 we had just seen a rise of 34.7% in the precept following another substantial rise the previous year, and Halstead had one of the highest precepts in the District. We are now below the district average.

Conclusion

The accounts for the past financial year have been audited by the Internal Auditor, and will be available for inspection from 12 May until 8 June. These will then be sent to the External Auditor for checking.

I hope that parishioners will agree that we are managing the Parish finances wisely. We will certainly continue to try to do so. And the principle I always have in mind when making decisions is that the money that the council spends is not the council’s - it is parishioners’ money, which we are simply spending on your behalf.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank Gillian King Scott, in her capacity as Responsible Financial Officer, for her excellent work in keeping the Parish finances in good order.

5 REPORTS FROM COMMITTEES

1. AMENITIES – CLLR. BALDWIN

Council registered its concern in 2005 about the condition of the grass verges and open spaces. After support from County Cllr. Parry and District Cllr. Williamson these problems were finally resolved. It seems that problems could again occur in 2006. There has been a reduction in Sevenoaks District Council’s budget of £25,000 which has meant a cut in man power. The Parish Council is looking into ways to tackle this matter.

Council would like to thank the residents of Church Road who kindly cut the village green located to the front of their properties.

In relation to the development of Halstead Place School, Council has asked for financial support under the possible planning benefits to refurbish and extend the children's play area.

2. HIGHWAYS – CLLR. TAYLOR

Traffic Calming.

A number of meetings have been held during the year about traffic calming with Bryan Fitzgerald from the new Highways Department. The Parish Council has agreed that traffic calming will be the number one priority for the village, should Barratts Kent make a contribution to planning gain, as a consequence of their proposed development at Halstead Place. Bryan Fitzgerald has estimated that the cost of a comprehensive traffic-calming scheme would be around £60,000. We have therefore asked Barratts to make a contribution of £60,000. This would involve provision of pinch points, speed indicator devices and tabletops at the Meadows/Southdene, and at the junction of Clarks Lane and Station Road. (Tabletops are the equivalent of "sleeping policemen" which cover an entire road junction). Mr. Fitzgerald is also assessing what works should be undertaken to relieve possible future traffic congestion on Stonehouse Lane, as a result of the Halstead Place development. Should he recommend that additional works can be undertaken, we will be adding this element to our request to Barratts.

Parishioners will no doubt have noticed 30 mile per hour signs spray painted on the roads around the village. Although we agreed with Highways at least 18 months ago that 30 mph roundels would be painted on the road surface to re-enforce the speed signs, this is as far as we have got. We will continue to put pressure on the Highways Department to finish this work as soon as possible.

Speedwatch.

I reported last year that there was a hold-up with Speedwatch, because the validity of the speed guns had been queried. This matter has now been resolved and Kent Police have now been able to provide us with a brand new speed gun, which is acceptable to all parties. We have also now received all the relevant equipment, so Speedwatch training will commence shortly, and parishioners should see Speedwatch volunteers out and about in the village in the next few weeks.

Road Surfaces.

We have taken Highways officers on a tour of the village to look at the poor condition of the roads in the parish. We drew particular attention to Southdene, Parkside and Beldam Haw. Highways have again pleaded poverty, but we will be pursuing this matter further during 2006.

Drainage at Curry Wood.

Highways were also shown the problems at Curry Wood at the Knockholt end of Knockholt Road. We specifically pointed out :

- That the drainage gutters needed regular cleaning particularly during the winter, to ensure that water drains away more quickly;
- That the 2 gutters on the Curry Wood side of the road need relocating because they do not catch all the water that collects in the hollow;
- That one of the road signs "Road Liable to Flooding" needs replacing because it has been removed (illegally).

A response on these particular issues is awaited from Highways.

Cadlocks Hill

Our County Councillor, Richard Parry, has agreed to put a case before the county Highways Committee to have Cadlocks Hill changed to a one-way road. Evidence has come to light that Satellite Navigation systems now show Cadlocks Hill as the direct route through from the M25 to Knockholt, Westerham and beyond. This has resulted in drivers who do not know the area, driving at excessive speeds on a very narrow lane. This resulted in a recent accident which blocked the lane for 2 to 3 hours. We will keep you advised of the outcome of the case which County Councillor Parry is making.

Yellow Lines.

New yellow lines are now in place near Meadway and Parkside. It would be useful to hear from parishioners whether they feel that parking has improved since their introduction, or whether people are ignoring them.

3 PLANNING – CLLR. TONY BENT

See attached.

REPORT FROM THE KNOCKHOLT & HALSTEAD SICK POOR FUND – GEOFFREY KITCHENER.

This report is provided by Geoffrey Kitchener, the Parish Council's representative trustee, working with other trustees of the Fund, including Val Dennett and, until he left the parish, the Revd. Michael Woodcock.

The Fund is a small charity, originally deriving its assets from ownership of a house for a district nurse. It now has an annual income in the region of £100 from a deposit account holding a little over £2,000. In the Fund's distribution for the last accounting year the trustees worked with the Knockholt Christmas Goodwill Fund to provide benefits for residents in both Halstead and Knockholt.

