

Launton Annual Parish Meeting 2021

Minutes of the meeting
held on Thursday 22 April 2021
at 7.30pm online via Zoom

Chairman: Councillor Simon Turner (Chairman Launton PC)
Clerk: Jane Olds (Parish Clerk)
Launton Residents: 12 residents
District Councillors: None

1. To accept apologies for absence

Apologies were received from four villagers; Cllr Ian Corkin (OCC); Cllr David Hughes (CDC); Launton Historical Society and Mechelle Harris (Hummingbird Centre)

2. To confirm minutes of the previous meeting on 25 April 2019

All were in favour of the Minutes being confirmed as an accurate record and they were signed by the Chairman.

3. Matters arising from these minutes

It had been confirmed that Bicester Heritage's planning application for the Experience Quarter had been submitted to CDC.

4. Report from the Chairman of Launton Parish Council for the past year

The last year had been challenging for us all because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic which, apart from its obvious serious affect has also prevented in-person meetings. Thankfully, Parish Council meetings had been able to continue due to a change in legislation, but last year's Annual Parish Council meeting and two annual spring cleans had had to be cancelled.

The Parish Council usually meets on the first Thursday of the month. The last in person meeting was 5 March 2020. Since April 2020 the meetings had been virtual using 'Zoom' which has worked well, with some residents suggesting that virtual meetings work better than in person meetings, not least because the attendees can hear the conversations better. Sadly the Government has stated its intention not to renew the legislation that permits Councils to meet virtually which runs out on 6 May; this presents the Council with some challenging meeting arrangements for May and June until step 4 with the provision of unrestricted gatherings in July.

Meetings, whether virtual or in person, feature a public participation session from 7:00 p.m. (at which councillors are available to talk to parishioners about any subject they wish, and at in person meetings any planning applications for the meeting may be viewed), prior to the council meeting starting at 7:30 p.m. Part of the meeting itself is set aside for members of the public to address the council about items on the agenda, subject to individual and overall time limits.

The agenda for the forthcoming meeting, and minutes of the previous meeting, are displayed on the two Parish Council notice boards outside the Parish Hall and near the War Memorial, and are also available from the council's web site at www.launton-pc.gov.uk along with other paperwork for the meetings.

The council has had its 12 regular monthly meetings this year, with one extraordinary in October. We have commented on 33 planning applications, an unsurprising decrease on recent years but perhaps not as significant as might have been expected during lockdown where 37–40 had been the common in recent years. The number of consultation documents remains relatively small: a notable consultation in the past year featured the government's apparent desire to turn the planning system upside down which was the cause of the extraordinary meeting in October. The oft-mentioned, but elusive Cherwell Local Plan Part 2, in which housing targets for the villages were to have been stated has now been abandoned after several years of reporting that they hadn't quite got round to it yet.

I remain more indebted than I can express to our superb clerk, Jane Olds, whose immense knowledge, efficiency, hard work well above and beyond the call of duty and persistent cheerfulness are an enormous asset, not just to me personally and this council, but to the whole village, as well as other local councils and other organisations whom she has provided assistance with virtual meetings and any number of other things. Her dedication was recognised last year when she was awarded the Bryan Metcalf Award for Volunteering – a national award by the Society of Local Council Clerks.

I also owe a debt of thanks to my fellow parish councillors for their continued hard work and support under trying circumstances. I would like to register my appreciation and best wishes for the future to the four councillors who are standing down at next month's election: Chris Fox, Lizzie Chisholm, Mike Murphy and James Allpress. We will miss them all but every cloud has a silver lining and I am looking forward to the arrival of Abi Dowman, Janice Hawes and Jackie Webber as new councillors next month. There will be one remaining vacancy on the council after the election which will be filled by co-option; I would encourage anyone who may have been unable to stand for election to contact Jane about putting themselves forward for co-option.

We have also benefited greatly from the support and hard work of our District and in particular, County, Councillors – especially with recent flooding and road problems. It is always a boon when they attend our meetings to update us all and pick up on things which they can help with and we look forward to continuing to work with them in the years to come.

