

FINCHAMPSTEAD PARISH COUNCIL

MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL GATHERING OF PARISHIONERS HELD AT 7 PM ON TUESDAY 31 MAY 2022 AT THE FBC CENTRE, GORSE RIDE NORTH, FINCHAMPSTEAD, BERKSHIRE

PRESENT: Councillor S. Weeks, Chair.
Councillor S. Bromley, Vice Chair.
Councillors S. Bowers; R. Cundy; C. Driver; G. Evans; S. Gurney; G. Jukes OBE;
S. McDonald; R. Margetts, R. Marshallsay, G. Veitch.

Clerk – K. Dagnall; Deputy Clerk – C. Warke;
Planning Committee Clerk – C. Cordell.

Approximately 65 guests including residents; representatives from the Finchampstead Neighbourhood Development Plan Group; the Wokingham Volunteer Centre; Sue Ryder Duchess of Kent; Berkshire MS Therapy Centre; the Finchampstead Society; the Friends of Finchampstead Ridges. Wokingham Borough Councillors P. Harper and C. Margetts

Representatives from Wates Construction and Wokingham Borough Council involved with the Gorse Ride regeneration.

CHAIRMAN'S WELCOME

Cllr Weeks welcomed everyone to the Annual Gathering and thanked all present for attending.

Cllr Weeks stated how good it was to see so many familiar faces as well as new people, including residents, representatives from several local organisations and volunteer groups which provide services for our community, and colleagues from the Borough Council.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from
Finchampstead Parish Councillors E. Biskup, D. Cornish; B. Eytley; A. Pearce; R. Woof.

J. Sunderland MP; J. Gallagher, Finchampstead Baptist Church; P. Glenister, Thames Valley Police;
A. Brown, Nine Mile Ride Primary School; Wokingham Job Support Centre.

WBC Officers I. Bellinger; R. Hayes; R. Josey.

THE CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

Cllr S. Weeks. Appendix A refers.

COMMITTEE REPORTS

Reports were presented by representatives from each of the Councils Committees. The slideshow presentation is included as Appendix G, additional reports are included as noted below.

AMENITIES COMMITTEE REPORT

Cllr S. McDonald. Appendix G refers.

PLANNING COMMITTEE REPORT

Cllr R. Cundy. Appendices C and G refer.

RIGHTS OF WAY COMMITTEE REPORT

Cllr R. Margetts. Appendices D and G refers.

ROADS & ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE REPORT

Cllr S. Bromley. Appendices E and G refer.

FINANCE & GENERAL MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE REPORT

Cllr G. Jukes. Appendices F and G refer.

FINCHAMPSTEAD NEIGHBOURHOOD DEVELOPMENT PLAN (NDP)

Allan Gibson, Chair of the NDP Project Group provided an update on progress with the Plan.

GORSE RIDE REGENERATION

Barry Williams of Wates Construction gave a presentation on the regeneration project.

PRESENTATION OF AWARDS

The Finchampstead Parish Council Platinum Jubilee Awards were presented to Jac Pluves (Individual Award) and Little Reds Woodfired Pizza Company (Group Award).

The Freedom of the Parish was presented to retiring Councillor Chris Driver.

OPEN FORUM

A number of questions and comments were taken from the floor.

CONCLUSION

Cllr Weeks thanked the Parish Councillors for their hard work, all undertaken voluntarily, over the past year. The Parish Council staff were also thanked for their support and work over the year.

Those present were invited to take a copy of the Council's Annual Report for 2021/22, to view the information on display and to join Parish Councillors for refreshments.

Appendix A

Chairman's Report 2021/22

Every Town and Parish Council has to have an annual meeting for its Parishioners. This meeting – our Annual Gathering – gives us the opportunity to tell you what we have been doing over the last year on behalf of Finchampstead. It also allows us to meet and listen to you - our residents, as well as to others who provide support or services for those in our Parish.

We have had an interesting and busy year which our Committee representatives will tell you more about shortly. Before I hand over there are just a few points I would like to cover.

