

Chairman of Ruskington Parish Council (RPC) Annual Report for 2021/22 from Cllr Graham E Conway

As Chairman of the Parish Council it is my duty to produce a report on the activities of the Council during the year, this report covers some of these activities and those involved.

The last Annual Meeting of Ruskington Parish Council was held remotely on Tuesday, 4th May 2021 at 7.00 pm via Microsoft 365 Teams. This was the last such meeting to be held remotely and following revised Government legislation, our May monthly meeting was back in the Winchelsea Centre, since when, thankfully, taking due care on distancing etc., we have proceeded normally.

Parish Office

Part of the lease agreement was an option to the purchase of premises by obtaining relevant funding and, following a village wide consultation process, which produced an 85% approval, Council followed the appropriate borrowing approval process for the sum of £260,000. We had hoped this approval would be received before the expiration of the lease at the end of July 2021. This was not the case, but the vendors agreed to extend the lease until such a time as we were able to proceed.

Subsequently, on 31st August 2021 we received notification that borrowing approval had been authorised. We believe that RPC has purchased a property with a first-of-its-kind loan from North Kesteven District Council to use as a parish office.

At time of writing, we are in the process of applying for planning permission to turn the rear of the property to business use from residential. If approved, we have architect's drawing for the conversion of this space to include:

- An extension to the current Parish Officer space,
- Formation of four 'Office' areas to be rented for use by the village community,
- Ad hoc meeting/social areas for more informal gatherings, and
- A communal kitchen and washroom facility for community users and Council employees

Parish Community Garden

In October 2021, as Chair of Council, I was able to offer an invitation to villagers and visitors to attend the Annual Parish Meeting, which, despite its name, was not an actual 'meeting' as has been customary, but an opportunity for members of our community to meet with Councillors, in a more informal setting.

We took the opportunity on this occasion to open up the partly renovated Parish Community Garden, at the rear of the Parish Office. We estimated 75-80 members of the community took the opportunity to meet with us. Refreshments were available and displays were set up inside the marquee and on the lawns to highlight Council's achievements and aspirations.

Thanks to the hard work of our Council workers the new premises has been tastefully re-equipped with new furniture, CCTV, etc. and will be a major asset in the future in allowing

village access to RPC services. Similarly, the Parish Garden is well on the way to becoming another major community asset.

The Clerk will apply for Co-op Community Champion Funding for the community garden. (Closing date 2nd September 2022).

Staff

There have been changes to members of staff during the year. Following the resignation of one of the village caretakers in January 2021 we were able to secure the services Mr Andrew Doughty to take up a newly created role of “Environmental Caretaker”. It is fair to say that this appointment has been a huge success and the village natural environments are being enhanced due to sympathetic management.

At the end of this month (May 2022) Mr Alan Horne, who has been employed by RPC in various capacities for 14 years, is retiring. Council is considering creating a new post, with longer hours, to encompass the former role plus a wider engagement with the public and upkeep of the village amenity spaces.

The Human Resources Committee has undergone a full review of how to structure the Council workforce, including contracts of employment showing RPC’s proactive approach to its responsibilities. Effective from 1st April 2022 all RPC staff will be paid according to their appropriate scale point in accordance with the National Association of Local Council circulars.

The Council approves all staff salaries in accordance with the National Association of Local Council circulars.

Councillors

During the course of the year it has been a pleasure to welcome Councillors Tomlinson and Lupton who, it is fair to say, have ‘hit the ground running’.

I would like to thank all Councillors for their efforts during the year especially the Chairs of the various Committees, who through the stewardship of these Committees have helped to drive the direction of the whole Council.

Finance

Council finances remain in a good and stable state enabling us to meet our commitments and obligations to the community. The achievement of this objective is thanks to the policies adopted over many years. The Finance Committee of the Council prepared a budget which was approved at the January meeting of the full Council.

The precept budget for the year 2022/2023 was agreed by Council on the 11th January 2022 showing a 4.66% increase on the previous year. The RFO reports income and expenditure against budget quarterly and action taken when and if any variances occur. In addition, each Committee can access its Budget on the same basis for its meetings

Reserves held by the Council at the 31st March 2022 have increased from the previous year but in line with expectations due to the one-off costs incurred with the Office move. Reserves also include the ring-fenced amount from the purchasing of the Office for the subsequent refurbishment of the building and garden.

