

**MINUTES FOR THE ANNUAL PARISH MEETING HELD IN ICKLEFORD VILLAGE HALL
AT 8.00PM ON TUESDAY 10TH APRIL 2007**

Present: Cllrs P J Crowe (Chairman), M Maxwell, C R Thurstance D Chapallaz, B Crosse, K Goldie.

Also present: Cllr C Strong (Chairman of NHDC), Cllr N Brook, (HCC), Cllr T Gibbs (NHDC), Inspector Wheatley, PC Matt Jenkins, PCSO Nikki Williams.

10 members of the public.

Officer present: Katrina Henshaw (Parish Clerk).

1 WELCOME BY THE CHAIRMAN OF ICKLEFORD PARISH COUNCIL

Cllr Philip Crowe welcomed those members of the public present, Cllr Claire Strong, Inspector Julie Wheatley, PC Matt Jenkins and PCSO Nikki Williams.

The Chairman then introduced Cllr Tricia Gibbs, Cllr Nigel Brook, the Parish Councillors and the clerk.

Minutes of meeting held on the 11th April 2006 were available and the Chairman advised all outstanding points would be covered in reports.

2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Cllr J Carlyle (away) and Cllr G Palmer (away)

3 SHORT ADDRESS BY THE CHAIRMAN OF NHDC

Cllr Claire Strong explained that she was currently the Councillor for the Offa ward which included Offley and Pirton and she was very privileged to have been the Chairman of the District Council for the past year.

Cllr Strong had declared at the beginning of the year that she was happy to work with any charity so had been fortunate to meet with an amazing number of people.

During the twelve years that Cllr Strong had been a Councillor, the Conservatives had run the District Council for eight years. One of the most significant things that had happened during this time was NHDC selling the housing to North Hertfordshire Homes who had been able to invest in the housing in a way that NHDC would not have been able to do.

NHDC now have a new service centre and Cllr Strong asks residents to advise their District Councillor if they have any problems contacting NHDC. This year the Council will need to agree the plans for the new Churchgate development in Hitchin. NHDC also plan to increase the amount of waste that is recycled by offering more kerb side collections.

Finally, NHDC continue to look at the services they provide and ways to provide more for less money especially as they now have to rely upon more money coming from the Council Tax as the Government contributions have decreased.

Cllr Crowe thanked Cllr Strong for her report.

4 REPORT FROM OUR COUNTY COUNCILLOR

Cllr Nigel Brook explained that he had eight parishes and tried to attend all Parish Councils meetings. As usual it had been a great pleasure to work with Ickleford over the past year. The highlight of the year was Ickleford being awarded as the best village in Hertfordshire. This was a terrific achievement and was certainly well deserved. He wished Ickleford every success in the national competition. The 86% response rate to the Parish Plan was a credit to Ickleford and he acknowledged how hard Cllr Maxwell and his team must have worked to achieve this.

Hertfordshire's population was getting older and there was not enough children to support all the schools so a review was currently being carried out and a big re-adjustment was expected in Hitchin. Ickleford School is a very good school with Pat Salmon known as an excellent Headteacher. He was honoured to see the school choir sing recently at the Royal Albert Hall.

HCC increased the council tax by 5% this year. An extra £10 million was being put into improving the roads in the county but more money is still needed. However, surprisingly, the Audit Commission had declared Hertfordshire's roads as some of the best in the country.

Cllr Brook thanked Ickleford Parish Council for their continued hard work and as Cllr Crosse was not standing for re-election this year thanked her for all her contributions to Ickleford and wished her well in the future.

Cllr Crowe thanked Cllr Brook for his report and said that he was always welcome at Ickleford Parish Council meetings. The audience was then given the opportunity to ask questions.

One resident asked if HCC would be planning to resurface Old Hale Way from Bowman's Mill to Strathmore Avenue. Cllr Brook advised that it wasn't scheduled until 2009/10 but he would continue to ask for this to be done sooner than planned.

Several residents were surprised to hear of the Audit Commissioners results about the roads as they could name several counties with better roads.

One resident stated that he believed the way HCC repaired pot holes was neither efficient nor cost effective. He also suggested that when HCC are carrying out minor emergency repairs it would be worth them considering repairing larger areas whilst on site as this would save money in the long term.