The Parish Council's work with the Parochial Church Council, the Parish Hall Committee and the Parish Hall Improvement Project group towards leasing the Parish Hall so that we can improve it and secure its future has continued to be frustratingly slow, but it seems we are now in touching distance of finally signing the documents and becoming being able to get on with planning, fundraising, doing the work. We hope that we may be able to sign in the next few weeks. I'd like to thank all members of the Parish Hall Working Group which was set up to bring together representatives of all four parties to progress the lease and what will come after it is signed who have been working hard to prepare for the moment when we can finally get on with it.

We are continuing to maintain the areas of public space in Sherwood Close and The Glades, and have the pedestrian refuge on Station Road, and the walkway between Ancil Avenue and Sycamore Road, cleared. We hope to improve on our additional highway duties (including cutting back the vegetation on highway verges). Our precept increased by a modest amount this year to allow us to continue providing the services that we do, always with an eye to improving things where possible.

We continue to represent the village at meetings with external bodies, notably Cherwell District Council and Oxfordshire County Council, but also including the East-West Rail team and the Police, and joint meetings with representatives from other local Parish and Town Councils where we have been able to hold them over the past year. We have also been engaging with Bicester Heritage – which is, of course, in the Parish of Launton – about their plans for the future, which are impressive.

The council has continued to provide financial support to Launton Lines, St Mary's Church and Launton Congregational Church, as well as making contributions to the Friends of Island Pond Wood, to assist with grass-cutting in the woodland, and making other charitable donations supporting organisations whose work provides benefits to the people of the village. We are also pleased to continue supporting the wonderful band of volunteers that comprise the village support group who have been a boon in these recent very trying times, and I know that they have done a lot of good work. I would particularly like to thank Lesley Thompson for her work with that group on behalf of the Parish Council.

The final thing to request is that people should be encouraged, to come forward if they have particular things that they think could and should be done in the village to assist the Parish in doing them. There are only seven Councillors and we don't have an enormous amount of time available and Jane, in particular, whose work ends up supporting everything that the Parish Council does is currently only employed for 45 hours a month and has been working rather longer than that just trying to keep us all afloat recently. Offers of help from other volunteers would be greatly appreciated.

5. Financial Report of Launton Parish Council for the year ended 31st March 2015

The Clerk reported that the Parish Council accounts for the year 2020 / 21 had now been closed and the internal audit had been completed. The 2019 / 20 accounts were closed this time the previous year and are available on the website.

The draft Statement of Accounts which is available, explains the Parish finances and is available on the website.

The income and expenditure for the year remained broadly reasonably static despite the situation over the last year.

The largest expense was the contribution to the 20mph Zone outside school at £3,270 although we were grateful for Councillor Ian Corkin's £2,000 Locality Fund contribution towards the project. We hope that when things are back to normal that the zone will have a positive impact on the safety of the children going to and from school.

We were also pleased to be able to apply for some Section 106 funding which had to be used for the Parish Hall. After much consideration it was decided to buy new tables and chairs and these have now been received ready for when the Parish Hall can re-open.

A full budget for the 21 / 22 year was agreed in January and will be confirmed at next week's meeting. This year the Precept was increased to £22,996 (an increase of £593 on the previous year) which meant that Band D properties would pay an additional £1.50 over the whole year.

The Parish Council's responsibilities remain the same - including verge cutting, in and out of the village, emptying the numerous dog bins, and making sure that the Parish Council is compliant with all the legislation including data protection and transparency. We have also spent a lot of time liaising with staff at East West Rail, the Mulberry developers, OCC Highways and OCC Footpaths to mitigate some of the impact of the various projects around the village which have been beyond our control.

The Reserves Policy has recently been reviewed in order to ensure that we are able to meet the various obligations; these include holding the recommended three months' running costs, the possibility of having to pay for an election (at about £1,600), and various contingencies, including the transfer of the Parish Hall Lease. Unfortunately, unless the Parish takes out a loan which is agreed by the Public Works and Loans Board, the Parish is unable to borrow money, so it is essential that funds are set aside in ear marked reserves to pay for things when needed.

