

Annual Report

2020/21



Woolmer Green Parish Council



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Parish Councils are a statutory local authority in their own right. They were established under the Local Government Act 1894 which removed all non-ecclesiastical functions from church parish councils and passed them to newly established local elected bodies called Parish Councils. They are not connected to the church which is a common misconception.

Parish Councils are the lowest tier of government and have the power to raise taxes through the Council Tax and can undertake projects that benefit their community.

Woolmer Green Parish Council was established in 2000 following its separation from Welwyn Parish. The Council has six Parish Councillors who are unpaid volunteers that live in the village and are dedicated to serving their community. Councillors serve a four year term of office which will end in May 2023.

Parish Councillors

Andy Gribble, Chairman

Transport, Staffing Committee, Young Person Liaison.

Phil Corke, Vice Chairman

Planning, Community, Staffing Committee.

Tim Dix

Hall Grounds.

Sarah Hall

Finance, Staffing Committee, Allotment Liaison. Treasurer of the Allotment Committee.

Rob Horton

Planning, Environment.

Grant Pinney

Village Hall, Community.

Clerk to the Council

Janet Pearce

The Clerk is not an elected member but an employee who holds the statutory office of the Proper Officer of the Council and the Responsible Financial Officer. The Clerk is responsible for carrying out the decisions of the Council, managing its finances and facilities and ensuring it complies with the law.

Borough Councillors

Councillors Julie Cragg, Steve Markiewicz and Roger Trigg.

Due to the current pandemic the regular councillor surgeries have been suspended.

County Councillor

Councillor Richard Smith.

Councillor Smith has decided not to stand for re-election in May 2021 after serving for fifty years in various capacities. Richard has been a great support to the Parish Council over the years and his influence was instrumental in the implementation of a road narrowing scheme to the B197 in 2014. He has continued to help us build on this achievement with the aim of making London Road safer. Richard has also made numerous other road and footpath improvements in the village from his Highways Locality Budget and is always most generous with donations to other Parish Council schemes from his Community Budget. The Parish Council will miss Richard who is always approachable and willing to help. We wish him well.

Member of Parliament

Grant Shapps MP

Community

This past year has been dominated by the coronavirus pandemic. Normal life has been suspended and the importance of a strong community has been more important than ever. As we look back on the last year, we also hope that, with the vaccine being rolled out, the year ahead will enable us to socialise with our families and friends which is so vital for our wellbeing.

Sadly, all our community events; Wheels on Woolmer Green, Village Day and Carols round the Pond could not take place, but some residents commemorated the anniversary of VE Day on their doorsteps to bring some cheer to our isolation.

On 16th March 2020, the government announced measures to protect the over 70s and people with certain health conditions who were asked to shield. These people were going to need some help obtaining food and medication, so the Parish Council made a call for volunteers via Facebook and a leaflet drop and had a tremendous response. Eighteen volunteers came forward willing to help. The Parish Council also liaised with the warden of the Wickfield Close sheltered housing community to ensure these residents received help too. Over twenty calls for help were responded to with some volunteers doing regular shopping trips throughout the shielding period. The Parish Council and the residents who were self-isolating are hugely grateful to these volunteers in serving the community in its moment of need. Thank you.

Going for a walk in the countryside during lockdown was one of the only outside activities that we could partake in. Another activity was gardening, and residents could gain inspiration from the villages wonderful planter displays. Once the spring bulbs were going over and the garden centres were permitted to open, volunteer Jenny rushed to Clockhouse Nursery to purchase the bedding plants. The resulting display raised all our spirits. Thank you Jenny.



The Woolmer Green Allotments celebrated their 10th birthday in April 2020 and they were more important than ever to the plot holders over the last year. The allotments were the one place to escape to and, with many of the plot holders having more time to spare, they looked at their best last year.

There are 25 plots on the site with some divided into half plots and shared by two families. Most are rented by residents of Woolmer Green or neighbouring villages and the site has been fully let for almost all the time since it opened. A few plots have the same tenants as in 2010 but there is a steady turnover so new tenants are welcomed regularly.