5 REPORT FROM OUR DISTRICT COUNCILLOR

Cllr Tricia Gibbs read the following report.

This year, like most, has been an interesting year to say the least. We still have no definite decision or date on the development of the West of the A1(M) but this is just a matter of time. We are, of course, still threatened by other large developments as well as possible expansion of Luton Airport.

As usual the District Council has had its annual struggle to keep council tax rates below 5%, the Government capping limit. Whilst some of you may say 'well inflation is under 3% so the council tax should be the same', if only that was the case! Salary inflation for council employee is set at 3.5%, contracts inflation is a similar rate and while we work efficiently we can only constantly strive to be more efficient; we have to also meet the costs of Government driven changes.

The most expensive of these is recycling targets. North Herts has always been keen on recycling and currently we recycle more than the targets set by the EU and the Government. From later this year North Herts is intending to move to alternate

weekly collections; this will mean black bins will be collected on alternate weeks with your brown bins in-between, plus paper, glass and introducing collection of cans and tins. There will also be seventy-five bring sites for plastic bottles. Having so many will allow villages and most hamlets to have a site. Consultation is already under way with the Parish Council for potential sites for this facility. There will be public information programmes which are being rolled out starting on 1st April 2007. We need to do this to avoid landfill tax changes which would cost us dearly if we continue to use landfill as we do now.

I am also really pleased that the village hall committee has been granted a £50,000 grant towards a new roof and other improvements. We have, of course, been able to help other organisations in the village with Area Committees' budget.

Another development is the change in the Area Committee structure. The decision of the Council at a meeting two weeks ago is that we should return to a Central Planning Committee with all undelegated decisions being decided by that Committee, it has for the last ten years been one of the functions of the Area Committee, but this has led to a number of occasions to unsound decisions being made and the Council having to attend a Public Enquiry, which has cost considerable amounts of money. It is envisaged that with a total of fifteen councillors on the committee and the funds available to train only fifteen instead of forty-nine, the quality of decisions will improve. It is also envisaged that better training will be given to Parish Councils enabling them to make more planning policy related decisions.

You will notice that I have not yet mentioned your Parish Council. They have as usual worked hard throughout the year for the benefit of Ickleford and I am hopeful that the Parish Plan, which was developed by members of the Parish Council and co-opted members of the community, will have beneficial results for the village. The transport group are already working with the Police, Hertfordshire Highways and the District Council to try and address some speed and rat-running issues which so badly affect the village. I also know that there will be an Environmental Action Day on the 21st April and I look forward to joining with that exercise.

Cllr Crowe thanked Cllr Gibbs for her report and said that she was always welcome at Ickleford Parish Council meetings. The audience was then given the opportunity to ask questions.

One resident asked how much the District Council currently recycled. Cllr Strong advised that it was currently 25% but would need to be 40%.

Another resident asked how they proposed to do this. Cllr Gibbs advised that people would need to be educated about the new services offered and this would be done via newspapers, leaflets and stickers on bins. Residents are also encouraged to compost themselves if possible. How things are packaged in shops would also need to be looked at.

There were a few complaints about rubbish coming from Biffa on windy days. Cllr Gibbs advised that Biffa are always keen to clear any rubbish and suggested people contact the site manager when they see it.

6 REPORT FROM THE CHAIRMAN OF ICKLEFORD PARISH COUNCIL

Cllr Philip Crowe read the following report.

Two words I feel best describe this last year for Ickleford are "Community Success" as it has been quite a remarkable year for so many reasons, and with the drive, commitment and leadership of so many individuals in the village has produced the

response and interest of the community that has again reminded me of the title we were given a few years ago of being a vibrant village.

I acknowledge that there are areas within the village that look neglected and still require attention, but nothing is perfect in life, and these problems remain before us and with further input from outside authorities will receive improvement in the future.

Four areas of success immediately come to mind – the Church under Reverend Margaret Holford's stewardship, continue to press forward with their fundraising and as the last edition of the St Katharine's Wheel detailed they now have £120,000 a magnificent achievement towards their target of £200,000.