You may or may not know that there are quite a few of us on the Council – in fact we have 17 Councillor places. I am pleased to say that at the moment we have a full house. However, we have had some changes over the last year. We had an election in May 2021 when two Councillors – Nancy Jennings Frisby and Richard Rampton – decided to stand down. We were delighted to welcome Emily Biskup and Sally Gurney as Members of the Council. More recently Jim May stood down after 15 years on the Council, and in April we welcomed George Evans to the team.

Most of the Councillors are here tonight and you will have a chance to meet and speak to them later.

We have also seen staff changes, with Anna Kent leaving the post of Planning Committee Clerk in May 2021. We were pleased to welcome Caroline Cordell to the Council in June, and then Colette Warke to the new post of Deputy Clerk in September.

Chairmans' summary presented after the Committee reports

Thank you to the Councillors for their reports and presentations. I hope that this has given all of you an insight into what we do as a Council for the benefit of our Parish and its residents.

As you have heard this has been a year of challenges and opportunities. The pandemic has brought its own challenges, but despite this we have been able to make significant progress with some projects and areas of work.

Community Infrastructure Levy funds provide us with a real opportunity to direct funds to priorities which are important to you, our residents. These funds, and the emerging Neighbourhood Development Plan which you will hear more about in a moment, are central to our work, and to the development of our forward plans.

We continue to try to build a better working relationship and communications with the Borough Council as by working together we can make best use of resources to help maintain and improve services and facilities for our residents. For the same reason we also look for opportunities to work with our neighbouring Town and Parish Councils.

We are helped in this by Councillor Roland Cundy's role as Vice Chair of the Borough Parish Liaison Forum. In addition, Katy Dagnall, our Clerk, chairs the Wokingham Clerks Forum, an important and well respected group including the Clerks from all of the 17 Wokingham Town and Parish Councils.

We will continue to listen to and communicate with you, our residents and are looking forward to an exciting year ahead working on your behalf.

Councillor Simon Weeks
Chair, Finchampstead Parish Council

Appendix B

Amenities Committee Report 2021/22

Refer to Appendix G.

Councillor Sylvia McDonald
Chair, Amenities Committee

Appendix C

Planning Committee Report 2021/22

The Planning Committee has responsibility on behalf of the Parish Council to review, consider and make comment on all planning applications and related matters, both within the Parish and adjoining parishes. The parish council are “consultees” and as such do not make the final decision, this is the responsibility of WBC. We also review tree works required to protected trees with Tree Preservation Orders (TPO’s).

The Committee meets every four weeks and in the past 12-month period we have reviewed 203 planning applications, on average 17 per month. Most of these applications are routine and non-controversial, often for minor changes or extensions; others are more complex and controversial. We have however objected to 45 of these applications. There is a wide range of complexity, from garage or barn conversions to new estates, 150 homes in an adjoining parish for example. Occasionally members of the public attend our meeting to support or more commonly object to applications being considered.

When considering applications, the committee tries to represent the views of the immediate neighbours and the majority view of parishioners but of course taking consideration of WBC planning policy and guidelines. Unsuccessful applicants may appeal the decision and when such appeals result in a public enquiry, a planning committee member will normally attend and may speak at the hearing. The inquiry is chaired by a government inspector from the Planning Inspectorate. Such an inquiry was held recently concerning land at the rear of Johnson Drive. A member of the planning committee attended that appeal as the parish were objecting to the application. We are awaiting the appeal decision.

An inquiry relating to 32 houses on Land North of Nine Mile Ride to which we objected last year is to be held on 2nd August 2022. Again, a member of the planning committee will attend this inquiry.

From time to time there are planning related matters that contravene planning policy and guidelines. Such matters are referred to the Wokingham Borough Planning Enforcement team for attention. The parish council maintains a list of parish issues and reviews these monthly through to resolution to ensure nothing is overlooked and that issues are dealt with in a timely and effective manner. Sometimes major issues are taken to court for resolution.

Perhaps the most controversial issue has been the continued receipt of unwelcome planning applications from developers for large scale and unplanned housing developments in the parish. I have already mentioned a couple of these. WBC now has a much more robust approach to such applications, but we remain vigilant and you can be assured that your parish council will continue to treat these issues with the utmost urgency. We share the concerns of parishioners with regards to over-development and the resultant impact on our parish, its roads, and its precious green space.

