

**Minutes of the Annual Parish Meeting held on the 13th May 2024 at 6pm in  
Church Lench Village Hall. Church Lench.**

**Present:** Cllr. Mr. Seabourne (Chairman of the Parish Council), Cllr. Mrs. Hodges, Cllr. Mrs. Tyrell, Cllr. Mrs. Buxton, Cllr. Dr. Morgan, Cllr. Mr. Hailwood, Cllr. Mr. Worrall, Mrs. K. Williamson (Clerk) and 6 parishioners.

**Apologies received:** District Councillor Ben Hurdman.

**1. Minutes of the meeting held on the 22nd May 2023:** Resolved that the minutes were of a correct record, duly signed by the Chairman.

**2. Matters arising from minutes:** Nil.

**3. Report from Chairman of the Parish Council:** Cllr. Mr. Seabourne reported: For the whole of last year the Parish Council had a full complement of Councillors, having coopted Mike Worrall (Atch Lench) and Lucy Buxton (Sheriffs Lench) at the last Annual Parish Council Meeting. With Lucy joining our ranks it also meant that for the first time in many years we had representatives from all four villages on the Parish Council. Our Parish Clerk, Nicky Holland, retired at the end of April. Nicky has served this community quietly and efficiently for the past 20 years and we cannot thank her enough for her efforts. We are very pleased to have been able to replace Nicky by the appointment of Kerry Williamson. Kerry is already working as Clerk to Abbots Morton and Rous Lench Parish Councils and we are already beginning to see the benefits of this "synergy". We are all looking forward to working with Kerry in the years to come.

Principal activities during the past twelve months have included: -

**Neighbourhood Plan:** Councillors Morgan Murray and Carolyn Hodges with some assistance have continued to work tirelessly to develop the plan. More people from the community have joined the working party which will be an immense help. In March an exhibition was held at the Lenches Club to display the historical context of the work and why it is so important. NP working group members were on hand to answer questions and to provide more information. The event was well attended.

**Parish Assets:** The Church Lench Bus Shelter was re-built during the year and our thanks go to the Shaws who initiated the work and met the full cost. The Church Lench Play Area is well used and largely in good condition. However, the see-saw is showing its age and may have to be replaced if funds allow. The Council is mindful that disabled access to the area is challenging and we therefore have a plan in place to remedy this when funds are available.

**Highways:** The speed sign which alternates between Low Road and Evesham Road in Church Lench became defective a few weeks ago, The PC is therefore exploring options to replace it. In the meantime, thanks to Councillor Lucy Buxton, Sheriffs Lench had a brand new sign installed.

The Lenches Amphitheatre Project: Building work on the amphitheatre has progressed steadily throughout the year and the bulk of the work is now complete. Events were held last summer and by all accounts they were a great success. Early in the year the LSRC asked the Parish Council again to raise additional funds through a Public Works Loan. Such a loan would have been repaid through the Parish Precept by council tax payers in the Parish. A consultation was carried out and a referendum held. Parishioners voted not to support the extra funding. Meanwhile a number of events are planned for the Amphitheatre this coming summer.

Planning: The usual mix of refusals and approvals of small projects took place during the year. In the vast majority of cases the Parish Council expressed a view, either for or against. The application to build 19 houses on land behind Low Road was refused by Wychavon after a vigorous campaign led by local residents. A new application to build 9 houses on the same site is now going through the planning process. The Parish Council asked for this application to go to the Planning Committee, rather than be delegated to a Planning Officer. This was agreed although no date has been set yet. The "Mayfield" development of 6 houses behind Atch Lench Road has yet to be determined by Wychavon Planning.

Council Finances: Inflation has been a challenge for the PC, given the very limited funds available to us. In order to "balance the books" it has been necessary to raise the Parish Precept by 7.4% for the forthcoming financial year. The PC will do all that is possible to minimise costs in 2024/25. Finance will continue to be a challenge for as long as no new households are created in the Parish.

### **Brief reports from the floor:**

#### **5. County and District Councillor reports:** Report received from District Councillor Ben Hurdman:

District Councillor Report May 2024 - South Lenches

This month the Wychavon Councillors will be looking at the contract for the Home Improvement Agency which is up for renewal in March 2025. We will be scrutinising the performance of the current contractors and reviewing what they do and do not cover in the field. It is vitally important that especially in our rural communities elderly people and people with a special need can remain in their homes with the correct care to maintain a good quality of life.