The Village Hall Committee made an excellent presentation last year to North Herts and as a result was rewarded with a grant of £50,000 to take forward the refurbishments that were highlighted as being required for the Hall in a survey conducted earlier.

The Parish Plan driven forward by Miles Maxwell and his team, and Miles will enlarge on this shortly, was a superb effort given the amount of work involved in collecting and analyzing all the data received from residents in the survey, and as a result Miles has enlarged his team of volunteers to take forward the requests/recommendations which will form the basis for the future of the village.

Finally of course we won the 'Village of the Year' competition, and who can forget that hot sunny Saturday last July when we received the award. I shall certainly not as it was also my eldest daughters wedding day, and having accepted the trophy from the Lord Lieutenant at 1.00 pm had to hurry home to change to give my daughter away at 2.00 pm! My obvious concern was to make sure I had my correct speeches in order. And I am pleased to say I got it right.

Returning to the 'Village of the Year' competition, in two weeks we welcome the National judges to the village for an afternoon's presentation when as many organisations of the village will be present to demonstrate our community spirit and hopefully see us proceed to the next stage – we shall obviously be defending the trophy this year.

All of the areas I have mentioned have required commitment, time and enthusiasm from many people, and these are only a few highlights of the village. The Sports Club continues to thrive, and again reverting back to the St Katharine's Wheel which seems to increase in size with every issue it is plain to see the village provides a constant source of activities for all ages to participate in.

The burial ground project continues to move forward albeit slowly due to the many discussions with outside authorities. A geophysical survey of the area was undertaken last year to establish what archaeological interests could be beneath the ground, and further meetings with the County Hall Archaeologist on this subject will take place. The Environment Agency and Highways continue to be involved, so it remains a question of watch this space.

Mention was made during the year during our celebrations of winning the 'Village of the Year' competition that parts of the village did not deserve such an award. Well the competition rules changed a few years ago, and whilst obviously a tidy village is still looked for, rusty drawing pins in a notice board no longer lose points, and the judges are looking at a more global picture. For a few years they told us we had to have the "buzz" factor to win so perhaps we have at last found it. Obviously we remain concerned over such areas as the Turnpike Lane garages, and graffiti at Gerry's Hole and the Parish Council have had many meetings with Hertfordshire Homes over Turnpike Lane and we still await proposals, but at least we have a dialogue going which did not exist before.

Over the year the Parish Council has dealt with nineteen Planning applications covering the usual subjects of extensions, new houses, listed building consents & hot food shops with not all receiving consent.

Finally my thanks goes to my own team of Councillors and of course our Clerk Katrina, the eyes and ears of the village, who have all worked tirelessly over the year on numerous projects, attended courses and outside meetings to ensure we are represented on all possible occasions. This year also with local elections, there could have been a Parish Council election but as only eight applications were submitted there will not be an election. There will however be one change of personnel as Cllr Mrs Betty Crosse has stepped down after twenty-one years. Betty is well known to many of you here and has provided excellent service during her time as a Councillor and our thanks go to you Betty for all your hard work, and knowing Betty as they say one door closes and another opens, I am sure she will continue to be involved in many other aspects of the village.

Thank you all for your involvement in the community which I feel has inspired us all to achieve the success of last year and we look forward to taking on the challenges provided in the coming months.

The audience was given the opportunity to ask questions.

One resident congratulated the Parish Council for all their hard work in being awarded the Hertfordshire Village of the Year.

One resident asked why some designated footpaths were used regularly by horses. Cllr Goldie advised that there were a few paths where permission had been granted by the land owner for horses to be ridden on. This permission could be withdrawn at any time as the paths have not legally designated as bridleways.

7 UPDATE ON THE PARISH PLAN

Cllr Miles Maxwell read the following report.

I would like to bring you up to date on the progress of the Ickleford Parish Plan. At our meeting last April, I was able to give you details of the terrific 86% response rate to the parish plan questionnaire. This did however provide us with the challenge of data input and analysis; there were tens of thousands of individual data points to record plus free text comments on a variety of issues – and many residents were exceedingly enthusiastic in taking this opportunity to have their say. Completion of the data input and then the subsequent analysis took us to August 2006.

