

Minutes of the Annual Assembly of Benenden
Monday 21st May 2018
8pm Iden Green Pavilion

PRESENT: Parish Councillors Thomas (Chair), Beveridge, Cruse, Kemp and Lewis, 16 parishioners, Borough Councillors Tom Dawlings, Seán Holden and Linda Hall, and the Clerk to the Parish Council

Councillor Nicola Thomas, Chair of the Parish Council, welcomed everyone present to the meeting, and thanked Julie Lewis for organising refreshments.

- 1 Apologies Parish Councillors Henning and Skeet, Bill Lewis, David Harmsworth, Lorraine Jones
- 2 Neighbourhood Development Plan – Tom Dawlings (report provided by Paul Tolhurst)

Context

Members of the NDP Steering Group have met with TWBC and they have outlined their approach to building a Local Plan for the Borough which will mean an increase in the level of development in the Parish above that envisaged in the existing Parish Plan. This is driven by the number of sites made available by local landowners.

- Proposed target in excess of 200 houses (218)
- Planning density 30 dph
- Once established target will be a ‘hard target’. E.g. In event of shortfall in density or site viability we will need to find additional sites
- ‘Windfall sites’ less than 11 units do not count towards our target so any small plots that receive consent will add to the target.

The NDP Group continues to lobby for a smaller overall target and have received positive indications that TWBC are minded to reduce our overall target.

At this stage Benenden has opted NOT to allocate specific sites in its plan, but to leave this task to TWBC. Benenden has also opted not to undertake a Local Call for Sites although the Group is aware of at least 3 local landowners who did not respond to the TWBC Call for Sites but who would want to offer development land if the village undertook its own Call for Sites. Both of these options could be reversed if believed to be in the interests of the village and would be for the Parish Council to take these decisions.

Key Work

All the working groups have produced some excellent base data and the Village Exhibition held on 7th April proved a great opportunity to present the information gathered. All working groups are now moving from information gathering to Policy Drafting mode.

The Housing Supply Working Group has completed its work on assessing 13 of the 14 sites put forward to TWBC under their Call for sites. The 14th site being a brownfield site at Benenden Hospital that already has outline planning permission and so has not been assessed by the working group. Their work will now become an input to a wider assessment taking into account inputs from the Landscape/Housing Design/Infrastructure and Business groups before we are ready to take a balanced view. The start of this process will be at the Policy

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Integration Workshop.

Key Dates are:

- Policy Integration Workshop for all volunteers from Working Groups- 24th March
- Planning Workshop with TWBC - 19th June
- Local Business Information Share - 24th June
- Launch of draft plan to village – end October
- Publication of Final Plan to village – end December
- TWBC and Examiner contribution – end Feb 2019
- Local Referendum – end March 2019

Communications

The Village Exhibition has been completed. Monthly updates are provided to the Parish Council and a monthly piece provided for the Parish Magazine. The website is now live <http://www.benendenneighbourhoodplan.org> Members have met with potential developers for two sites and although not in a position to offer any advice/support the group emphasised the need for appropriate density and design to be taken into account.

3 Benenden Village Trust – Robin Dalton Holmes

The Parish Council has been the sole trustee of the Harmsworth Memorial Trust, which owned the Village Hall, the Iden Green Pavilion, the recreation grounds in Benenden and Iden Green including the sites leased by the Bowling Club and the Tennis Club, the St George's Club building housing the club, the pre-school and one house, and land on which the recent Vyvyan Cottage developments in Standen Street was built.

Historically HMT has been dependent on the skills of those elected to the parish council and three drawbacks applied in this arrangement:

- Potential conflicts of interest arise between the legal obligations of a charity and the developing role of the Parish Council in the planning process.
- The inability to add trustees who could bring long term and requisite skills such as property management and financial expertise to bear.
- The burden on busy people elected primarily as councillors to manage two diverse activities.

The Parish Council recently resolved to transfer the assets of the HMT to a new charity, The Benenden Village Trust, which was approved by the Charity Commission a few months ago, and the assets of the HMT were transferred to the new charity on 1st April.

