

Minutes of Ruscombe Parish Council's Annual Parish Meeting on Thursday 27th May 2019 at 8pm via Zoom due to risks of Covid 19 to people not yet vaccinated and because of the new variants.

Parish Councillors In attendance: Mr J May (Chairman), Mrs C Bulman (Vice Chair), Mr G Merrick (Planning Chairman) and Mr M Evans (Planning Vice Chairman).

Guest Speakers: Alex Cruickshank Sundew Ecology

Public: 4 members of the public

Justin opened the meeting and explained the agenda and explained there was a set time at the end of the meeting for questions but if anyone wanted to ask questions throughout the meeting, they were welcome to do so.

1. Approval of APM Minutes 8th May 2019

Justin explained that these are minutes from two years ago because during May 2020 England was very much still in heavy restrictions to prevent the spread of Covid 19 and therefore there was not an APM in 2020 but RPC did publish reports onto their website to keep the public informed as best they could. The approval of the minutes from 8th May 2019 were proposed by Mike Evans and seconded by Justin May but not signed due to not being together. These minutes are on RPC website if any members of the public would like to read them.

2. Chairman's report – Councillor Justin May

Justin thanked and gave recognition of hard work to all RPC councillors, Ruth as Clerk and volunteers and residents. A special thanks to Karen Robson who has recently retired from RPC after many years of service as councillor and previously chair to RPC. A special welcome to Gary Merrick and Jane Holmes who have joined the council and have already achieved some really great progress and change. Justin explained RPC have had a very productive year. They have Made huge amounts of progress on the Neighbourhood Plan, installed hanging baskets and planters around the village, refurbished both the pond at the crossroads and Castle End Road pond, had the bridge on Stanlake Lane painted by Network rail saving RPC £8,000, RPC are having a community Orchard created on a piece of unused land in Pennfields -special thanks to Councillor Paul Cassidy for his work to lead this project, had a very successful litter pick day and many other smaller achievements. RPC is in a strong financial position and have reduced the precept component of council tax paid by residents again. RPC have also recently used a planning consultant to support RPC to make an objection to a planning application that they felt was unsuitable for Ruscombe.

3. Guest speaker Alex Cruickshank Sundew Ecology

Alex introduced himself, he has previously worked for the wildlife trust but is now self employed as an Ecology Consultant. Alex first became involved with Ruscombe during the Neighbourhood Plan to complete biodiversity report on behalf of RPC. Alex is currently producing a map of 4 walking routes around Ruscombe. Alex explained there are 5 protected Wildlife sites. These are:

1. Windsor Ait - A small wooded with elements of both wet woodland and fen UKBAP Priority Habitats.
2. Grassland Opposite Blackthorn Farm - A small unimproved grassland with ridge and furrow patterning and areas of wet grassland, particularly in the furrows.

Chair initials_____

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3. Wingwood Copse - A long, thin Lowland Mixed Deciduous Woodland located approximately one and a half kilometres to the south east of Ruscombe. This woodland include wild-service tree and an area of climbing corydalis which is a species noted in the Rare Plants Register for Berkshire and various veteran trees. A veteran tree is a tree plays an important role for providing habitats and food sources for wildlife.
4. Ruscombe and Vale Wood - Ruscombe Wood is an area of largely ash dominated woodland with areas of hazel coppice without standard trees. This woodland includes Early Purple Orchid and Three nerved sandwort.
5. Ruscombe Village Pond - This pond supports populations of Great Crested Newt and Common Newt.

Alex also explained there are some important habitats in Ruscombe. These are important for a variety of species and include:

- Farmed land, including Arable land, Pastureland and Hedgerows. Ruscombe has a good network of hedgerows, but more could be added and some existing ones could have gaps filled in.
- Stremms – the Twyford Brook is the main watercourse and although this could be affected by pollution run of from urban areas and arable land, it appears this watercourse is well buffered either side by pasture and scrub land which will reduce the impact onto the watercourse.
- Parkland – often include veteran trees.
- Woodland – a good woodland should include some tall trees and some low trees.

Alex also explained Ruscombe has a good variety of species, including Great Crested Newt, Watervoles, stag beetles, skylarks, and various others.

Also explained he is creating a walking map for RPC, it included 2 short walks and 2 longer walk. He has them mapped already and will now be writing about what wildlife might be seen on each walk. Alex explained that to help the wildlife in Ruscombe we can go out, enjoy it and be aware of it. We can also record what wildlife we see via the iRecord App because this will inform what wildlife is in our environment.

Justin asked how areas get designated as a protected site? Alex explained they need meet a criteria of either several species or plants. There is woodland in Ruscombe that is not designated. A member of the public asked if Ruscombe Business Park ponds had been looked at during Alex's review. Alex explained that they had, but they could be surveyed for specific interest. These ponds are owned by the business park. Alex also explained there are the Countryside Stewardship Scheme and English Land Management but there are not any projects of these taking place in Ruscombe currently. A member of the public also asked in public rights of way could have hedgerow added to them? Alex explained that they could although he was unsure how this would be arranged but advised discussing with the public right of way officer.

4. Planning update - Councillor Gary Merrick

Planning is one of the main activities of Parish Councils. They do not decide on planning applications, but the local authority (Wokingham Borough Council in our case) consults the Parish Council in reaching its decisions; the Parish Council comments on the applications using its local knowledge.