The allotments are managed by a small committee that collects the rent, keeps an eye on the site, organises social events and manages the small waiting list. You can enquire about adding your name to the waiting list by emailing wgallotments@gmail.com.

The plots all look different and reflect the interests of the plot holders. There are always plenty of courgettes and runner beans in the summer as well as flowers and fruit bushes. When it is allowed, the plot holders have a get-together and barbecue in the summer and hopefully will be able to do that again in 2021.

The Parish Council and the plot holders appreciate the kind support of the landowners in renting the corner of their field which enabled the allotments to be established in 2010. They are definitely a great addition to the village.

During the period of lockdown during 2020, popular publicans of the Chequers, Nick & Marion stepped in to support the community. They quickly established a takeaway meal service, arranged to dispose of our garden waste when the brown bin collection was suspended, organised for a free donation of garden compost to be available for residents when the garden centres were closed, organised a book swap scheme, encouraged children to show support for the NHS by displaying their rainbow artwork. In return they asked for donations and, in all, over £4,000 was donated to the Lister Hospital. The Parish Council presented Nick and Marion with a community award as a thank you for their hard work.



Sadly, we now hear that their lease on the pub will expire in November and the brewery has given Nick & Marion notice to leave. The community is now supporting them by starting a petition in the hope the brewery will reconsider.

The Annual Parish Meeting, where the public can hear what the Council has been doing and ask questions, due to be held on 28th April could not go ahead. Also, the Parish Council were not able to hold its regular monthly meetings at the village hall and had to wait for government legislation that permitted video conference meetings to enable decision making.

The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 came into force on 4th April to permit video meetings, so the Parish Council used this system to hold a full Council meeting on 28th April in place of the Annual Parish Meeting and have continued holding its meetings remotely.



The monthly market was forced to close for three months but reopened at the end of June and was held outside as stalls could spread out to enable social distancing. After weeks of isolation the public said they were grateful to be able to attend a local event and the stall holders were pleased to be back.

The market has continued since then but is restricted to food sales only. The Christmas Fair was able to take place and was well attended despite activities being restricted.

The Parish Councillors all attended the outdoor Remembrance Service, and a £50 donation was made to the Royal British Legion's Poppy Appeal.

A £300 grant was awarded to the church.

After seven years without a convenience store a Tesco Extra opened on 12th February 2021 at the new Kellard House development on the former Entech site. There are three further shops awaiting occupation.



Finally thank you to all our volunteers that deliver the newsletter. A long-standing volunteer who delivered to London Road, Paula, moved out of the village. We greatly appreciate all the help she has given the Parish Council over the years, including playing a big part in campaigning for the road improvements in 2014. Following a request in the newsletter, new resident Andrew has taken on the London Road deliveries.

Hall & Grounds

On 20th March 2020, due to rising cases of Covid-19, the government issued emergency guidance which meant the village hall had to close and the hall caretakers and cleaner were not able to work. All bookings were cancelled, and essential income ceased. The government subsequently set up a Job Retention Scheme which would cover 80% of staff wages if there was no work for them to do. The Parish Council agreed that it would place its loyal staff on furlough and continue to pay them their full wages while claiming from the government scheme.

The village hall has been able to open for short periods since July 2020 for limited activities and since the hall closed again in January 2021 the Parish Council is able to make use of the flexible furlough scheme for all its staff.

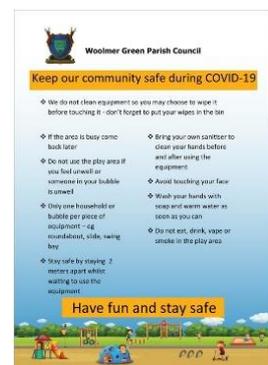
When the hall opened it had to be made covid secure by introducing an enhanced cleaning regime, erecting signage informing on safety and social distancing, installing sanitising dispensers, preparing a covid-19 risk assessment and ensure staff were trained and confident with the new arrangements.

The Parish Council relies on hall bookings for two thirds of its income so it decided that all spending should be restricted to essential items only. Some large payments were unavoidable such as the renewal of the wedding license which cost £1,300 although the Licencing authority extended the length of the license from three to four years as compensation for Covid restrictions.

