

# WELWYN PARISH COUNCIL

## THE ANNUAL PARISH ASSEMBLY

HELD ON

THURSDAY 18<sup>th</sup> MAY 2006

IN THE CIVIC CENTRE, PROSPECT PLACE, WELWYN  
WHICH COMMENCED AT 8.00pm

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**Present:** Chairman, Cllr J Roper and Councillors: Mrs M Benson,  
J Blackburn, Mrs A Burnapp, Mrs S Butler, C Hukin,  
P Neville, C Passmore and I Skidmore

**In Attendance:** Rebecca Findlay (Clerk), Lorraine Ellis (Assistant Clerk), two  
members of the Welwyn Film Record Society and eight members  
of the electorate.

**Apologies for absence:**  
Cllr M Rowland (ill) and I Wheeler (other commitments)

**Approval of minutes of the 2005 Annual Parish Assembly:**  
The minutes of the last Annual Parish Assembly, held on the 19<sup>th</sup> May 2005, having been  
previously circulated, were approved following a proposal and seconded by members of  
the electorate – **Unanimously carried.**

**Matters arising from the minutes:**  
The Chairman reported that Dr Herbert Ober had put his name forward to act as the  
Parish Council's representative as Tree Warden. The Council receive regular input and  
advice from Dr Ober on tree matters.

The fencing at the toddlers playground which had been vandalized has now been  
replaced.

The Parish Plan Working Party looking at transport will be a good opportunity for  
residents to have a voice about the traffic congestion in the High Street, Welwyn and also  
in Digswell.

**Welcome:**  
The Chairman welcomed members of the public to the meeting and thanked them for  
attending although it was disappointing that so few members of the electorate were  
present.

## **CHAIRMAN'S REPORT AND FINANCIAL STATEMENT ON LAST YEAR:**

### **Staff and Staff Changes since last year:**

In his report, the Chairman outlined the staff changes during the last year. Lorraine Ellis had joined the Parish Council staff as Assistant Clerk; Barbara Sopp had retired recently after 9 years service as Cleaner and relief Caretaker for the Civic Centre. Jayne Wittick has recently been recruited as Barbara's replacement.

The Council has now defined the new post of Handyperson which will be advertised shortly. Once recruited it is anticipated that the Council's overall spend on contract staff and service companies will reduce.

### **Changes to Council Ward Representation:**

David Elsdon retired at the end of 2005. At the Council's Christmas 2005 Reception he was presented with an illustrated Scroll to record his many years as a resourceful and energetic Councillor for Digswell Ward.

Shirley Butler has been co-opted on to the Council as replacement for David Elsdon. Councillor Butler, as many of you will know, is a resident of Digswell too, and joins the Council with an impressive track record of service to that Ward.

### **Council Organisation & Structure:**

#### **Parish Council Offices**

The offices in Lockleys Drive are open three mornings each week although the Council staff actually work many more hours.

All are encouraged to visit the office more often where they will receive help and guidance on a wide range of issues. The Parish Council, where appropriate, will offer support for issues that are ultimately the province of the District and County Councils.

#### **Parish Council**

Eleven Councillors represent five wards:

- Ø Danesbury
- Ø Digswell
- Ø Hawbush
- Ø Oaklands/Mardley Heath
- Ø Queensway

#### **Standing Committees and Chairmen**

- Ø **Finance Committee** – Cllr Ian Skidmore
- Ø **Planning Committee** – Cllr Colin Hukin
- Ø **Leisure Facilities Committee** – Cllr Magdalene Benson
- Ø **Allotments, Cemetery & General Purposes Committee** – Cllr John Blackburn

### **Working Parties**

During the process of management the Council sets up Working Parties to undertake focussed research into specific issues and report back to Council with recommendations for action.

The aim is to attract non-Councillor membership of working parties, particularly where parishioners have special interest, or offer specific experience or skills that are needed.

At the start of the year there were two working parties although this has now increased to four allowing for the demise of one of them.