We then published the results summary booklet which was delivered to every household in the village in the late summer. As with the questionnaire itself the results booklet was divided into the five themes of 'Traffic and Transport', 'Crime and Disorder', 'Amenities and Facilities', 'Environment' and 'Youth'. Several strong themes were apparent from the results. In 'Traffic and Transport', speed of traffic through the village was a major concern for residents with 85% citing it as a problem. Requests to improve safety at Cadwell Bridge and Chambers Lane also featured highly. In 'Crime and Disorder' there was a desire for increased police presence by 76% of residents, with 63% of respondents to the questionnaire willing to pay additional parish council tax to fund this. When asked what they felt the police should focus on, speeding traffic was by far the most significant concern. In the 'Amenities and Facilities' section, 92% of villagers expressed support for the return of some form of post office. There was also very positive backing for the proposed new community building to house the pre-school plus, ideally, other activities for residents. For the environment no single item stood out as being more important than others. There was no consensus on how to improve the Little Park area, with all options scoring reasonably. Although there was support for Bowman's Mill there was a feeling that additional actions to lessen the impact of their activities should be considered. Younger residents were most concerned by the lack of activities within the village and poor public transport.

When asked to nominate one thing that they would change in the village, the top three responses from adult residents were slower traffic, less traffic and resolution of parking issues. For younger residents they were better facilities, safer roads and improved public transport.

The next stage of the process was the formulation of the action plan. We decided this should be a list of concrete proposals with specific measurables and finite time lines. All of this is to enable open, transparent assessment of the progress of the plan. To produce the plan, the committee separated into sub-groups along the lines mentioned earlier; additional residents were co-opted onto these based on their own interests. The challenge for these groups was to formulate the action plan in association with third-parties who hold the purse strings and will be responsible for performing many of the actions. The groups that we have worked with include the District and County councils, Hertfordshire Highways, the police, North Herts Homes and the Community Development Agency for Herts, as well as local organisations such as St Katharine's Church and Ickleford Primary school.

I am pleased to say that this monumental effort has now been completed. The Parish Council formally adopted the plan in February, and we have now submitted the final document for printing. We hope that the finished publication will be ready for distribution to all households in the village by the end of the month.

In the mean time, each of the sub-groups has also been busy in progressing some of the actions. The 'Traffic and Transport' group has done a terrific job working with traffic police to identify possible sites for, and most effective types of, traffic calming to address residents' number one concern of speeding traffic. They have also performed a detailed survey of the condition of the roads and pavements in Ickleford, and have used this to guide a site visit by an engineer from Hertfordshire Highways. We have a pledge that many of these will be addressed during the present financial year. Prior to the PP, Ickleford was languishing in 74th place in Hertfordshire Highways' ranking of priorities for road safety improvements. Because of our efforts with the plan we have now moved up this list, and have already had a site visit from Jacques Grant from CDA with a view to identifying the most effective ways of improving road safety in the village.

The C&D group has had several meetings with our colleagues in the police with a view to tapping into the matched-funding scheme for PCSOs. This is a system whereby villages and the police split the costs of funding this additional police presence. As I mentioned earlier, we had a strong mandate from the questionnaire to increase the parish council tax for this, and the PC decided in November – when we had to set our precept – to proceed with this option. I hope that Inspector Wheately will be able to provide you with a progress report on this. We have also met with our PCSO Nikki Williams and our new ward Constable Matt Jenkins to discuss local priorities for Matt's beat which includes Ickleford and the other villages to the north and west of Hitchin; we have agreed that these should be traffic, anti-social behaviour and re-invigorating the NHW scheme.

The A&F group has been looking at alternative ways of providing some form of local post office services, including working with St Katharine's PCC to see whether a part-time facility can be incorporated into their new building. However, their main efforts have been focussed on planning for the proposed new community building with a substantial amount of work being done to prepare for a Lottery Grant for a feasibility assessment. Tentative approaches have been made to NHDC and HCC to see how they would perceive this building project, and we have been pleased by their generally positive response. We now also have a ladies' rounders team that has been formed in association with the Cricketers public house. This team will be the founder member of a local league starting this Spring.