The founding trustees are David Harmsworth, Chairman, Kent Barker, who as a former councillor ensures continuity, Barrie Jones, a practising solicitor, Jonathan Strong, a Chartered Surveyor and a governor and director of Benenden School, Tom Dawlings, Borough Councillor for Benenden and Cranbrook Ward and Robin Dalton Holmes. There is scope to co-opt another three trustees and the additional skills we have identified as invaluable are a qualified Accountant to act as Finance Director, fund raising for special projects such as the children's play areas, and women to balance the initial all male situation.

Caroline Levett has been engaged as Trust Clerk and in addition to Lorraine Jones as Hall Manager discussions

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are taking place regarding a role for a Facilities Manager/Caretaker for all of the different properties.

A review of all major repair, refurbishment and key equipment is being undertaken. Progress is being made with a review of necessary contracts of employment, tenancy agreements and landlord's obligations. The hope is that in due course the scope of the Trust run by a permanent professional team may be expanded to embrace other responsibilities and activities which require a board of management.

All parishioners will be entitled to apply for membership in due course and at the first AGM next summer all trustees who wish to continue or new candidates will be subject to election by the members.

4 Parish Council Chairman's Report – Nicola Thomas

The Parish Council has dealt with some changes over the past year, some planned and welcome, others unexpected and challenging. The most challenging of all was the sad and sudden loss of Peter Davies at the beginning of March which shook us all. However, Peter would have been the first to say "business as usual". The Parish Council thanks the Clerk for her support and direction.

Over the past year the Parish Council said goodbye to Peter Ellis and welcomed Lynne Kemp . Gordon Reynolds and Kent Barker both decided not to stand for another term, and the Parish Council welcomed Graham Beveridge as a new Parish Councillor. A few parishioners who have expressed an interest in joining, so hope to be back to full strength within a couple of months. It is intended over the coming months that other Councillors will contribute a piece to the village magazine, and have a chance to introduce themselves.

The sheer energy and enthusiasm of the Neighbourhood Development Plan Steering Groups, unfailingly led by Paul Tolhurst, who has addressed the inevitable village politics with his characteristic strength and pragmatism, has been inspiring. The NDP will, no doubt, be the most important issue over the next year for the Parish Council.

A welcome change for the Council was the formation of the Benenden Village Trust. The removal of the Harmsworth Memorial Trust's responsibilities with their transfer to the BVT means that the Parish Council's tasks are now reduced to a more manageable level.

The Parish Precept has again been slightly reduced per household from last year. The internal audit takes place on 25th May, and at its meeting on 18th June the Parish Council will consider and approve the accounting statements for 2017/18. Income for the year was £46,964 and unaudited expenditure for the year was £36,249. The main additional expenditure this year has been on the Neighbourhood Plan, this has been covered by reserve income, and a £9,000 grant to be received from central government to cover some of this additional expense.

Thanks also go to our Borough Councillors, Tom Dawlings, Seán Holden and Linda Hall, who have done a sterling job this year representing parish interests at both borough and county level.

5 County and Borough Councillors

Cllr Linda Hall apologised that she had not attended Parish Council meetings. A broken foot had put her out of action for a number of months and her involvement with Goudhurst's Neighbourhood Development Plan and her role on the Joint Transportation Board means that she has many meetings to attend. She does however play a full part in Borough Council meetings.

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- Cllr Hall advised that she has voted consistently against the new Civic Complex Development. However planning permission has now been granted. It is unclear at present what will happen to the existing Town Hall.
- Each Borough Councillor has £200, as a Community Award, to grant to community groups each year.
- A new refuse contract is currently being negotiated. It is hoped that arrangements for the Civic Amenity Vehicle will be ongoing. Residents are likely to be charged for a garden waste bin.

Cllr Seán Holden reported the following :

- Cllr Holden abstained from voting on the Civic Complex Development. He had met with the Leader of TWBC to discuss funding for Cranbrook’s new Community Centre.
- Council Tax has increased by 5%, 3% of which is set aside for Social Care.
- The Revenue Support Grant received from central government has reduced by £500million over the past five years.
- Following changes to administrative boundaries, Goudhurst is now included within the Cranbrook division.
- Cllr Holden is leading a campaign to remove lorries from rural roads, working with KALC and MPs, based on experiences in Leicester. Goudhurst is looking to reclassify the A262 as a B road.
- There is currently an £11million blitz on potholes taking place. To make good all roads in Kent would cost £620million.
- Work is taking place to provide improved broadband to last 5% hard to reach rural areas. Colliers Green is working on a community solution to achieve this. Problems remain around mobile phone signal in the village.
- Work has commenced on the new Primary School.
- KCC unanimously supported the formation of a working group, Plan Bee, looking into the protection of bees.