1. **Parish Plan Working Party – Cllr Ian Skidmore (Chair)**  
- wound up following the successful launch of the Parish Plan Steering Committee
2. **Youth Working Party – Cllr John Roper (Chair)**  
- continues from 2004 with more work to do
3. **Welwyn Playing Fields Working Party – Cllr Magdalene Benson (Chair)**  
- created in 2005
4. **Civic Centre Working Party – Various Councillors**  
- created in 2005
5. **Cleaner Welwyn Week Working Party – Cllr Ian Wheeler (Chair)**  
- created in 2006

### **Outside Bodies – Representation:**

Apart from work undertaken within Committees and the various Working Parties, Councillors represent the Parish Council on Other Bodies including:-

- Ø **County Association of Parish and Town Councils**
- Ø **School Governing Bodies**
- Ø **Welwyn District Road Safety Committee**
- Ø **Welwyn Hatfield Community Safety Partnership**
- Ø **Welwyn Festival Committee**
- Ø **Welwyn Twinning Society**

### **Frequency of Council Meetings**

The Council and the 4 Standing Committees meet throughout the year on a monthly basis, on Tuesdays, with Full Council meeting on the last Tuesday of each month.

Working Parties meet according to their needs. The Council has made a change to the Council's Rules and Procedures since last year, to allow the Council to continue it's work in future without a summer recess.

Members of the public are encouraged to attend all meetings and the Council allows a 15 minute period before Full Council commences to allow a free exchange of views and to raise any issues.

### **Review of 2005/2006**

The Chairman reported that under the guidance of the Clerk to the Council, the Council were:-

- Ø **firmly reviewing it's position in many areas**
- Ø **being self-critical of past and present performance**
- Ø **introducing better practices and control mechanisms**
- Ø **developing new strategies and plans for the future**

### **Staffing**

During the past year the Clerk to the Council has introduced contracts of employment for staff, job descriptions and annual appraisal procedures. Each of these steps will enable more efficient and effective day-to-day management of the Parish Council.

### **Strategies**

Last year the Parish Council launched the Parish Plan Process with the object of ensuring that everybody in the Parish had the opportunity to help shape the community's future direction.

The Parish Plan Steering Committee completed the questionnaire stage in April and has already shown that among the community there is a very low level of knowledge of the many services offered by the Parish Council. There is general confusion about the respective roles and responsibilities of the County, District and Parish Councils. The Clerk has produced a helpful 'Guide to Who Does What'.

### **Maintenance and Improvements to Facilities**

This year the Council has continued the programme of upgrading and improving premises and facilities which are available for hire. The Council has recognised that they cannot continue as they have in the past with short-term 'mend and maintain'. The Council want to ensure that their facilities remain modern and safe and of a high standard. The Civic Centre is being made a priority for major refurbishment starting primarily with the kitchen but there is much more to do.

In the previous year a considerable sum of money was spent re-laying the cricket pitch and the new cricket square is now attracting praise. The condition of the football playing surface continues to be the envy of neighbouring sports clubs.

The Youth Working Party reports to the Leisure Facilities Committee and is augmented by volunteers who have come forward as a result of the Parish Plan process and they have succeeded their first target of installing a youth shelter on Welwyn Playing Fields, which was officially opened on Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> April, although due to vandalism the structure of the shelter is being improved as a direct result.

The 4 Standing Committees continue to be the main vehicle the Parish Council uses for establishing future directions and in supporting the role of the Clerk to the Council who is very much the day-to-day Manager.

**PLANNING COMMITTEE (Colin Hukin)**

**Applications** - The Planning Committee review all planning applications put forward by residents and businesses within the Welwyn South Ward. On average 20 – 30 applications are received each month. The Committee have received and listened to several verbal submissions given on behalf of various groups in the community and this is helpful in the Committee’s deliberations.

A high number of applications for works to protected trees are received; the Council’s aim is to balance judgement with the need for good tree management and the need to maintain the landscape for the benefit of the community as a whole.

The Council wishes to remind parishioners that plans and proposals are always available for inspection in the Parish Council Office within normal working hours and also that the District Planning Department has introduced a system for examining planning applications on-line.

**Licensing** – The introduction of the Licensing Act has caused us considerable anguish. The Council were not included in the loop for the approval process and in many instances relied on the energies of Councillors to establish who was applying for what. As a result of this new area of responsibility the Parish Council is considering renaming the Planning Committee to the ‘Planning and Licensing Committee’ to better reflect the current level of activities.

**LEISURE FACILITIES COMMITTEE (Magdalene Benson)**

The prime role of this Committee is the responsibility for maintenance, repair and improvements to all the halls, sports pitches and associated equipment maintenance and purchase.