Unfortunately, the main boiler on the hall was found to be faulty and beyond repair so that had to be replaced which also meant the full underfloor heating had to be flushed and the final cost was over £4,700. Thankfully, our County Councillor, Richard Smith, agreed to grant the Parish Council over £4,697 from his Locality Budget to cover this.

As the market was being held outside the Parish Council had to apply for a Temporary Event Notice each month to permit the sale of alcohol in the hall grounds. This is also required for events such as village day. It was decided, as only a limited number of notices are permitted each year, that an application of variation to the hall Entertainment Licence should be submitted which would permanently extend the sale of alcohol into the grounds and this has now been granted.

From 23rd March 2020 the playgrounds also had to close and were taped off and signs erected to remind everyone that they were not permitted to be used. Once government guidance had been clarified they opened again on 18th July and signage was installed to inform users how to allow children to play safely.



Environment

The rainfall this last winter has been exceptionally heavy and continuous which has resulted in flooding in New Road, Carvers Croft and at the southern end of London Road. New Road adjacent to the pond has had standing water on it for much of the winter. All the incidents have been reported to Herts Highways but unless the flooding endangers property it will not be classified as a priority.

Many of the roadside gullies are blocked and Highways clear them on a six month or twelve-month cycle according to need. The New Road gullies are scheduled to be cleaned by the end of March 2021.

Planning

Due to the pandemic the Local Plan examination hearings planned for the spring of 2020 were postponed until the summer and the session dedicated to discussing Woolmer Green was eventually held remotely on 29th July.

The Parish Council's planning consultant had already submitted a document in answer to questions posed by the examiner prior to the hearing and he also attended the session remotely. The Council has consistently opposed the development of the Green Belt site (HS15) as brownfield sites were available at the start of the Local Plan process and should be developed before resorting to Green Belt.

A number of issues were discussed, and these included the setting of the Grade II listed Payne's Farmhouse within the context of the surrounding farmland. Historic England had been consulted and agreed that the existing western hedgerow boundary already provided sufficient screening from the proposed development. The Borough Council stated it will also ensure an adjacent landscape buffer is introduced to further separate the listed building from the development which would mitigate any possible harm to the setting of the farmhouse.

Flooding was also raised as it is well known that there are flooding problems in New Road by the entrance to Payne's Farm where water runs off the fields, including the field proposed for development. The Borough Council said it has worked with both the Environment Agency and the Lead Local Flood Authority and carried out a Flood Risk Assessment on the site. The conclusion was that any issues would be resolved at the planning stage by introducing a sustainable drainage system (SuDS).

The issue of inadequate infrastructure was raised and no problems had been identified by the relevant statutory authorities relating to school places or health care provision that would prevent the growth of Woolmer Green. The Borough Council reiterated that any issues would be dealt with at the planning stage.

Herts Highways took part in the hearing and informed the inspector that their modelling found no future capacity issues with the B197 that could not be mitigated at the planning stage. Highways did agree there are capacity issues at the clock roundabout but stated that further investigation proved that at the end of the plan period waiting time at that junction would be no more than two minutes. This is not considered severe. It also stated that the B197 was included in the North & South Central Growth and Transport Plan which will identify any interventions that may be needed in the network in the future.

With regard to the Green Belt, the inspector stated that, without significant development on Green Belt around settlements, the Borough Council will not be able to fulfil its housing requirement. In concluding the discussion of the Green Belt site, the planning inspector said that, in principle, he saw no reason why it should not be developed.

In September, the planning inspector asked for representations on the latest published document relating to the calculation of the Objectively Assessed Need based on later 2018 household predictions. The Parish Council hopes that the projection of 16,000 will be reduced but a decision has yet to be made.

By November 2020, the examination inspector had produced his interim report and advice and Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council had to address the issues he raised. It was noted in the report that the proposed distribution of new housing development in the submitted plan is heavily biased towards four of the eight villages and that included Woolmer Green.