That distribution resulted in expenditure that was broadly in line with income. The Fund, however, has powers to spend both capital and income. Because of this, the trustees are not constrained by their annual income if, in order to do effective good, it would be necessary to eat into capital. Indeed, the Fund may be wound up by total expenditure of its assets, if the trustees so decide. The Charity Commission gives helpful and wide-ranging guidance on what we can apply funds to. Broadly, this would enable the trustees in case of infirmity or ill health within the benefited areas of Halstead and Knockholt to supply benefits, equipment or comforts, in particular those that the state does not provide.

The trustees are therefore keeping watch for opportunities. They are open to suggestions for further application of the available funds for Halstead and Knockholt residents, and if anyone wishes to make any such suggestion, please advise Geoffrey Kitchener or Val Dennett.

The Chairman thanked Mr, Kitchener for his knowledge of and dedication to the work of the Sick Poor Fund.

7 INSPECTOR ALLEN AND PCSO GLASSPOOL

Report from PCSO Glasspool

During the last year he has tackled the problems experienced with youths which have frequently occurred because they lack something to occupy themselves.

A golf course of six lessons was arranged at Broke Hill Golf Club supported by the Parish Council. A Youth Club has now been started and 30 youngsters have joined. There are currently four regular helpers and approximately six casual. More volunteers would be welcomed and would help fill the rota. A visit was arranged from PC Andy Blackmore who spoke on crime prevention and a Neighbourhood Watch Meeting was held recently.

Speeding is a problem in the village and PCSO Glasspool is now trained to use a speed gun and has carried out Speed Watch activities in the village.

Report from Inspector Allen

Inspector Allen advised the parishioners that he has been in place as Sevenoaks District Inspector for six weeks but have been a serving police officer for twenty years.

He has already visited the village and realises that parishioners have concerns about police response time to their calls. This is being looked into.

Inspector Allen referred to Council and parishioners' concerns about the court case mentioned by Cllr. Armstrong which involved 3 youths. He was not familiar with the case but thanked everyone who had come forward to report the crime. He had no information to impart as details cannot be released due to the age of the youths. The case was discontinued; a hearing did not take place.

THE FUTURE OF THE PARISH ROOM

Cllr. Armstrong had outlined in his report what he thought were three options for the future of the building.

1. Keep it as it is now for the use of the Village but this would incur the costs which are paid for within the precept;
2. Lease it out possibly to a business;
3. Sell it outright

Cllr. Mrs Halliday reminded parishioners present that Council had only entered into this investigation in response to pressure from parishioners.

Cllr. Cooke advised this request followed two higher precepts due to works on the Parish Room.

Parishioners discussed the matter.

It was agreed that every household would be contacted possibly with a letter enclosed with the Parish Council newsletter asking for a response which could be deposited somewhere within the village, rather on the lines of a referendum This will be discussed at the Parish Council meeting.

Council was advised to seek the advice of a reputable estate agent and to ensure that a repairing lease is agreed. The Chairman advised that Linay Commercial had already given Council advice.

Several parishioners felt that if it was to be disposed of it should be leased, preferably on a short lease. It was suggested that bookings be increased and the Clerk informed the meeting that hiring has increased but we are more expensive than the village hall. Cllr. Cooke remarked that the hall had made a profit for the last financial year but service costs were rising.

It was noted that The Parish Council own the freehold of the land and building.

Some parishioners did not think that the building should necessarily make a profit or cover itself and understood that the Precept would have to increase to cover the cost of the building.

The majority of parishioners present suggested that the Parish Council do nothing until such time as a decision on the Halstead Place School development has been finalised as more homes in the village could make a difference to the income of the Parish Council.

Many parishioners were totally against leasing or selling the Parish Room.

County Cllr. Parry remarked that possibly the District might be willing to provide financial support for the building which could secure its future for a few years.

The Chairman closed the meeting.

OPEN FORUM

Mr, Sargeant from Clarks Lane spoke about an incident that had happened with a dog worrying his sheep. He had dealt with the dog owner who was abusive and threatened him physically. Mr, Sargeant rang the police who did not come out to see him at that time. He had been told that the police would not be visiting him at all.

Inspector Allen stated that the Duty Officer should not have said that. There should have been a follow-up. The matter will be looked into.

On the subject of response vehicles, Inspector Allen advised that the Area Centre is Tonbridge but police are not statically sited and work a roving system.

Website – this is currently under construction and will be launched in the near future. The parishioners felt it important that the Parish Council hosted a site that other organisations could link to.

Speed – Could speed signs be permanently erected, SID signs preferably? It is possible to erect camera signs? PCSO Glasspool will look into this.

Could PCSO Glasspool do Speed Watch with the volunteers? This would give them more authority. Inspector Allen said on an occasional basis.

Traffic calming – Will lights be required for some of the traffic calming? Parishioners will have to understand that they will need to balance the benefits of one against the other.

Mrs Baldwin stated that the road throughout the village were deteriorating drastically and asked if County Cllr. Parry could do anything. He asked the Clerk to contact him with details prior to the Joint transportation Meeting which would be taking place on 6 June 2006.

The Chairman closed the meeting and invited the parishioners to join the Council in refreshments.