One of the key challenges we face in a Parish like Ruscombe is 'How can we balance the need for more affordable housing for the younger generation whilst preserving the countryside that makes our parish so special?'

This is what we aiming to do with the launch of our Neighbourhood Plan which Mike will be expanding on in the next report.

The last 12 months have seen many people's daily routines changed dramatically with the impact of COVID. It has meant that a number of people have found themselves working from home and others have taken a new look at where they live.

- There have been 19 applications for home extensions in the form of loft conversions, small extensions, garden buildings and two commercial to residential. The 16 of these have been approved and only 3 rejected in their original submission.
- A revised application for the gates at the McCarthy & Stone development in London Road was approved.
- A revised application to build two new houses on a plot in Ruscombe Lane, following demolition of one existing house, was approved after a number of changes to the site layout. This application has now been withdrawn.
- Applications for the conversion of part of Spitfire House and the whole of Interserve House have been resubmitted a number of times due to changes of specification. Although this type of development is likely to become more common; we feel strongly that it is essential that the scale of the building and accommodation is appropriate for the location and the facilitates such as car parking and the impact of the access and egress from the site. Currently we have issues with both of these schemes.

If you are interested in finding out what local planning applications are being made, and what happens to them, the main source of information is the Wokingham Borough Council website's Planning section, which lets you search applications and follow their progress. The link is:

<https://www.wokingham.gov.uk/planning/>

5. Neighbourhood Plan update – Councillor Mike Evans

The Ruscombe Neighbourhood Plan will establish a set of planning policies for the future, based on input from the community. In 2019, helped by a very capable team of volunteers, we carried out a survey to find out what our residents thought about future development in Ruscombe. We had a good response, which enabled us – again with invaluable support from our volunteers – to produce a first-draft Neighbourhood Plan document.

Activities following production of the first draft were:

- The first draft was submitted to Wokingham Borough Council Planning for initial review.
- In May 2020 WBC told us that they were completing their review, but their response could be delayed because of social distancing and staff shortages in the organisations that they needed to consult.
- In July 2020, with the help of our consultants, we conducted a walk-round in order to produce a character appraisal of the different areas within Ruscombe, the objective being to produce area-specific housing design guidelines (known as design codes).
- In September 2020 WBC gave us their comments on the draft. We then worked with our volunteers and consultants to produce a revised draft in December 2020.
- The next stage was the Draft Plan Pre-submission (Regulation 14) Consultation which took place between 22nd February and 19th April 2021. The Draft Plan was made available online or in printed form if requested, and a summary paper, inviting comments, was distributed to all households in Ruscombe. The Draft Plan was also made available to statutory consultees (e.g. neighbouring councils, utility companies, Network Rail).
- Responses to the consultation are now being considered and will result in some changes to the Plan.

The Ruscombe Neighbourhood Plan contains policies for future development covering the following subjects:

- Development limit for Ruscombe
- Housing design codes
- Enhancing Ruscombe's Conservation Area
- Community engagement in planning
- Buildings of traditional local character
- Employment
- Community facilities
- Local green spaces
- Green infrastructure and biodiversity
- Managing traffic
- Car parking.

Once the Plan has been updated in the light of comments received during the consultation, the final stages will be:

- Submission of the Draft Plan to Wokingham Borough Council who will appoint an independent examiner.
- Local referendum (If more than 50% of respondents agree, the Neighbourhood Plan becomes part of the statutory development plan for the area).

6. Financial report – Clerk Ruth Reid

Ruscombe Parish Council (RPC) began the financial year with £140,994 (including £78,160 CIL money and £62,834 RPC reserves). RPC have received £32,000 in precept and £1,344 in other income (including VAT refund and interest earned). RPC have spent £35,497 the biggest expenditure has been the Community Orchard, purchase of Speed indicator device, staffing, Neighbourhood plan, and more charity donations than usual.

Ruscombe Parish Council currently hold £138,841 of this £65,267 is CIL money and £73,574 RPC reserves.

CIL money is given to RPC because of new housing developments built in Ruscombe, this money can only be spent on infrastructure.

7. Public questions

A member of the public asked if RPC were aware of a giant hogweed on the pathway outside Twyford Orchards? RPC were not aware, but Ruth will report to highways on Friday morning.

A member of the public asked about the risk to Ruscombe now Grazeley is not being built? Justin explained he does not think there is a risk of large quantity of development to Ruscombe. WBC Ward councillors and leader of WBC John Halsall has worked hard with the government to reduce the amount of housing Wokingham were told to provide and was successful in bring this number lower. A member of the public explained that Greenbelt land could be listed like a national park, which would help protect it. Councillor Carol Bulman asked if planning department knew about this possible change? All were unsure but assumed so.

A member of the public asked about the current plans to build toilets at St James Church? Justin explained that there are not any current plans. The church had had plans approved in 2015 to build a

toilet but they did not do the build. RPC are supportive of the need for a toilet to be built and did offer support to that project but not the larger proposal of a church hall and toilet.

No further questions were asked and Justin Closed the meeting at 9:24pm.

Chair Signed_____

Date_____

Chair initials_____