We follow the progress of the Wokingham Borough Council Local Plan update closely. We respond to all related consultations, including the Revised Growth Strategy consultation earlier this year. Our comments included strong opposition to the proposals for Rooks Nest Farm.

Gorse Ride Regeneration: a presentation on this project will follow later on the agenda.

The Arborfield Strategic Development Location (SDL)

Over the past year the development at Arborfield Garrison has continued to move forward. The northern part of the development is now known as Arborfield Green, and although most of this lies in Barkham Parish there are about 300 new homes now occupied in Finchampstead Parish.

The southern part of the site, all of which is in Finchampstead, is being developed by Cala Homes and is now known as Finchwood Park. The first properties here were occupied since December 2019 - construction has been slow to start but now over 140 are occupied. Eventually there will be 1500 homes on this development.

Finally, I would like to thank my fellow councillors for their continued enthusiasm and regular attendance at our monthly meetings! My thanks also go to Caroline the Planning committee clerk, who ensures that we are well prepared for our meetings and achieve our deadlines and of course she completes all the paperwork.

Councillor Roland Cundy
Chair, Planning Committee

Appendix D

Rights of Way Committee Report 2021/22

The previous two years have been challenging for our Rights of Way network. We have experienced some very severe periods of wet weather, coupled with unprecedented numbers of people using our paths during the Covid Lock-Downs. Whilst it is great to see people out and about enjoying our countryside, it does mean that the paths are suffering some increasing levels of wear and tear, which we are doing our best to get repaired. We work with the Borough Council on this as it is the body responsible for the paths.

One particular concern has been the increased numbers of people riding horses and bikes on footpaths, rather than bridleways and by-ways. On paths where riding a bike or horse is a real danger to walkers and others, we have placed signs reminding riders that they do not have permission to do so.

After some considerable effort, and working with Barkham Parish Council and WBC, we have managed to get some significant improvement to the permissive paths over the Hazebrouck SANG as a route for children cycling to Bohunt School. Whilst not perfect, we hope we will have some cleaner children as a result!

After a number of years of trying, plans are now being finalised to improve the drainage on BP 26 (Heath Ride to Goose Green). This may result in the path being closed for a couple of weeks and we will give more details when we have them.

We have compiled the third in our series of circular walks within the parish and have now published details of this. We are also looking at the possibility of introducing QR Codes on our circular walks and other paths, to allow walkers with suitable smartphones to download maps, location details and other immediate points of interest.

We continue to work with the Ramblers to identify suitable locations to improve access to Rights of Way by replacing stiles with new kissing gates, with a number of paths to the west of the parish and along the Blackwater valley having been made much more accessible to walkers with more restricted mobility.

In 2021, we held a consultation on establishing a permitted path from Booth Drive to Rooks Nest Country Park. Discussions on this are ongoing in order to find a solution which can accommodate the concerns of residents who live in the immediate vicinity but meets the needs of other nearby residents who value the use of the path.

It is hugely disappointing that after many years, we still haven't finalised plans with Cemex for the completion and opening to the public as soon as possible of all rights of way on Fleet Hill and Manor Farm once extraction operations have ended.

We now have a separate working party focussed on this and it remains a top priority for the Parish Council.

Another long-term project is the development of a safe cycle route from Finchampstead to the centre of Wokingham. The owners of Sand Martins Golf Course have been helpful with this project and although progress is much slower than we would like, we continue to push hard to establish this much-needed route.

We continue to work with WBC on their new Rights of Way Improvement Plan and we have contributed ideas for new routes. We are also looking at options for producing details of walks from within our parish that link up with those of our neighbours, for those who want a more challenging step-count target!

Finchampstead has over 20 miles of public rights of way which are a source of free pleasure and exercise to everyone in our community. We hope that you continue to enjoy them.