Cllr Tom Dawlings reported the following :

- Withdrawal of the Revenue Support Grant has cost TWBC £5million a year. However a new revenue stream for local authorities is from retention new business rates.
- TWBC Local Plan requires that 13680 houses need to be built by 2033. The formation and adoption of Neighbourhood Development plans are important.
- The refuse contract negotiations will look to make recycling easier with kerbside collection.

6 Benenden Community Shop – Martin Pexton

Turnover for the year to 31st March 2018 was just under £450,000, compared to £400,000 the previous year, and double the turnover when the shop started in 2015. Profitability is also much improved.

Product offering is always improving, especially with local suppliers.

There are now 4 paid managers in the shop and 2 in the café, with 60 active volunteers. The café is increasingly popular and the servery area is being reconfigured to make better space for food preparation.

The AGM takes place on 21st June. There will be an opportunity for new shareholders, and new committee members are needed. Martin will be standing down as Chair, but will continue with finance. Cllr Thomas thanked Martin for all his work and input.

7 Planning and Highways – Kent Barker

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Over the past year the Planning Committee looked at 44 planning applications, mostly for extensions/additions. There were a handful of applications to convert barns or outbuildings, a couple to replace sheds or pool houses; one to replace an existing swimming pool, and a couple to build new garages. There were just 2 applications for new builds – one of 4 and one of 2 dwellings.

The planning committee always starts with the principle that a home or landowner should in general be allowed to do what they want with their property – as long as it doesn't infringe national planning guidelines. But the committee is conscious that Benenden has a considerable number of large family homes, and a relative shortage of smaller, affordable, starter homes or flats. When a homeowner adds an extension, or additional bedrooms, it increases its value and makes it even less affordable if sold in the future. This is particularly the case where people apply to join two cottages together to form one bigger one. It effectively means that the village loses two of the sort of dwellings it most needs.

The committee has also been frustrated by the general attitude of the TWBC planning department, which seems reluctant to recommend plans for smaller units or encourage conversion of redundant buildings into small units. An example being the owners of a former egg-packing shed were told that a proposal for a five bedroom dwelling would be likely to find favour where plans for two or three smaller units would not. The Parish Council expressed its concerns when another proposal, to convert an outbuilding into a small studio or one bedroom dwelling, was turned down, although this was finally granted after reapplication.

It is possible, regardless of our Neighbourhood Development Plan, that TWBC's need to find sites for 18,000 new homes in the next decade will mean an increase in the number and approval of applications such as the recent one that was passed for Walkhurst Road.

Benenden needs smaller units if it's to keep its young people in the village and for workers to be able to afford to live here.

8 Benenden Village Hall – Nicola Thomas (report provided by Lorraine Jones)

The hall continues to thrive with income levels for the financial year at £38,852, a 14% increase on 2016-17 and 49% increase on 2013-2014. The year-end balance was £28,376.57, a 22% increase on last year. A copy of the unaudited account is available on the village hall website.

Improvements are ongoing. There is a new dishwasher, new stage curtains, and window curtains in both halls. The doors and window frames are in the process of being sanded and re-stained. There are plans in the pipeline for completely revamping the small hall and for changing the velux windows in the main hall.

New regular classes this year include Scottish Dancing, Judo, Flamenco Dancing and Spine-Safe Pilates. The hall was chosen to be the venue for Grierson Galleries art show, which proved so popular that it is going to become an annual event. The hall helped to promote Village Halls Week earlier this year on social media and is now helping Keith Harrison, Chief Executive of Action with Communities in Rural Kent, to launch Volunteers Week which is happening in June.

9 Iden Green Pavilion – Jo Bird (report provided by Bill Lewis)

The building and car park are leased by the Benenden Village Trust to the Iden Green Pavilion Trust, which itself is a registered charity. The Constitution, which was written 25 years ago, states that:

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“The object of the Charity shall be the provision and maintenance of a village hall for the use of the inhabitants of Iden Green and the neighbourhood thereof without distinction of political, religious or other opinions including use for meetings, lectures and classes and for other forms of recreation and other leisure-time occupation in the interests of social welfare and with the object of improving the conditions of life for the said inhabitants.”