The accounts show that the precept was underspent by Circa £13,000 (5.97%) showing good budgetary control and reserves are therefore considered to be at an appropriate level.

The Council's annual audit of both its finances and systems is carried out by internal and external auditors. At this date only the internal audit has been completed for which we have received a sound report and anticipate the same assessment by the external auditor. It is to the credit of both the Parish Clerk, Mrs Kathryn Locke, and Responsible Finance Officer and Deputy Clerk, Ms Kirsty Sinclair, that the necessary records are maintained to a high standard which contributed to the Council obtaining a most positive report in these areas.

The RPC also wishes to acknowledge the contribution made by our Internal Auditor, Mr Ian Sismey who has provided advice during the year.

Freedom of Information and Data Protection

There have been 3 requests under the Freedom of Information regulations made to the RPC which were expedited in accordance with Council Policy

Recreation

The Recreation Committee led by Cllr Cox has been occupied in bringing on stream a major project to enhance the sports facilities at the Parkfield Road Sports Field. Piloted by the RFO Ms Kirsty Sinclair, RPC were successful in an FCC Community Foundation funding bid to refurbish and enhance this area. We have engaged a nationally renowned contractor to design and build a total new play area, building of which is anticipated in the next 2 months.

RPC is striving to deliver inclusive environments as an integral part of the development process of our play spaces, an environment that can be used by everyone, regardless of age, gender, or disability. Future Policy will ensure that when replacing play equipment etc. it will be accessible to all of the younger members of our community.

Development is well underway to create a community café in The Pavilion building, to offer refreshments to sports teams and their supporters. Currently we are at our 'Stage 2' level, i.e., warm drinks and warm food etc. 'Stage 3' will be implemented by upgrading the facilities in the kitchen, dining, and bathroom areas to allow for a more adventurous menu.

After a period of lack of use, the Changing Rooms at Parkfield are also being renovated and will be available for use at the start of the coming season, i.e., July/August 2022.

After a period of experimentation with offering our sports facilities free of charge, we found that the on-cost of maintenance and replacement was far in excess of any voluntary contributions made. RPC has to operate with due diligence in protecting the community precept, so with effect from 1st April 2022 (1st July 2022 in respect of football pitches) a

scale of charges has been prepared for the use of facilities, including Pavilion and Changing rooms.

Environment

Members of the Environment Committee have continued their efforts to safeguard our green spaces. Last year the Committee brought before Council an Environmental Policy designed at 'wilding' areas of Horseshoe Hollow and certain grass verges.

Horseshoe Hollow: After a couple of 'false starts' requiring 2 changes of contractor, Horseshoe Hollow had its first cut of the year on 27th April 2022 by the new contractor, 'Hill Holt Wood'. They have done the job well and exactly as asked. In addition to the areas not being cut to conform with the Environment Committee diversity development scheme, areas of wildflower growth have also been left uncut. The cuttings were baled and removed on 2nd May 2022. The next cut will be later in the year, i.e. late August/September.

RPC received a "Highly Commended Certificate" in the Lincolnshire Environmental Awards 2021 for its "*Restoring Horseshoe Hollow*" project.

Cllr. Cotter has prepared a design for the Interpretation Board, which was approved by the Environment Committee. A design for the 'Lectern' style display board has been agreed, with the Committee favouring wood, preferably oak, in keeping with Policy. At time of this Report quotes are being considered for the board design and supporting structure.

An additional path has been mown on the west side of the Beck by the Environment Caretaker. 30 trees were received from the Woodland Trust and have been planted in Horseshoe Hollow.

In addition to the Woodland Trust trees further trees were received from the LCC Countryside Team under its Treescape scheme. All in all in the region of 230 trees have been planted by the Environmental Caretaker in the last 6 months, a massive effort.

Metal tags have been purchased to identify the tree species and will be used in a nature trail around Horseshoe Hollow. Worksheets and identification charts will be made available for young people to gain a Certificate of Achievement.

Closed Churchyard: In conjunction with the Parochial Church Council and Church Wardens it was agreed that the Churchyard would be left uncut to encourage wildflower species to proliferate. We believe the churchyard should be a haven for plants and animals, as well as a pleasant and reflective area for the congregation and visitors.

