

Acting Chairman's Statement 07/05/20

Having only recently taken over the role of Acting Walkern Parish Council (WPC) chairman, I have found the role both challenging and rewarding in equal measure. The previous Chairman was unable to continue in the role earlier this year and as Vice Chairman I decided immediately to step in and take his work forward so that the WPC could continue to press on with all its various aspects of work on behalf of the residents of the village. The Parish Council wishes former Chairman Steve Wood all the best in his future endeavours.

Having set this year's precept in line with our plans for the development of the village over the next 12 months and beyond, our main objectives can be defined as follows:

- **Communication** – WPC recognises the need to better communicate with all residents of the village and with that in mind we have begun an overhaul of our web site and communication strategy in line with what works for other councils and feed back from residents.

Our new web site will be going live in May 2020 and features more useful information both on the village in general, the work of the Parish Council and links into other community areas of the county. We will regularly update this new site with news items and welcome constructive feedback from residents to the ongoing development of our new site.

- **Planning** – This has proved and continues to be a challenging brief for Walkern Parish Council as some applications are still being sought despite their disregard of both the local plan and our very own Neighbourhood plan. Both plans are designed to protect our village from unwanted and undesirable developments up to 2033.

some of these applications essentially bring no enhancements to the fabric of our local society or way of life. That said applications that do meet the afore mentioned plans thresholds are welcome and we have a track record of supporting sensible small-scale development by the residents of the village.

We are also fully engaged with the ongoing construction site at Froghall lane (this requires constant monitoring and liaising with EHDC and Mears) and the proposed development of East of Stevenage (EOS) Gresley Park (EHDC recently approved this plan but serious objections remain). We are also committed to attending meetings related to the proposed expansion of London Luton Airport.

Planning remains a complicated area and Walkern Parish Council is extremely fortunate to have Councillor Rist heading up planning responses for us as she brings invaluable knowledge of the Neighbourhood Plan and the village in general. I would like to thank Councillor Rist for all her hard work and diligence in protecting our village.

- **Walkern Sports & Cricket Club (WSCC)** – As many people will know this facility is owned by WPC but run by a dedicated team of volunteers under the stewardship and guidance of Nigel Bennett, Jo Ransom, and the rest of their team. Walkern Parish Council as landlord has a direct interest in the success of this venue plus the sports fields and is demonstrating this by further

investing in new security doors at the facility and repairing damage to the sports field caused by wildlife.

We are also in discussion with Nigel and Jo about further improvements to the interior that will make the venue more usable for different groups that may wish to hire it. WPC will continue to support Nigel and Jo throughout the coming year, and I wish to thank them both for their hard work in making this facility a viable village venue for our residents and the wider WSCC user groups. Furthermore, Councillor Overall who heads up this brief for WPC, has shown real commitment to the WSCC and has taken this brief on for us with real enthusiasm and dedication and I would like to also thank her for her work in this area.

- **Grants** – WPC will continue to make grants to important groups within the village and help with unforeseen expenses when funds allow us to do so. It is vital that we, as a council work closely with all village groups that need our help and we remain open minded and committed to supporting these village groups.

If any group wishes to apply for a grant, then please don't hesitate to contact the clerk at least a week before our WPC monthly meeting.

- **General** – In recent months residents will have noticed that we have installed 2 new benches at the sports field one of which was purchased by friends of Billy Green in his memory. We have also welcomed resident Mary Cannon's purchase and installation of a third bench at the same site. Again, our thanks go to Nigel Bennet for the concrete base and the installation work.

We continue to install new dog waste bins and general waste bins at various locations around the village as required. Other work involves the management of our village assets and their maintenance requirements. We have also recently engaged Hertfordshire County Council over traffic issues in the high street and we are working with them to come up with solutions to this problem.

- **Councillor Vacancy** – We were delighted to be joined by new councillor Cristine Nudds in recent months and Christine has shown a real interest in all WPC business and I know she will be a valuable member of our team. We are also supported at our meetings by Councillor James. We do however still have two vacancies that need to be filled.

After a few comings and goings, we think that it would be useful for anyone that is interested to attend a meeting or two. Firstly to see how we do things and secondly to understand what our remit is and also the work we have to do to carry this remit out etc and then if still interested we would welcome any and all applications from any adult over 18 who resides in the village.

Covid 19 Response

This dreadful and unrelenting illness has changed many of our lives and we support the Governments advice about social distancing and the lock down measures. At the time of writing this we are making progress as a nation but let's not become complacent as every life is precious.

When the news started to worsen in early March over the potential impact of the virus, WPC took immediate and decisive action to aid all elderly and vulnerable residents of the village. We agreed the following:

- to provide a prescription and food pick up service for all residents that needed this
- to agree to use funds from our "benefit of inhabitants of Walkern charity account" to help people pay for food and essential items if they could not get to sources of money that they might usually rely on e.g. the post office or the bank
- to communicate our service via a leaflet, drop to the entire village

To date we have carried this out and responded to all calls that have been placed to us and we will continue to do this for the foreseeable future. I would like to thank resident Dave Standing for printing our leaflets which showed me just how strong we are as a community when we work together. Also many residents phoned us to offer their support in picking up food items etc and I know we are all keeping a watchful eye on our neighbours so thankyou to everyone who has stepped forward in this way let's keep it going!

I would also like to thank Chris Todd (Merlin) for keeping the village looking clean and tidy and also James Wakeley and Michelle Hilton for maintaining the war memorial and the village flower beds at the entrances to the village.

Finally, I would like to recognise the important work of our Clerk Heidi Broady for her continued commitment to the WPC.

Heidi's role is particularly important to the effectiveness and success of WPC as she provides the governance and continuity that allows things to run so seamlessly, despite the comings and goings of many councillors in the past. I am grateful she has remained with us and continues to do so as we could not operate without her.

Councillor Tom Deffley

Acting Chairman