

## MARDEN PARISH COUNCIL

**DRAFT Minutes** of the Annual Parish Meeting of Marden held on  
Tuesday 4 May 2021 at 19.00 by Zoom

**Present:** Cllr David Bennett (Chair).

**In Attendance:** Parish Clerk Alison Sutton; 8 members of the public.

- 1. Apologies for absence** – Paula Barratt, Sally Postlethwaite; Ward Cllr Kema Guthrie.
- 2. Minutes of the last Annual Parish Meeting** – 28 May 2021 – ADOPTED and will be signed when circumstances permit.

**3. Report from the Chairman –**

Welcome to you all. It has been two years since the last Annual Parish Meeting and a lot has happened in that time. The last twelve months have been very difficult for all as we have learnt to live with the Pandemic. With the use of Zoom, the Parish Council and its working groups have been able to continue parish work, and we have even been able to set up a new working group during this time, but more of that later.

I think it is important to recognise the volunteers, some 45 in all, who came forward to offer help to the Parish as part of the Covid Volunteer Group set up by the Parish Council the week before the first lockdown. Special thanks must go to Mike Thomas, supported by his wife, who coordinated the group and, in particular, ensured that prescriptions and other essentials were collected and delivered to a significant number of isolating parishioners. The second and third lockdowns have been easier to manage as more and more parishioners have been able to organise their own support. Nevertheless, a reduced number of volunteers remained available to support the community throughout.

Moving on to a summary of other Parish Council Activity.

The most important challenge, recognised at the beginning of 2019, was the need to improve engagement with all parishioners in the Parish. In July 2019 the Council developed and distributed a 3-year plan. This document set out the objectives in a number of key areas, and I will use these as the basis for the remainder of this report.

As already indicated, communication and transparency are key to all the decisions and work undertaken by the council. It is important that as many parishioners as possible are aware of, and understand, the decisions that are made and the status of work carried out. We had already begun this process by increasing the amount of information available on the parish website combined with improvements to the layout and information provided in N&V. We have, over the last two years, set up a dedicated Parish Council Facebook page with links to the community Facebook page and our website. We have just completed the implementation of a new Parish Council website while still retaining the Community website. It is anticipated that the split into two sites will make communication much clearer to all. Your feedback on these changes would be much appreciated.

Over the last two years we have made contact with major businesses in the parish to try and ensure that appropriate communication is timely and flows both ways. Much thanks should go to S&A for their understanding, and issue resolution during Covid lockdown as well as providing an improved liaison group meeting at least twice a year. Additionally, we should thank them for providing sponsorship for the wonderful Christmas Tree in 2020, which they have indicated they will do again at the end of this year. Other major businesses have helped with improvements to the footpath network, but more of that in a moment.

The outcome of reviewed planning applications over the last two years has provided both highs and lows. As many of you will be aware the current “made” NDP (2016) main policies M1 & M2 are now out of date, though the rest of the policies are part of the Local Plan planning policy. However, given the shortfall in Herefordshire Councils 5-year land supply (this currently stands at 4.2 years), M1 and M2 being out of date leads to planning being approved in places potentially not wanted by the parish. The implications of this situation led to a working group being formed to review, update and allocate appropriate new sites. The aim of the review being to bring forward a revised document to referendum that would have appropriate status. Unfortunately, this activity has been put on hold due to the current situation with phosphates and its impact on the river Lugg catchment area. In essence Natural England will not sign off required Regulation 16 documentation. From a parish perspective this means that our ability to influence both positive and negative applications is limited. In order to support and help the Parish Council in its deliberations, it is vital that you as parishioners make your views known, good or bad, and if you wish your views to be considered by the Parish Council you need to make the council aware at the earliest opportunity, again whether or not it is for or against a particular application. You should also make your feelings known to Herefordshire Council as they make the actual planning decision.

Over the last two years we have reviewed 48 planning applications, supported 26 and objected to 15 in line with the principles set out in the made NDP. The rest have been commented on.

Finances are currently in very good shape with a surplus at the end of this year, largely down to the Covid impact combined with reduced progress on the community facilities project. We currently have over £75k in reserves, much of which is earmarked for the new community building and village green. The Financial Advisory Group has met on a number of occasions each year with its principal activities being to review the year end accounts and develop the budget for the coming year. The budget development has been brought forward and now starts mid-year with proposed items submitted, costed and considered prior to a budget being recommended for full council approval. The budget is now published each year with enough time for parishioners to comment prior to being approved by Council in January. A further significant improvement in transparency has been the adoption of a reserves policy which is reviewed each financial year end, with the final agreed reserves analysis published on the website as part of the year end accounts.

General maintenance has continued in line with the agreed monthly Lengthsman plan. The major change year on year has been an effort to minimise grass cutting in the early part of the growing year to allow the wild plants to flower first. Drainage has been a significant issue in the parish for some time and this year the Parish Council secured a £9.5k grant that enabled us to have the drains from Small Ashes down to the School House to be inspected, flushed and surveyed, as well as other work to improve drainage in the parish. The inspection work enabled a report to be produced highlighting specific issues in some locations, these have been reported and will be pursued further in the coming months.

