

Launton Annual Parish Meeting 2024

DRAFT Minutes of the meeting
held on Thursday 18 April 2024
at 7.30pm

Chairman: Councillor Simon Turner (Chairman Launton PC)
Clerk: Jane Olds (Parish Clerk)
Launton Residents: 26 residents
District Councillors: None
County Councillor: None
Police: PCSO Ashley Sim

1. To accept apologies for absence

Apologies were received from two villagers; Cllr Gemma Coton (CDC) and Cllr Ian Corkin (OCC)

2. To confirm minutes of the previous meeting on 20 April 2023

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

None.

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

The Parish Council usually meets on the first Thursday of the month, and meetings feature a public participation session from 7:15 p.m. (at which councillors are available for parishioners to talk to them about any subject they wish), 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. Documents, including the agenda, are displayed for all to see using a data projector.

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 documents for the meetings.

The council has had its 12 regular monthly meetings this year, with no extraordinary meetings. We have commented on 29 planning applications, similar to last year's 28. The number of consultation documents thankfully remains relatively small.

Both the Council and I remain hugely indebted to our extraordinary clerk, Jane Olds; her relentless cheerfulness in the face of odds that others would consider insuperable continues to astonish me; her knowledge and efficiency are second to none, and her tenacity and incredibly hard work – going far above and beyond her duties – put us all to shame. Once again I make no apology for repeating my comment from last year: I simply do not know what I, or this council, would do without her.

As ever, I also owe a debt of thanks to my fellow parish councillors for their continued hard work and support; I would particularly like to express my thanks to Ed Sanders, my Vice Chairman, who is always ready to step into the breach. At last year's elections the six remaining councillors at the time were elected unopposed, leaving us with a single vacancy; we were delighted to co-opt Richard Walker last September to bring us back to full strength.

We have also benefitted greatly from the support and hard work of our County Councillor and our District Councillors. Imminent elections prevent me from saying too much, but we look forward to working with our new and old councillors in the future.

A significant change in the village, following a well-supported consultation last June, is that we now have a 20 mph speed limit throughout the village, and have recently benefitted from the installation of new vehicle activated signs that point out to drivers the speed they are actually doing. We always knew that this change would not be universally welcomed – especially by those who seem to believe it is somehow their right to rat-run through the village at whatever speed they feel like – but most drivers are adjusting to the new limit and I have certainly noticed a general reduction in speeds.

The Speedwatch group had been doing great work providing information about speeding drivers, but some recent utterly vile comments on social media and physical confrontation from drivers have left the volunteers of the group shaken and, with some core members stepping back as a direct result, it appears that the group is currently unable to continue. This kind of narrow-minded “mob rule” by a bigoted but vocal minority should have no place in a civilised country, and I would urge people to volunteer their time to allow the group to continue its valuable work. The best way to deal with bullies is to stand up to them rather than allow them to shout us down.

On a more positive note, last July a new energy assessment was done on the Parish Hall, where – to everyone's great surprise – revised rules on Energy Performance Certificates (particularly regarding electric heating) meant that, with no work being done, the Parish Hall moved from a 'G' rating in 2018 to a 'C' rating! This automatically triggered the full lease coming into force and, although ridiculous delays caused by solicitors meant that the expected short timescale for completion of the lease ran into months rather than days, the Parish Council now has a 35-year lease on the Parish Hall as of January this year, finally enabling us start applying for grant funding (which, as we had discovered, was completely impossible without a full lease in place, contrary to what solicitors on both sides had breezily assured us years ago). Although the funding landscape is regrettably a more barren place now than it had previously been, all avenues are being explored.

The Parish Hall Working Group, comprising members of the Parish Council, Parochial Church Council, Parish Hall Committee and the Friends of Launton Parish Hall continued to work towards the improvement of the Parish Hall, working tirelessly to advise the Parish Council on all sorts of aspects, notably including bids from contractors. However, with the arrival of the long-awaited lease, the group had effectively made itself redundant and has recently disbanded: I would like to thank all the members of the Working Group for their tireless efforts on behalf of the community over many years.

The Parish Council is now responsible for the Hall and is forming a new Parish Hall Management Committee; during the transition period we are extremely grateful for the continued work and support of many of those who ran the Hall on behalf of the Parochial Church Council. People who care about the Hall are encouraged to put their names forward to join the new management committee: let's work together to achieve the goals that we have been striving towards for so long!

Moving away from the Hall, 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, as well as cutting back the vegetation on highway verges. Our precept again increased somewhat this year to allow us to continue providing the services that we do, as 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; the almost constant contact with the East West Rail Alliance team has now reduced enormously as they move towards completion, but there remain some niggling issues that have yet to be resolved. We continue to liaise and meet with the Police and representatives from other local Parish and Town Councils.

The council has continued to provide financial support to Launton Lines and St Mary's Church, as well as making contributions to the Friends of Island Pond Wood and making other charitable donations supporting organisations whose work provides benefits to the people of the village.