Last Summer was the first period for this long-term project, but within a few weeks' Hoary plantain, Common Knapweed, Pyramidal Orchid, Harebell, Common Cat's ear, Oxeye Daisy, Bulbous Buttercup and Yellow Oatgrass were identified by a representative from Lincolnshire wildlife. There were enough differing plant species (i.e. 8) to apply for the churchyard to become a designated wildlife area.

The Lincolnshire yellow rattle, sown to help reduce the grass growth and vigour, is growing and flowering. 1,000 bulbs, kindly donated by the Kesteven Sleaford Rotary Club have also been planted.

Cllr. Cotter has prepared a design for the Interpretation Board, which was approved by the Committee, subject to agreement with the Parochial Church Council. A design for the 'Lectern' style display board has been agreed, with the Environment Committee favouring wood, preferably oak, in keeping with Policy. At time of this Report quotes are being considered for the board design and supporting structure.

Cemetery

Council agreed the Environment Committee proposal to install an 'Ashes Scattering Area'. Four raised beds and a "board" for memorial plaques have been created by the Caretaker/ Handyman in the former area of the shed, and planted with salvia by the Environmental Caretaker, with a low hedge of rosemary and lavender. A small noticeboard will be placed outlining usage and a set of 'Rules' has been agreed by the Environment Committee.

Memorial Garden

RPC Chairman laid a wreath on behalf of the Council at the Annual Remembrance Day service on 14th November 2021.

The Environment Caretaker has advised that the gravel path, especially around the central rose bed had not been dug deep enough to allow gravel to cover the weed suppressing membrane. Quotes are being obtained for a contractor to dig a path, lay matting (as used at the cemetery) and fill with gravel. Extra planting to the central rose bed will be undertaken by the Environment Caretaker.

Community Speed Watch Scheme

Cllr. Cox continues to organise the Council's involvement in the Scheme.

Other Matters

Litter and the NKDC Litter Picking Grant

The village continued to suffer the problem of unsightly litter being deposited on public paths, highways, open spaces, and The Beck. Our operatives spend much time collecting this waste, but we are also fortunate that a number of public-spirited individuals also assist by helping collect this waste in Horseshoe Hollow, the sports field and around the village in general. Ruskington Parish Council works with NKDC to remove and prevent littering and dog fouling incidents in the village, and applies annually for the NK Litter Picking Grant which goes towards the equipment, additional bins, and people power to keep Ruskington clean, tidy, safe and litter and dog poo free.

Dogs

Dog waste can also be deposited in any of the normal litter bins around the village. Dogs not on a lead add to the problem contrary to the signage at the Sports Field and the standing By-law requiring dogs to be on a lead.

Councillors in conjunction with Aurora Security have investigated what further measures can be undertaken to deal with this on-going issue, including Fixed Penalty Notices. The advice was that external agency policy negated this as a course of action.

Council Meetings and News

All members of the public are welcome to attend any of the Council or Committee meetings. The full Council currently meets eleven times per year, on the second Tuesday night of the month. Although Committee meetings are timetabled, Council has found it beneficial to schedule meetings as needs arise. Always, however, statutory notice is adhered to.

Information on forthcoming Council and Committee meetings can be seen on the Council Notice board outside the Winchelsea Centre and on the Council Facebook page.

Notes from these meetings are available on the Parish Council Website <https://ruskington.parish.lincolnshire.gov.uk/> Additional news can be found on our Facebook page. <https://www.facebook.com/RuskingtonPC/>

Signpost Magazine

The Council supports the production on a quarterly basis of the Signpost magazine which brings news about the village and council. Copies of the magazine can be found in the council offices, the library, medical centre, the Co-op, and other areas in the village.

Kirsty Sinclair has continued in the role of Editor in addition to but separate from her RFO duties. So thank you Kirsty and if you have any items for inclusion they will be very well received at the Parish Office. Many businesses within our community take advantage of the advertising spaces available in every issue.

Summary

I would like to thank staff, Councillors, and volunteers in the village for all they do to make the village such a pleasant and desirable place to live. Parish Councillors contribute a lot of their free time to assist in village administration and policies, but the bulk of the work falls inevitably on the shoulders of workforce, to which I, as Chair, are extremely grateful. I believe our village is extremely fortunate in those who have opted to serve our community with diligence and determination.

Graham E Conway
Chairman
Ruskington Parish Council
10 May 2022