There has also been a desire to look for ways to improve the general appearance of the parish and to this end the Parish Council has engaged with the Marden Gardeners' Association who put forward proposals for improvements in a number of areas, namely the green area around the Rudge Grove bus stop, the green area around the bus stop opposite the Volunteer Inn, as well as the War Memorial site where we might even get a new flagpole! While the plans are well underway and funded, authority still needs to be given by Balfour Beatty prior to implementation.

A major concern in recent years has been the state of our footpaths and bridleways, largely due to not being able to fill the volunteer footpath officer vacancy. That vacancy has now been filled by Sally Postlethwaite. Sally has made a significant difference to almost all of the 28.5 km within the parish, building much improved relationships with landowners and Balfour Beatty. In addition to footpaths and bridleways being enhanced, horse riders will also be please to know that the Parish Council has obtained Balfour Beatty agreement for 9 'Caution – Horses' signs to be erected on key roadside sites throughout the parish.

With regard to roads and traffic, a review was carried out to determine if the installation of village gates would be appropriate for Marden. Unfortunately, an evaluation by Balfour Beatty confirmed that there were no suitable sites available as possible sites all had very narrow verges. Other traffic measures are largely on hold until the New House Farm development gets underway and designated S106 money is released. On a positive note, Speedwatch, a voluntary group promoted by the Parish Council, has resumed when not restricted by Covid lockdowns, much to the annoyance of some drivers! A small but dedicated group of volunteers try to hold 2 or 3 one-hour sessions a week. There are currently six volunteers, but more are welcome to join the team and help an initiative that is clearly having a significant and favourable impact on traffic speeds.

A number of projects have been progressed throughout the pandemic. The NDP review group I have already spoken about. The community facilities project has been the other significant area of work. Having submitted a planning application in early 2020 as part of the New House Farm development Reserved Matters, the plan was to produce a detailed business case that would then be presented to the Parish. Covid and more specifically the delay in approval of the planning application due to the phosphate issue has essentially put a hold on significant work. In October last year Architype were asked to look at a contracting strategy that would ensure we kept the overall project within the funding level the Parish Council established as its limit, at least without a fairy godmother suddenly appearing! Their conclusion was that we should consider a local builder on a design and build basis but more importantly felt that their own fee costs were becoming cost prohibitive to our project and recommended we tender for a new architect. This the Parish Council did in late 2020 early 2021. Three firms tendered and all three were interviewed and CBW Architectural Design Ltd was contracted. While CBW are fully aware that the main project work will not commence until the planning application has been approved and the timeline for the gifting of the land is known, the Parish Council has contracted CBW to carry out a short study into the overall design submitted to Herefordshire Council with the view to looking at areas of cost improvement while still meeting the key defined requirements of floor space, kitchen and storage etc. Once this has been completed at a cost of no more than £3k (part of the overall fees not extra), the detailed business case can be finalised and presented to the Parish for approval. In addition, and running in parallel, throughout the coming months the Parish Council Community Facilities Group will be working closely with the Marden Village Trust to ensure the new building delivers a facility that is complimentary to the existing facilities and that will be able to pay its way in the long term. As a new initiative the Parish Council signed up to the Climate Emergency and formed a new working group (Environment & Sustainability) who are charged with developing initiatives within the parish to improve the overall environment around us and reduce CO2 emissions. You will already have seen a number of informational articles in N&V in recent months and will see more ideas progress. As with other working groups more volunteers are welcome.

In conclusion I would like to thank councillors and working group members who give their time voluntarily, the Clerk who continued to ensure the Council runs smoothly and lawfully throughout the pandemic, our Ward Councillor who has supported many of our causes, those parishioners who volunteered to be part of the Parish Covid support network, our footpath officer and her helpers, tree warden and you, our parishioners, for your ongoing support. Thank you all.

David Bennett

#### 4. Report from Marden Village Trust

Marden Community Centre is operated by the Trustees of Marden Village Trust.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Centre has been closed to hirers since March 2020. During this period Marden Village Trust meetings have been held regularly on-line.

It is hoped to reopen the Main Hall, evenings ONLY, in June 2021 though this is dependent on infection rates locally, and Government, NHS, and insurance guidelines due to be announced in May 2021. Potential users will be required to undergo training, and to adhere to the strict cleaning and sterilising procedures already in place, or access to the building will be denied.

The Trustees

#### 5. Report from Marden Recreation Ground Trust

There is not much to report really other than the fact that the trust has received £25K in various grants! We were approached by Herefordshire Council each time and filled out a basic application and were successful on every occasion.

We have not been able to hire the recreation ground out for football or village events but it has been a valuable space for people to exercise and get fresh air whilst socially distancing. The real highlight of the year was the erection of the Christmas tree!

Now that the restrictions are slowly being lifted, things are getting back to normal and football clubs and village groups are making bookings again.

The trustees will be meeting in the coming weeks to discuss how best to use the grant money to benefit the recreation ground and the wider community. If it were not for the grants received the trust would have made a small deficit during the last financial year. The latest set of accounts will be presented at the AGM in May (date to be announced).

Steve Miles: Secretary, Marden Recreational Ground Trust

#### 6. Report from Marden Consolidated Charities

Due to the Covid pandemic, the Charity has been unable to hold its Annual General Meeting, so there are no accounts available and in addition there has been no activity by the Charity.

Jane Keating: Secretary, Marden Consolidated Charities

#### 7. Public Forum

None.

This meeting was closed at 19.24.

**SIGNED:**

**DATE:**

Chair