Further hearing sessions were held during February and March 2021 to discuss further sites added to the Local Plan as a result of new sites submitted for consideration in 2019. The Marshall car dealership, which is now vacant, had been allocated for employment, but the site owner re-submitted it for housing. The Parish Council has consistently promoted this site for housing development as it could relieve the pressure on the Green Belt.

The inspector also wanted to examine sites that the Borough Council had rejected. A site adjacent to Knebworth had been promoted although it is within the Woolmer Green

boundary. Both Woolmer Green and Knebworth Parish Council objected jointly to this site as it would join the two villages and erode a fragile gap between the settlements.

Although the Local Plan is still under examination a developer has distributed a leaflet to all villagers outlining their development plans for the Green Belt site in Woolmer Green and inviting comments. This has prompted residents to voice their objections via social media, set up a petition and write to their MP. The Parish Council considers that consulting on any proposals is premature as the future of the site is undecided.

The development of the former Entech site is well under way with some dwellings already occupied. The shop and office complex is completed and an application to install a pelican crossing on the B197 is currently under consideration. The Parish Council has persistently lobbied Highways to request that a pelican crossing be installed near to the shops. The Council considers it essential to ensure pedestrians can cross London Road safely.

The Parish Council responded to eighteen planning applications during the last year.

The Parish Council responded to the government's Planning for the Future consultation.

Finance

Income from hall bookings was greatly reduced this year due to the hall having to close for long periods due to government Covid-19 regulations. The Council decided it would make use of any available government funding and immediately qualified for the Job Retention Scheme as staff were placed on furlough. In total £12,251.66 was claimed from this scheme during 2020/21.

The Parish Council did not qualify for any of the business support schemes until the government announced details of the Additional Restrictions Grant that covered organisations that had not received wider grant support and yet had been severely impacted by restrictions. The Council received £10,240.93 under this scheme which was received in March 2021.

Spending has been kept to a minimum and savings were made to utilities and hall supplies but overall Council reserves have been maintained.

Statement of Accounts

2019/20	Receipts:	2020/21
41,597.72	Hall Lettings	7,749.25
6,765.14	Barleyfield's Family Centre	6,299.82
375.00	Security	0
1,289.00	Pitch Fees	1,587.98
0	Bar	305.00
940.00	Farmers' Market Income	665.00
1,648.68	Car Park	3,052.48
568.39	Allotments	583.66
153.78	Interest on Investments	295.67
	Entertainment Fund :	
787.75	Village Day	0
1,012.00	Advertising	1,005.00
1,289.08	Other	0
750.00	Other income	27,339.59
57,176.54	TOTAL RECEIPTS	48,884.15
	Payments:	
40,529.71	Payroll	41,152.84
	Hall Maintenance :	
2,919.95	Insurance	3,006.05
6,383.80	Water, Gas, Electricity, Waste	4,664.21
3,301.51	License, Safety, Supplies	2,296.71
	Grounds Maintenance :	
6,230.71	Grounds	4,301.87
905.00	Playgrounds	535.14
568.39	Allotments	583.66
1,494.04	Office Expenses	1,813.32
150.00	Publicity	0
625.00	Audit & legal fees	375.00
799.84	HAPTC, CDA, CPRE	841.12
1,200.00	Grants	350.00
1,041.15	Sundry Expenses	408.05
	Entertainment Fund :	
700.57	Village Day	0
540.00	Newsletter	552.00
1,019.13	Other	0
	Non Recurring Payments:	
11,136.77	Hall Maintenance	6,292.20
-	Wedding License	1,300.00
1,200.00	Planning Consultant	1,700.00
9,435.88	Toilet Refurbishment	-
3,855.00	Mardleybury Road Bollards	-
383.39	Election	0
625.00	PPP	0
0	Contingency	0
95,044.84	TOTAL PAYMENTS	70,172.17
-37,868.30	Income less Expenses	-21,288.02
25,668.00	Precept	26,155.00
-12,200.30	Surplus/Deficit	4,866.98
62,136.38	BALANCE BROUGHT FORWARD	49,936.08
49,936.08	TOTAL FUND	54,803.06