The Environment group has met with Guy Bowman to look at ways of further reducing the environmental impact of the Mill's activities such as maximising their use of the Bearton Road/ Old Hale Way approach to their site. They have also hosted discussions with NHH to identify ways forward for Little Park. There has been progress in conjunction with the PC to address the issue of the muddy patch on Upper Green. And the group has organised what we hope will be Ickleford's first annual litter collection day on Saturday 21st April. This is a great initiative to get residents to take responsibility for maintaining the village environment. We've had terrific support in this from Biffa and NHDC; I hope all of you will join us on Saturday week to make this a really successful event.

Last but not least, the Youth group has had success in enlisting the support of youth out-reach workers to set up an occasional youth club here in the village hall. Sadly, funding for this has now run out, but we will continue to look for similar opportunities for our younger residents. We have attracted several one-off activities in the Sports and Recreation Club for children, and the PC continues to support these schemes as best we can.

As I hope you will agree, the PP has already started to have an impact – and the specifics I have mentioned are only examples of the work of the various groups. There is, of course, still much more to do. In closing my report I'd like to acknowledge the efforts of all my colleagues on the PP and its sub-groups for making such great progress, and also the backing of the IPC, Tricia Gibbs and Nigel Brook, colleagues in agencies such as the police, district and county councils and of course the residents of Ickleford for your support in this exciting initiative.

Cllr Crowe thanked Cllr Maxwell for his report. The audience was then given the opportunity to ask questions.

One resident asked for an update on Chambers Lane. Cllr Maxwell advised that the preferred option was for a footpath and old aerial photographs had indicated some encroachment onto the road so cutting this back was being looked into. If a footpath could be created the school would look at having a walking bus from the Sports and Recreation car park which would reduce the amount of cars around the school at drop off and collection times.

8 UPDATE ON POLICE ACTIVITY IN ICKLEFORD

Inspector Julie Wheatley explained that she was the Inspector for the 'Safer Neighbourhood Team' and she was pleased to report that recorded crimes were down this year with domestic robberies and vehicle crime significantly reduced. In Ickleford and Holwell there were 117 recorded crimes in the past year. Whilst she acknowledged the Police were doing a good job she was aware they could do better so was looking at ways to improve.

There have been many cross border crimes so the Police have been targeting these crimes. There are now excellent intelligent sharing protocols with Bedfordshire and Cambridge and these are proving to be very successful.

Inspector Wheatley was trying to achieve safer neighbourhoods by increasing police visibility, engaging the community and listening to what the members of the public want.

PC Matt Jenkins explained that there had been some vandalism around the village particularly at the sports club. The public telephone box on Upper Green had been tampered with on three occasions and some windows of other properties had been broken. They would continue to display a visible police and there was a dedicated Problem Solving Team to supplement the service offered by 'Safer Neighbourhood Team'. However, as there were no specific patterns to these crimes they were difficult to solve and prevent.

Cllr Crowe thanked Inspector Wheatley and PC Jenkins for their reports. The audience was then given the opportunity to ask questions.

Cllr Crowe asked if there was any news regarding match funding a PCSO. Inspector Wheatley advised that last November the Government announced that there would only be 252 PCSOs and not the 349 initially indicated and all of these were allocated last year. In this new financial year it may be viable to match fund further PCSOs but this is yet to be decided. However, there were two additional PCSOs for schools so Ickleford would benefit for that.

One resident asked if the mobile police station still visited Ickleford. Inspector Wheatley confirmed that it did and whilst it was here one of the PCSOs should be walking around the village.

One resident asked if there could be more surveillance at the garage area behind St Katherine's Close as there had been three recent fires there. PC Jenkins advised that as there was pattern to the frequency of these fires it would be very difficult in be there at the right time. Inspector Wheatley then advised they were arranging an Environmental Action Day in May to remove items and look at areas with fire risks. This day would involve the Fire Brigade, Police and NHDC. Inspector Wheatley agreed to also involve North Hertfordshire Homes, as owners of the garage area.

Cllr Goldie asked if the Neighbourhood Watch co-ordinators would be receiving the ringmaster messages again by email. Inspector Wheatley advised that a new Watch Liaison Officer for North Herts had been appointed and the service would be up and running again soon.

There being no other business, Cllr Crowe thanked everyone for their attendance and support.

The meeting closed at 9.45 pm