Wychavon have committed to using HVO fuel where possible in their diesel equipment in parks and gardens. This should reduce Co2 emissions by 90% in comparison to white diesel. We are also using environmentally friendly herbicides rather than pesticides.

Over the past six months everyone is aware of the amount of rain we have had. However there is a weather station at the Civic Centre which gives us a bit of detail. We've had:

61mm in Jan (slightly lower than average)

143mm in Feb (highest ever recorded)

122mm in March (just below highest ever)

Over the last six months we have seen the highest percentage of winter water run off in the last 39 years.

Planning - There have been 5 planning appeal decisions over the last month with all 5 being dismissed. This is promising and gives me confidence that the planning committee and officers are making the correct decisions where necessary. Applications are currently being processed in 3 days and last month 320 were processed.

Regarding the applications in South Lenches, there are a few contentious planning matters that you are all aware of. I was pleased to see that the observatory appeal was dismissed. The comments of the inspector around not being a sustainable location are encouraging to hear when it comes to other appeals for The Lenches.

I was also pleased to see the appeal for Orchard Cottage has been dismissed, whilst I feel the other application to convert the garage was of value to the village I do feel the bungalow would have been over development of the site and overcrowding a very narrow lane.

Lastly I would like to thank you for welcoming me so warmly into the role of councillor. Over my first 12 months as a district councillor I have learned a great deal and have been reassured by the Parish Council's commitment to preserving The Lenches.

#### **6. Neighbourhood Plan: Cllr. Mrs. Hodges reported:**

There has been lots of support for the Neighbourhood Plan with good representation from the all the Lenches. Thanks extended to Cllrs. Mrs. Tyrell and Dr. Morgan. In October /November 2023 a professional Planning Consultant was engaged to help with the Neighbourhood Plan, fully funded. The Planning consultancy has expertise in rural communities.

In March 2024 a community event was very well attended. All efforts resulted in 100 responses to the Neighbourhood Plan engagement. This was a 30% response rate with mainly positive responses to the vision and objectives. Currently, two areas of the Neighbourhood Plan are being worked on: Valued Landscapes and Green Spaces. A draft plan will be sent to Wychavon District Council soon. Funding for 2024-25 will open soon, which will be applied for. The Neighbourhood Plan will be shared with the community at a community event in approximately 6 months time.

#### **7. Village Hall Committee Mrs. Hall reported:**

This year sadly we lost David Yates and I want to record the gratitude of the Village Hall and of many in the village for his very long service as a trustee. Our constitution is for four trustees and I am delighted to say that Jonathan Hazelwood has agreed to come onboard.

Thinking about the hall itself, repairs are becoming quite a theme as the building ages. There is a steady stream of mostly small items: leaks, lights, guttering, plugs, a broken window pane, a broken gate, broken toilet seat. There is normal maintenance inside and

out and more recently getting safety certificates for almost every appliance we own. This year replaced the key safe and at Pre-school's request, installed an extra lock on the front door. We need around £13,000 a year for upkeep.

The very good news is that we have been approved for a grant for solar panels for the south facing part of the roof. Wychavon District Council will pay two thirds of the cost. This means we need to find about £3,500 from our own contingency funds, which we can do. The panels will save us about £600 a year in electricity costs.

Pre-school now attends daily and its income is important to us. We were made aware that it was in financial difficulty. It now has new officers and a new Committee and we have had two meetings with them. We are confident that they are working very hard to get back into good financial shape. It has long been the view of the Village Hall Committee that they should support the Pre-school, based on its importance as a feeder for the school and the life of the village. Accordingly, we agreed not to increase their fee this school year as our funds are sound. We are therefore subsidising them, which has had an impact on our bottom line. This is not a position that will be held indefinitely.

We continue to feel the weight of competition with other village organisations and now the amphitheatre. It is increasingly hard to find both dates for events and then to sell tickets for them. We have three evening exercise classes a week and the usual Parish Council meetings and Church events. We have a presence on Facebook and we printed flyers this year that went out with the ARCH messenger and into local shops.

Please support your Village Hall!

**8. Tree Warden:** Mr. Hazelwood reported the following:

A planting scheme of 2000 bulbs has been planted at the Sports club. Two trees on the triangle Green at Ab Lench to be considered.