It was reported last year that negotiations were continuing with Welwyn Hatfield Council to take over the management of the Digswell Playing Fields but this year discussions have stalled through no fault of the Parish Council.

The Committee has received a report on the parlous condition of the Christmas lights. A decision is required on whether to repair damaged lamps at great expense or to replace them. The Council will be providing bunting this summer during Welwyn Festival Week rather than erecting the Christmas lights.

In line with the Council’s wish to make the name and function of Standing Committees clearer and more appropriate to their tasks, Full Council is going to consider renaming the Committee to the ‘Leisure Facilities and Open Spaces Committee’.

**ALLOTMENTS, CEMETERY & GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE – (John Blackburn)**

**Allotments** – Major progress has been made this year to address two areas which have been of concern to the Allotment Association and ploholders for many years:-

- Ø Align the charging year to the growing year rather than Council's accounting year
- Ø Establish a more equitable approach to renting whereby the rental charge reflects the size of the plot.

**Welwyn Cemetery** – During the past year the south side of the cemetery has been levelled in order to extend the projected capacity of the cemetery and the Parish Council is planning to plant trees along the top of the new bank to match those already in place on the original bank. Formal and informal inspections of the cemetery are carried out during the year. The Council occasionally has vandalism which the Clerk and her staff sort out as quickly and efficiently as possible. The general view is that the cemetery is a much tidier and attractive place for visitors than it has been in recent years.

**St Mary's 'Closed' Churchyard** The Parish Council has responsibility for maintenance for grass and yew hedge cutting regimes which have been agreed and followed. The Council has budgeted for the clearance of the undergrowth and Ivy which is invading the North and East walls of the Churchyard, the Council remains alert to potential public safety issues.

Liaison meetings have been held with the Churchwardens regarding the impact of the New Church Hall Project, in particular the necessary safe re-siting of some headstones.

**War Memorial** – Austin's Funeral Directors were asked by the Council to build a grassed tray for the placement of personal memorial crosses, the use of this tray was successful and is to be placed there every year, the Council is very grateful for their generosity.

The Clerk is currently seeking expert advice on the costs of cleaning and possibly refurbishing the War Memorial itself.

**FINANCE COMMITTEE:** (Ian Skidmore)

Councillor Skidmore reported that it costs about £250,000 to keep Welwyn Parish running. The money mostly spent on maintaining the following local facilities:-

- Ø Civic Centre
- Ø Parish Offices
- Ø Whitehill Centre
- Ø Pavilion
- Ø Playing fields
- Ø Public toilets
- Ø Playgrounds
- Ø Churchyard
- Ø Cemetery
- Ø Allotments

Insurance for all of the above and of course the staff who look after all of these areas.

The money comes from the Council Tax; the Parish Precept is about £150,000 which on average is less than £1 per week per household for the availability of all of the above. The majority of the Council Tax goes on Policing, County costs and District costs.

This year it is estimated that it will cost £250,346 to run the Parish and that the income will be £98,000 giving a precept of £150,346, being a 3.7% increase over last year, less than the overall percentage increase for the District as a whole. Payments for the use of the facilities such as the hire of the playing fields.

The Library and the Health Clinic located in the Civic Centre pay rent and this all brings in about £100,000 per year.

The budget for the year is slightly different from last year, it is believed that it will be more cost effective to do as much general maintenance as possible using Council staff rather than this being carried out by external contractors. Staff costs will rise to take on a person who will do this but maintenance costs will fall in a variety of areas to balance this out. The other major change The Council has set up two earmarked Reserve funds, one specifically for 'building maintenance' and the other for 'plant maintenance'. These replace the old "repairs and renewals" fund. The Council are aware that the Parish buildings are not only a responsibility but also a significant source of income without which the Precept would have to increase.

**QUESTIONS FROM THE FLOOR:**

There was one question from the floor. It was asked, "What publicity had there been about the meeting". The Assembly was told that the usual advertising was used but there was competition from other areas of the community tonight.

The Chairman presented Barbara Sopp with a basket of flowers as a gesture of thanks and appreciation for her time working for the Parish Council.

**Close of the Annual Parish Assembly:**

The Chairman, Cllr.Mr John Roper, thanked everyone for their input and attending their meeting then closed the meeting at 9.05pm to enable the Welwyn Film Society to show their film.

Signed.....Chairman of the Parish Council  
on behalf of the Electorate

Date.....