

Biddenham Parish Council Zoom meeting 19.08.2020

Those present: Peter Chase (Chairman); Graham Bates; Harry Fowler; Stewart Briggs; Francia Slade;
Krzys Osuch (taking minutes)
Roger Rigby (Borough Councillor); Jon Gambold (Borough Councillor)

From Gt. Denham PC: Anne O'Meara (clerk); Donna Parsons (chair)

Members of the Public: Deborah Slade; Gillian West

Apologies: Chris Gee; Alan Jacobs

There were three items on the agenda:

- 1) To ratify Mrs Karen Cotton as the new Biddenham Parish Clerk, starting on 1st September 2020
- 2) To update all participants of the situation regarding the land currently used by the Golf Club at Gt. Denham.
- 3) To replace the lapsed General Power of Competence for Biddenham Parish Council.

The chairman firstly asked all participants if anyone needed to declare an interest in any agenda item. There were no declarations of interest.

1) To ratify Mrs Karen Cotton as the new Biddeham Parish Council Clerk

The Chairman informed the meeting regarding the choice that the HR sub-committee had made for recruiting a new PC clerk. There were twelve applicants, of which four withdrew their applications during the process. From the remaining eight, four were shortlisted and interviewed. The candidate that was selected is a Biddenham resident. This candidate showed empathy with village life, much enthusiasm for the work to be done and had the necessary experience, although not all the qualifications required, but was willing to take courses to attain the required qualifications. The candidate chosen was Mrs Karen Cotton. **Chairman proposed** that Mrs Cotton be engaged as the new Parish Clerk; Cllr Briggs seconded this proposal. **All Parish Councillors voted in favour of the proposal.**

2) To update all participants of the situation regarding the Gt. Denham Golf Club & Golf Course

The chairman informed the meeting that he, Donna Parsons, Jim Weir, Jon Gambold and Roger Rigby together with Natalie Wilkins had had regular meetings regarding the golf club. That they had sent communications to the landlord (Old Ford End Trust), through the landlord's agent Bidwells, but they had not had any reply. Thus, engagement in any form of communications so far had been unsuccessful. This had the effect of the Landlord issuing various statements through the press that were inaccurate and have left them open to challenge. Some of the statements from the landlord appear to undermine the commercial position of the current Golf Club operator.

The group, as well as residents, thought that this was a move by the landlord to re-develop the land for building purposes. Consideration was made as to the possible steps that the landlord would take:

- a) How would the landlord re-categorize the land allowing it to be used for building purposes.
- b) Would the Borough Council allow the land to be used for other purposes, splitting away the clubhouse and green-keeper's compound, which could be rented from commercial purposes.

Jim Weir had managed to engage the support of the Borough in keeping the land as amenity land. The Borough Officers were standing by the current policy for its use. The Deputy Major & Borough Councillor H. Vann (portfolio holder for town centres & planning) were also supportive of the group's actions. However, it was believed by the group that if there was a future housing requirement in the Borough, then this land could be put forward.

A barrister had been engaged to offer opinion, which should be available by Friday 28th August. The cost of this was to be covered by a "crowd funding" exercise which had taken place, which produced an initial £1200 – sufficient to fund said barrister – and which had now increased to £3,700. Thus, no shortfall need to be made up by either Parish Council.

It has been suggested that a Community Action Committee be set up to protect this land and that any balance left of this fund be allocated for their use. However, this committee need to be properly constituted with a Chairman, Treasurer and Secretary.