5. Financial Report of Launton Parish Council for the year ended 31st March 2023

The Parish Council accounts for the year 2023 / 24 had now been closed and the internal audit had been scheduled.

This year's draft Statement of Accounts, which explains last year's Parish finances, was available in the Finance section of the Parish Council website and will be formally considered at the May meeting.

The income and expenditure for the year has changed this year. Income increased predominantly due to the increase in Precept.

Expenditure decreased this year, mainly because there were fewer invoices for the Parish Hall.

The Parish Council was successful in obtaining a match-funded grant for the new defibrillator and cabinet which has been installed outside the Parish Hall and has had to make some additional expenditure on the other defibrillator following its use.

At the recent March meeting, the Parish Council agreed to buy new rubbish bins to replace those on Sycamore Road and by the War Memorial together with a new dog waste bin which will be moved from the Sports field (as it is difficult for the CDC team to empty) to the path in Yew Tree field. These are yet to be ordered.

The Parish Council has also been successful in applying to Oxfordshire County Council to use some of the S106 developer funding which had been accruing to pay for the three Speed Indicator Devices and the Blackthorn Road white gates which have recently been installed.

A full budget for the 24 / 25 year was agreed in January and was confirmed at the April meeting. Following very careful consideration of the budget, but mindful that the Parish Hall is likely to be a costly project, this year the Precept has been increased to £51,592 (an increase of £11,849 on the previous year) which meant that Band D properties would pay an additional £18.68 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. Again, this year we have spent time liaising with the teams at County Council responsible for highways and public rights of way 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 a percentage of the precept as a general contingency, the possibility of having to pay for an election (which has recently increased from £1,600 to £2,415), and various contingencies. 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 adopted the General Power of Competence (possible when the Parish has a qualified Clerk and two thirds elected members at the time of adoption) at last year's May meeting following the uncontested election, 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 Friends of Island Pond Wood, grass cutting in the churchyard, the Royal British Legion, the South Central Ambulance Service Charity who provided us with a really helpful training session, Launton Village Players, Oxfordshire Mind and the village Over 60s group.

The Parish Council website now has a wealth of information, and a news section. If you haven't already signed up to receive our regular updates and meeting notices by email, please do – you can find a quick form on the left hand menu bar. I have also used the email list recently to alert people to the road closures, so it's worth signing up.

Also, if you're a user of Facebook the Parish Council also has its own presence – please do 'like' Launton Parish Council Page.

There were no questions.

6. East West Rail Project

No representative was available to attend.

7. Parish Hall Improvement Project

The project information was covered in the Chairman's report.

8. Reports from representatives of village organisations

The Clerk had contacted village organisations and 15 had submitted reports or presented them at the meeting. The following organisations responded:

Friends of Island Pond Wood

Friends of Launton Parish Hall (FoLPH)

Launton Community Communications Group (incorporating *Launton Lines*, Facebook page and website)

Launton Environmental Society

Launton Historical Society

Launton Over-60s Group

Launton Parish Hall Management Committee

Launton Parish Path Wardens

Launton Plotters

Launton Village Players

Launton Village Rock Chorus

Launton Poppy Cascade

Launton Village Speedwatch

Launton Women's Institute

St Marys PCC

The written reports were available on the Parish Council website.

9. Report from the Cherwell District Councillor for Launton

The District Councillors were unable to attend but submitted a report .

10. Report from the Oxfordshire County Councillor for Launton

Councillor Ian Corkin was not able to attend but submitted a report, some of which was read out at the meeting.

11. Report from Thames Valley Police

PCSOs Ashley Sims and Louise Beaumont conducted a Have Your Say event for local residents to obtain feedback on Saturday 9 March. These surveys are currently being processed and will outline our neighbourhood policing priorities for Launton.

Sgt Gavin Staniland sent a report following the reaction to the village Speedwatch group on social media.

The Bicester neighbourhood team were alerted to negative comments being made on a post on one of our TVP social media feeds in relation to community speed watch.

The social media operator who published the post had intended the story to be a positive message showing engagement and support for the community Speedwatch groups.

TVP have an algorithm on the social media platform which prevents grossly offensive language from being published in the comments feed.

However, this algorithm only filters specific words such as swear words and racist or homophobic words.

As soon as the social media operator was aware of the negative comments on the post, they removed the post immediately however by this time over 1000 comments had been posted.

The social media officer has reviewed comments that were posted and whilst it is clear that many were of an unpleasant nature they do not constitute offences under the Malicious Communications Act nor do they directly incite racial hatred.

The officer who created the post has been spoken with and whilst the post was intended in a positive light it has clearly shown what an emotive subject speeding is within the community and any future posts relating to community speed watch will have comments disabled.

12. Any other business

No other business was raised.

13. Date and venue of next meeting

To be decided.

The meeting closed at 8.54pm.

Signed.....

Dated.....