Councillor Rebecca Margetts
Vice Chair, Rights of Way Committee

Appendix E

Roads and Road Safety Committee Report 2021/22

Traffic monitoring

The majority of the effort in the Roads and Road Safety committee is on traffic monitoring. You may be familiar with the equipment that we have been using to monitor speed across the parish and to educate drivers on the routes with the worst records. However, this has changed this year on two counts: -

1. Due to the Covid pandemic we were not allowed by Thames Valley Police to run any sessions until June 2021
2. From January 2022 TVP announced a new Community Speedwatch operation very much based around their Community Speedwatch website. To join you must register a new group and then join the group. You must then view some training videos and answer a series of tests. If you achieve a 90% score or better in the tests you become an operator. Finally, we had to purchase a new camera which records 10

second videos of vehicles exceeding the police guidelines which shows speed and time. This makes processing the results much easier

We resumed weekly sessions on May 13th and are looking for extra operators if you are interested.

Speedwatch signs and gateways

Working closely with Barkham Parish Council we have designed some Community Speedwatch signs which have been approved by TVP and WBC. We have now had these signs installed on the major entrances into our parish.

WE have also worked with WBC to get new gateway signs installed at the major entrances into the parish which didn't already have them installed.

Signs, potholes & footways

Signs, potholes, fly-tipping, and footways are the topics where the Parish Council receives most dialogue from our parishioners.

Finchampstead Parish council has no direct control of the highway maintenance of local roads. Over the last few years however, we have been very proactive in trying to improve the quality of the roadside verges and the visibility and accuracy of road signs. You can see from the examples that many signs get rendered invisible by overgrown vegetation, unreadable through traffic grime or algae and occasionally even turned around by wind or mischief makers.

Diligent reporting of problems really does make a difference, and we don't want to lose this momentum. So we appeal to all of our parishioners to photograph and take note of the location of any examples of poor signage, verges, or potholes either close to your home or whilst you are walking round the parish and report them direct to Wokingham Borough Council through their website.

None of this progress would be possible without the active participation of our Clerk and other members of our Roads and Roads Safety Committee as well as our dedicated volunteers (which currently includes 5 other Parish Councillors). I would like to give my thanks once again to you all.

Councillor Steve Bromley
Chair, Roads & Road Safety Committee

Appendix F

Finance & General Management Committee

Report 2021/22

This Committee is responsible for the General Management of the Parish Council and is the engine room which drives everything we do.

Role of Finance & GM

Budget and precept
General management and strategy
Financial policy and controls
Risk Management Sub Committee
Human Resources Sub Committee
Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funds

Grants

2021/22 budget

We continue to give good value for money against background of serious cost increases
Positive factors are savings made against budget in 2020/21 and increasing tax base
Precept of £168,500 giving a Band “D” rate of £27.93 per annum
Second lowest Parish/Town precept in the whole of Wokingham Borough

Developing the Council

Neighbourhood Development Plan will form the basis for new Strategic Plans in coming year
CIL funds received have been over £800,000 and could eventually rise to over £4 million
This is enabling us to undertake projects previously beyond the scope of a Parish Council
Need to increase our capabilities to manage these for best outcomes for Parishioners
Deputy Clerk appointed and IT and Web infrastructure strengthened

CIL Projects

Spent £33,000 in 2021/22 on 9 projects including improving paths at Hazebrouck Meadows, Traffic monitoring units and Defibrillators for local schools.
War Memorial relocation project is underway.
Future approved projects include California Crossroads improvements (with WBC), Wellingtonia Avenue Tree Survey and Bridle Path 24 drainage improvements
Under consideration are 3 other local projects and discussions are ongoing with WBC on some potentially significant developments in the future

Grants

CIL cannot be used for everything – conditions apply
Grants to local organisations still play a vital role
Over £40,000 awarded in 2021/22
Youth work at FBC, Citizens Advice, Blackwater Valley Partnership and Keep Mobile
Local Primary Schools and Community Halls
Many smaller charities supporting local people in different ways

Communication and Risk Management

No report on 2021/22 would be complete with reference to Covid
Exceptional circumstances and challenges for FPC
Managed to continue to operate and deliver uninterrupted services to Parishioners
Working remotely conducted all Council and Committee Meetings (helped by new IT structure)
Expanded our Newsletter and Facebook activity to include an expanded range of topics and provide comprehensive briefings for everyone

Councillor Graham Jukes OBE

Vice Chair, Finance & General Management Committee

Appendix G

Committee presentations 2021/22

Presentations for the Amenities, Planning, Rights of Way, Roads & Road Safety and Finance and General Management Committees are included in a separate file.