The Trust employs a part-time cleaner and all other duties - Property Management, Secretary, Treasurer and Bookings Secretary are shared amongst the Trustees who undertake their responsibilities without payment on a voluntary basis. Trustees were thanked for the time and effort they put in to the management of the Pavilion. Tribute was paid to the late Peter Davies who served as a Trustee.

The report for the year ending 31st December 2017 shows the Pavilion to be in sound financial shape and maintaining a healthy number of regular hirers, who provide a range of classes and group activities, from painting and craftwork, to yoga, pilates and keep-fit. Other hirers include the WI, Parish Council, Benenden Almshouses, and the Tennis Club. These activities occur on weekdays during daytime and evenings, whilst at weekends there is a steady stream of children’s parties and other family gatherings.

Expenditure on building maintenance during recent years has brought the Pavilion up to a high standard, which, coupled with its location in the heart of Iden Green and within the Harmsworth Recreation Field, makes it a very attractive proposition for hirers, especially during the summer months.

Income for the year was £ 6,920 and expenditure £4,729 with a balance £21,885

Other income is generated by the annual Quiz Night and the Jazz and Blues Evening. This latter event, normally held in the open air outside the Pavilion, had to be relocated to Benenden Village Hall because of heavy rain. Thanks go to Lorraine Jones who, with Peter Davies’s support, enabled a really successful evening when all had seemed doomed to fail!

Pavilion revenue from these annual events helps to keep hire fees at a very modest rate, which adds to the attractiveness of this venue. Help and support in putting these events on is very much welcomed, so please contact any of the Trustees if you can lend a hand.

The next Jazz & Blues Night will be held on Saturday 28th July from 6.00pm.

10 Benenden Almshouses – Robin Dalton Holmes

This has been a year of steady planning to advance towards the construction of new and replacement almshouses on land between Rothermere Close and Feoffee's.

The almshouse charity is potentially a key component in the Neighbourhood Plan.

The weakness in almost all new low cost housing is that the first occupants can exercise a right to buy after which the property can be sold at full market value and the stock of affordable housing is diminished. Almshouses are exempt from the occupants' rights to buy.

Last Autumn Benenden Almshouses trustees submitted a proposal to TWBC's call for sites for housing using about 1/3 of its land to construct 12 purpose built almshouses financed in part by a small group of twelve marketable 3 and 4 bedroomed houses for immediate sale. If the scheme is viable it is hoped to retain a couple

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of semidetached houses as almshouses in addition to the eight 2 bedroom and four single bedroom almshouse flats. TWBC has been encouraging and suggested adding a further marketable house. Trustees believe that the allocation of new housing sites required by TWBC to satisfy Benenden's share of national targets in the Neighbourhood Plan should contain a proportion of further almshouses, for all age family occupation to help ensure that a permanent stock of affordable rentable accommodation can be available to help those with local connections either to continue living here in retirement or return to Benenden when they cease to live in parental homes.

The Almshouse charity is a legal structure which already exists and can contribute to this objective and we intend submitting our planning application without delay.

11 Gibbon and Buckland – Nicola Thomas (report provided by David Harmsworth)

In 2017 the Charity gave substantial grants to 25 students who were 18+, and 4 to 16+ youngsters to help in gaining qualifications, in addition to one grant to the Primary School and presenting the leavers with Bibles. The Chair of the Charity is Simon Brown, and the Clerk is David Harmsworth.

12 Parish Magazine – Kent Barker

The June magazine will be the 33rd edition since it moved to the new larger colour format in October 2015.

Despite the fact that nearly half the 40 pages are taken up with advertising and that no-one gets paid for the work they do, the Magazine makes no money at all. The Parochial Church Council effectively subsidises the Magazine by about £500 a year, and the Parish council has earmarked double that sum to underwrite the magazine should it be required.

In its early stages it was decided to put all the money into the appearance of the magazine. Accordingly there is now colour on any and all 40 pages and it is printed on top quality paper.

The magazine has three editors, taking charge once every three months. Camilla McDonald, the layout editor, works tirelessly every month, ensuring the very distinctive style of the magazine

One of the reasons for the request to the Parish council for £1000 to be available would be to pay a stand-in designer once or twice a year so Camilla could take a break.

The magazine would particularly welcome articles and ideas from people in the village.

The meeting closed at 9:15pm

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