I have put on the Statement, the S137 expenditure allowance. This allowance is published by Government and gives Parish Councils the power to 'to incur expenditure for certain purposes not otherwise authorised' such as the poppy wreath for Remembrance Day which wasn't otherwise possible. However, as the Council is able to adopt the General Power of Competence, there is more flexibility in the awarding of grants. The Parish Council generally considers grants quarterly in April, July, October and January. These grants cannot be awarded to individuals, but over the last year the Parish has been pleased to be able to support the Volunteer Driver Service, Cherwell Larder and the Hummingbird Centre.

The Parish Council website now has a wealth of information, and even a news section. If you haven't already signed up to receive our regular updates and meeting notices, please do – you can find a quick form on the left hand menu bar. Also, if you're a use of Facebook the Parish Council now has its own presence – please do 'like' it.

The accounts would be available for inspection shortly.

6. Parish Hall Improvement Project – Report from Martin Evans

March 2020 saw Lockdown begin and it meant any meetings about the improvement of the Parish Hall needed to move online. Jane Olds, the Parish Council Clerk, set up a Zoom link and the Working group began to hold virtual meetings from May 22nd. The Working group was set up with representatives from The Parish hall Management committee, St Mary's PCC, Launton Parish Council and PHIP.

Last May we were presented with another cost of £900 plus VAT from the PCC solicitor and this led to further negotiations with Darren Oliver who is the Diocesan Chancellor and also a

senior partner at Winckworth Sherwood. An agreement was worked out eventually that there would be no charges as long as work was purely administrative and kept to a minimum (similar to what was decided in May 2019).

Alex Bond, the architect came out to the hall in March and took measurements and sent a report on the existing hall building. In this Alex says “ there is no suggestion the structure is unsound, but the single skin walls pose a difficulty in terms of upgrading them. Other building components need to be replaced.....Buildings are never designed with the intention of having a finite life, but the reality is that most building components do have a limited duration before they need to be replaced.”

Over the next few meetings the Working group came up with a “Wish List” of improvements to the hall, but until the Agreement to Lease is signed the Parish Council cannot engage Alex Bond for further work and so we cannot develop these plans in any more detail for now. In August the documents were sent to Caroline Dyer who is the Trust administrator for the Oxford Diocese (Oxford) Limited, or DT(O)L, who hold the Parish Hall in trust for the PCC and will also be signatories to the legal documents. Caroline raised several errors in the documents such as DT(O)L being the named “landlord” as she doesn’t want to be asked about the day to day running of the hall, and certain words being incorrect such as Diocesan secretary which should be Diocesan Property Manager as well as more serious questions about a “licence for alterations.” This took several months to research and then the required changes had to be made to the documents which took us to January 2021.

Since then the documents have been sent back to the PCC solicitor and he has suggested a few more changes which we are now trying to do.

In August we held our postponed PHIP AGM via Zoom.

Before Lockdown we researched sources of funding including grant applications and now need actual architect’s plans before we can proceed further.

We have also researched new tables and chairs and these have now been bought by the Parish Council with Section 106 money and delivered to the Parish Hall. We have 16 tables plus 2 larger tables with 2 table trolleys, and 60 blue plastic chairs with 2 chair trolleys for storage. The old blue tables will be removed and also some of the older plastic chairs.

PHIP has managed to do one fund raising event on July 11th , a cake stall was held outside the Parish hall and the money raised totalled £415 and was split between St Mary’s Church and PHIP.

7. Reports from representatives of village organisations

The Clerk had contacted village organisations and 11 had submitted reports or presented them at the meeting. The following organisations responded:

Fete Group
Friends of Island Pond Wood
Launton Lines
Launton Parish Hall Improvement Project
Launton PCC

Launton Transport Representative
Launton Village Players
Launton Village Rock Chorus
Launton Village Support
Launton Women's Institute
LGA

The written reports would be available on the Parish Council website.

8. Report from the Cherwell District Councillor for Launton

Councillor Hughes was not able to attend.

9. Report from the Oxfordshire County Councillor for Launton

Councillor Ian Corkin was not able to attend.

10. Report from Thames Valley Police

No report had been received.

11. Any other business

Lesley Thompson wished to offer a vote of thanks to Simon Turner for keeping going as Chairman of the Parish Council over a very difficult period and for his tenacity with the Parish Hall project.

12. Date and venue of next meeting

Launton Parish Hall at 7.30pm on Thursday 21 April 2022

The meeting closed at 8.22pm.

Signed..... Dated.....