

Chairman of Ruskington Parish Council (RPC) Annual Report for 2020/21 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.

On a personal level, shortly before being elected to the Chair of Council in June 2020 I was diagnosed with a serious illness, which has responded well to the marvellous care of our NHS, at a time when it had a few other matters to deal with!

My thanks go to colleagues and staff in RPC for their understanding and assistance during this year in matters such as last-minute rescheduling of meetings etc. to match my treatment timetable.

Covid

My first meeting 'in the Chair' was in its normal public format. Everything since then has been held remotely, via Teams, which has meant all of us have had to learn new IT skills and how to effectively operate controlled ordered meetings when we did not have our usual face-to-face contacts.

To say the least 2020/21 has been a particularly challenging year due to the pandemic, but I believe that RPC has risen to those challenges and ensured a continued service to our residents.

Parish Office

For a variety of reasons RPC were not able to renew its lease on the previous Office premises. Council entered into a lease agreement on a new location on the High Street, initially for one year. 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, have since followed the appropriate borrowing approval process for the sum of £260,000. We confidently expect this approval to be received before the expiration of the lease at the end of July 2021.

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. I am grateful to the Councillors who have sat on the Relocation Committee to plan these developments. Often, we were meeting on a weekly basis to move matters forward.

Staff

There were changes to members of staff during the year, following the resignation of one of the village caretakers in January. The Human Resources Committee has undergone a full review of how to structure the Council workforce, prior to filling the ensuing vacancy, including contracts of employment showing RPC's proactive approach to its responsibilities.

The Job Advertisement for the new post is currently in the public domain. I would like to thank all staff for their commitment and hard work during the year. Also the work of the

Human Resources Committee who have also met, at times, on a weekly basis to amend policy etc.

It was pleasing to report to Council that our Clerk, Mrs Kathryn Locke, and Deputy Clerk/Responsible Finance Officer, Ms. Kirsty Sinclair, had successfully completed their CiLCA qualification – all carried out in their own time. In view of the increasing work requirements of our Admin staff it was decided to offer Ms Sinclair a Full-time contract with immediate effect.

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

Councillors

During the course of the year we have had a considerable turnover of Councillors and it has been a pleasure to welcome Councillors Cotter, Cox, Ditch and Menday 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 Chairmen 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 and Policy Committee of the Council prepared a budget which was approved at the January meeting of the full Council.

The precept budget for the year 2021/2022 was agreed by Council on the 26th January 2021 showing a 2.29% 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 2021 have reduced again from the previous year but in line with expectations due to the completion of the sports MUGA and the one-off costs incurred with the Office move.

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

Audit

The Councils annual audit of both its finances and systems is carried out by internal and external auditors. At this date only the internal audits 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, 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

Hospital Car Voluntary Service (HCVS)

Cllr. Ditch carried out a review of the scheme and Council decided to close the scheme. Council supported a new scheme of the same name to set up.

Recreation

Last year RPC was supported by Tesco Sleaford and a £2000 grant was awarded for more equipment at the Elmtree site focussed more towards older children. The Recreation Committee led by Cllr White have been occupied in bringing on stream the major project to enhance the sports facilities at the Parkfield Road Sports Field - the Multi-use Games Area (MUGA).

Pre-Covid, walking football and netball teams from within the community and a further training area for the Ruskington football were taking up the bookings available. Covid restrictions have of course limited usage for the time being. Enquiries are currently on going for the use of the facility.

Environment

Members of the Environment Committee have continued their efforts to safeguard our green spaces. The Committee has brought before Council an Environmental Policy designed at 'wilding' areas of Horseshoe Hollow and certain grass verges. In conjunction with the Parochial Church Council and Church Wardens it has also been agreed to allow areas of the Churchyard to be left uncut to encourage wild flower species to proliferate.

30 trees were received from the Woodland Trust and have been planted in Horseshoe Hollow.

Cemetery

Following an Environment Agency report it was regrettable decided that RPC had to close the Cemetery for future interments. Burial of cremated remains is still possible and Council has agreed the Environment Committee proposal to install an 'Ashes Scattering Area', work on which will be beginning in the next few months.

Memorial Garden

The Garden footpaths were totally refurbished in time for Remembrance Day. RPC Chairman laid a wreath on behalf of Council in a private act on 11th November. Work to bring about further improvements to the planted areas will recommence shortly.

Community Speed Watch Scheme

After a number of ‘false starts’ Cllr. Cox has taken control of the Council’s involvement in the Scheme. Accordingly at least 20 members of the community have come forward wishing to get involved and are awaiting training. All the necessary equipment has been purchased.

Other Matters

Litter

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 and the sports field.

Dogs

Further dog waste (litter) bins have been installed in the village in an attempt to improve the correct disposal of waste by dog owners, however, some dog owners are still not picking up their dog’s waste. The sports field remains a particular problem and fouling could lead to football matches being cancelled as the pitches could be declared as unfit for play, or can in certain circumstances cause Toxocariasis which can lead to blindness which can be avoided if the dog waste is collected and deposited properly in these waste bins.

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 are currently looking at what further measures can be undertaken to deal with this on-going issue.

Litter Picking Grant from NKDC

The grant funding received from NKDC is an important contribution towards the costs incurred by Ruskington Parish Council for litter picking. The staffing costs have again increased from last year and, as our village continues to expand and has new housing estates, we have a continued need to keep on top of litter collection and dog fouling clearing, especially as there has been a notable increase in dog ownership within the village during the Covid-19 pandemic. The grant, also goes towards supplying the village’s volunteer litter pickers with hi-viz vests and the equipment to pick up and dispose of litter safely.

Council Meetings and News.

All members of the public are welcome to attend any of the Council or Committee meetings. The full Council meet eleven times per year, on the last Tuesday night of the month. For most of 2020/1 the meetings have by necessity been remote. With effect from the June 2021 meeting it is hoped to resume meeting at the Winchelsea Centre at 7pm.

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.

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.

Graham E Conway
Chairman
Ruskington Parish Council
4 May 2021