Discussion followed that this is privately owned land. Mr Hazelwood took the action to discuss this with the landowner and was advised to submit a grant application to SLPC for the cost of the trees (£50 per tree) if the landowner was agreeable.

**9. Public Paths Warden:** No reported provided.

Path (land to the left of garages) in Ab Lench is blocked with electric fencing. SLPC advised to contact Worcestershire County Council to report this.

**10. Church Lench Pre-school:** Mrs. Benbow (Chairperson) reported that:

At its AGM In October 2023 Pre-school elected a new committee. It was established that Pre-school was in some financial difficulty having suffered significant losses over

the last 3 years. Pre-school was fortunate enough to hold sufficient reserves to be able to absorb these losses. Over the last 6 months the new committee have worked hard to improve marketing, raise the profile of Pre-school, cut costs and attract new families. There are a number of reasons for the losses such as Pre-school received an 'inadequate' Ofsted grading at the end of 2021 making it difficult to attract new families, along with the challenge of having to persuade families to travel past other Pre-schools to come to The Lenches due to the lack of young families living within the Lenches communities along with the challenges across the sector of Covid.

Since the new committee was elected, its focus has been to make The Lenches Pre-School operationally sustainable. Various initiatives have been undertaken to address this:

**Costs:** Pre-school have reviewed and reduced its cost base where possible. Very appreciative to the Village Hall Committee for freezing their rates.

**Fees:** Pre-school implemented price increases in January and will be benefiting from a marked increase in government funding rates from April just gone and this coming September.

**Marketing:** A new range of activities and initiatives have and are being implemented to attract new families such as fortnightly Forest School sessions in the community orchard, advertising banners, Open Day, closer working relationship with school (joint forest school days, school fete attendance and more), increased social media presence and being more visible among the wider community and supporting events such as Christmas Fayre, Lent Lunches and more recently Village Hall Big Breakfast at the weekend. We have also purchased and displayed bird, leaf and mammal identifying prints in Yates' community orchard for everyone's benefit. Linking in and planning joint outings with Charlton & Crophorne Pre-school.

The Pre-school had established an outdoor education/learning facility in the field adjacent to the Village Hall, however following a visit from an Enforcement Officer this has had to be suspended while a new location is found. As the land is agricultural the equipment could not be left here, it would need to be removed each time, which is not viable. With the landowner's permission a change of use from agricultural to mixed use for educational and leisure could be a potential solution but this will cost £590.

Fundraising efforts have raised £700 in 6 months. Current Year End figures suggest a significant reduction in losses, estimated at under £4000 however £3000 will be attributed to last year's figures missing payments HMRC and staff holiday pay. This is significant progress relative to last few years however it is still a predicted loss.

A new manager has been recruited and 18 children are registered so far for 2024-25. Currently there are 28 children (increase from 13), with 11 being from outside of the village.

We have a strong committee of 7 trustees for our charity, all are parents and bring a variety of skills and ideas and together with the new manager are keen to keep Pre-school thriving. I am incredibly proud of all that we have achieved in just 6/7 months as a brand

new committee. I am quietly optimistic for the future of Pre-school as we look forward to its next chapter.

Pre-school is grateful to The Lenches Community for their continued support whilst Pre-school navigates such challenging times.

Discussion followed that included the encouragement from SLPC Councillors that the Pre-school committee should engage the community about fundraising for the change of use application (crowdfund) or applying to SLPC for a grant towards the costs.

**11. Parochial Church Council:** Mr Ball reported that:

The Church is always open, warm and welcoming. There is a weekly service, open book with Church Lench School and an outdoor service. Bell ringing occurs every week and the ARCH messenger is produced monthly. The Church holds 4 social events a year. Works that have been carried out over the past year include a window being fixed. Future works are planned to include upgrading the heating to an ecosystem, this is looking to be a £10,000 to £20,000 project. The bell ropes also need replacing - a new set were purchased in 2000 so now at 25 years old they are all in poor condition. The PCC has submitted a grant application to SLPC for some funding towards the purchase of new bell ropes. Thanks were extended to the volunteers: flower arranging, cleaning and opening the Church. And the Church clock is now accurate.

Discussion followed around the condition of one of the Church gates. Mr Ball will look into this and consider removing the gate.

**12. Matter raised by the Parishioners:**

Village Pool parking maintenance - under the apple tree needs cutting back so that people do not need to walk into the road.

**Meeting closed at 7.10pm.**

**Signed by the Chairman:**

**Date:**