Harry Fowler reminded the meeting that the call for sites had been closed last week and asked if Bidwells had put up the Gt. Denham site. Jon and Roger replied that they had not. Donna Parsons confirmed this. The Chairman asked if a site could be put up retrospectively. Roger Rigby replied informing the meeting that an application could be put in at a later date under "administration" rules. However, such an application needs to be submitted to the Borough by 2023, for the 2030-2040 plan. **Cllr Bates** reminded the meeting that an application can be submitted at any time and The Borough would have to consider it. **Anna O'Meara** stated that the whole of planning for the Borough was in turmoil awaiting the decision of the East – West railway corridor and was sure that Bidwells were looking at this opportunity. The Chairman and others is to have a meeting with MP, Richard Fuller on 4th September and will be seeking his input. He also reflected that there would be more revenue for Bidwells to keep the area as a golf club than to leave it fallow. **Cllr Briggs** asked for an update as to the state of the Golf Club. The Chairman informed said that out of the 500 members that the club had six months ago, there are now just 50; thus it would be very difficult to work at a profit unless financial help is given. The positive points for the club are that it is relatively flat and close to Bedford Town, thus could attract old and new members.

The Chairman went on to state that he would like Biddenham Parish Council to adopt the barrister's findings and conclusions in this matter. He proposed that The Biddenham Parish Council adopts, in principle, the solicitors conclusions. This was **seconded by Cllr Briggs**. All Councillors voted for this proposal. **Cllr Fowler**

suggested the need to get an agreement from the Barrister that any communications are in the name of Biddenham Parish Council (and Great Denham Parish Council).

Page 2 of 3

The Chairman next stated that currently, Biddenham Parish Council is not communicating with Bidwells officially and asked the Councillors to agree to begin dialogue. All voted positively. Thus, the question arose whether to write as each individual Parish Council or together as one. There was an almost split vote, but after debate, it was decided that one letter from both Councils would carry more weight. The Chairman also stated that he would see if it was possible to re-instate "The Biddenham Action Forum" which was formally constituted to contest the "Gold Lane" development in Biddenham. **Roger Rigby** suggested waiting to see the result of the Solicitors opinion. **Gillian West** asked if the club house could be used as a community centre. **Anna O'Meara** replied saying that the viability had been looked into, but thought that it was unviable and that the clubhouse and golf club were all locked into one lease, but that The Borough could possibly separate them out. Graham Bates informed the meeting that a landowner could refuse permission to separate any item from a lease. **Anna O'Meara** continued by asking for a resolution to fund activities for a regulated action group. **Jon Gambold** informed the meeting that any legal costs could be in excess of £50K.

3) **General Power of Competence (GPC)**

The Chairman next explained the purpose of, and criteria required for, a Parish Council to comply with GPC. This was first adopted in April 2017 and should have been renewed after the elections in April 2019:

- a) It needs a constituted council of at least two-thirds elected council members.
- b) The Parish Clerk must hold the Cilca qualification.

The Clerk had held the Cilca qualification all along and, had the renewal been made when it ought, the renewal would have been a formality. Although the new Parish Clerk does not hold such a qualification, she will be taking the relevant course. **Cllr Briggs** noted that the Parish Clerk must hold the qualification at the next Parish Council elections, i.e. by 2023, if the power is to be renewed again.

All Councillors present voted positively to adopt the GPC.

The Chairman at the latter part of the meeting presented information as to the handover of materials by the previous Parish Clerk.

- a) That he had all bank statements and access to the bank accounts
- b) There were currently discrepancies totalling just £142 in the cashbook for 2019/2020 which he needed to track down.
- c) He had to submit the accounts to Mazars for auditing and approval.

An internal auditor is required prior to the accounts being sent to Mazars, however the current auditor had retired; the chairman is looking for a replacement. This was an immediate requirement as the account need to be submitted to Mazars by 31.08.20; however he had obtained an extension to this deadline due to the

situation of our present Clerk nursing their husband (who has sadly now died) and also having resigned. However, the accounts must be submitted by end November latest and, despite the extension, they will be “qualified” (i.e. it will be noted that they were submitted late).

The meeting closed at 20:29.

The next Biddenham Parish Council meeting is on 9th September at 19:30.

Signed:

Peter Chase – Biddenham Parish Council Chairman