

STANDON PARISH COUNCIL

MINUTES OF Extra-ordinary meeting of the Standon Parish Council held on Tuesday, 6 April 2010, at 7.00 pm in the Community Centre.

*Cllr M Acford	Cllr A Lang
Cllr Mrs R Arikans	*Cllr C W Marks
*Cllr G D Cowell	*Cllr Ms E Painter
*Cllr Mrs J A Dearman	*Cllr R M Stacey (Chairman)
*Cllr K Goodsell	*Cllr Mrs M Wilkinson

* denotes present.

In attendance: 40 members of the public.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Lang and Cllr Mrs Arikans.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

3. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman stated that, as the subject of the meeting was emotive, it was important that the public should show respect when others were speaking. The Parish Council had no preconceived ideas and would listen to the views of all sides before reaching a decision on the way forward which would be approved under part II of the Agenda.

4. TO RECEIVE COMMENTS FROM PARISHIONERS

Comments by allotment holders

A reference was made to the recent article in the Hertfordshire Mercury with exceptions being taken at some of the remarks contained therein.

Video recordings had been taken on the allotment site with no apparent noise nuisance in evidence. It was stated that there was an earlier map of Puckeridge which showed that the land in question prior to being agricultural had been laid out to allotments and the Government initiative was to encourage a healthy nutritional lifestyle and allotments were a way of achieving this aim. The resident raising the foregoing had lived in the village for the whole of his life and was extremely pleased to have the facility of being able to rent an allotment.

Comments from residents backing onto the proposed new site

A resident stated that concern was expressed regarding the fact that there had been no prior notification that the site in question was to be turned into allotments. The present houses backing onto the site had been built in 2006 and the resident had moved into the house because of the peaceful location backing onto agricultural land and the fact that the rear garden was not overlooked. The proposal for siting 18 plots with upwards of possibly 50 people being on the site left the residents feeling very uncomfortable. The noise nuisance in the first week of the allotments being let, with only 3 plots in use, had been high and this would not get any better when the site was being fully utilised. A further concern was the effect that the allotments would have on the value of the properties. In the opinion of a local estate agent values would be adversely affected. The allotments were a visual eyesore and there was resentment to the visual intrusion and the detrimental effect on lives. Although there was a degree of noise and inconvenience from the school and hairdresser's establishment affording little privacy in the front, the back garden was looked upon as a quiet refuge. Whilst not averse to allotments per se, there was opposition to them being provided to the rear of the houses. This would result in a total loss of privacy, because of the rising slope of the site which would enable allotment holders to be able to view directly into the houses. This would be an intolerable situation.

Comments from allotment holders

An allotment holder voiced the opinion that there would be no reason to want to stare into the houses. It was pointed out that the government was promoting biodiversity and encouraging land to be used for allotments. Therefore, the provision of allotments should be viewed as something positive and not negative.

Comments from residents

No-one was against allotments which were normally provided on flat ground and in the main were not an eyesore. However, this would not be the case on this particular site and with the proliferation of sheds, etc, similar to those on the existing site, the site would fast become an eyesore. Residents stated that the promotion of allotments should be encouraged, but the current provision was in the wrong place.

Comments from allotment holders

An allotment holder who had a house backing onto the existing allotments with a bedroom window 10 feet from the boundary did not feel in anyway that he had lost privacy. He welcomed being part of the community. At the time of purchasing his property his solicitor's search had revealed that there was a possibility that the land in question could at some stage in the future be turned into allotments.

Another allotment holder stated that the land in question had been owned by the Standon Charities for some 200 years. The present site had been brought under allotment cultivation some 30 years ago since which time there had been a fluctuating demand for allotments. However, over the last 10 years there had been a resurgence of interest in allotments both nationally and locally and this had resulted in the present situation with an expanding waiting list. Further it was stated that no planning permission was required to change the use of agricultural land to allotment use.

General comments by Councillors and Allotment Holders

Reference was made to the Allotment Act of 1908 where the Parish Council was under a duty to consider the provision of allotments where there was a demand made by 6 people. It was stated that there would appear to have been an insufficient search made when the residents purchased their houses, which would have revealed the past history of the site. A suggestion was made that in order to obviate the problem of visual intrusion a natural screening barrier could be provided. A Councillor suggested that the provision of a community orchard on the other side of the bank would act as a buffer. The Chairman suggested that this community orchard could be provided halfway up the slope.

Comments by Councillors and Residents

A resident questioned whether it was a long term plan to include the whole of the Standon Charity land as allotments. If the Parish Council decided in favour of the allotments being sited to the rear of the houses were there any restrictions that could be imposed to ensure that noise nuisance could be contained. The Chairman confirmed that there were no plans to extend the site and controls could be exercised through the tenancy agreements.

Cllr Acford by way of explanation stated that the whole of the field to the rear of the residents' premises was owned by Standon Charities and the small section of land delineated for allotments had been negotiated with the Charity having established that the then leasee was happy to relinquish his tenancy in favour of the Parish Council. It was a convenient portion of land which sat well with an extension to the existing site. The provision of additional allotments had evolved over a period of approximately 4 years and the full utilisation was down primarily to the efforts of Mr Brian Durrant in seeking to ensure that the site was fully utilised. The resultant demand to which earlier reference had been made had resulted in a build-up on the waiting list to a point where approximately 2 years ago there were 20 people on the waiting list. It was this situation which had prompted the Parish Council to approach the Charity to consider providing additional land. In hindsight the Parish Council should have engaged in dialogue with the residents.

Surprise was expressed regarding noise nuisance as allotments were by their very nature places for quiet enjoyment. Mr Durrant made the point that nobody had taken the trouble to discuss the issue with him.

At this juncture the meeting was adjourned to allow the public to vacate the meeting.

5. PRESS AND PUBLIC TO BE EXCLUDED

RESOLVED that under Section 1 of the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960 the Press and Public be excluded during discussion of item 6 of the Agenda in view of the confidential nature of the business to be transacted.

6. ALLOTMENTS

It was generally agreed that there had been a fair expression of views with regard to the decision to provide additional allotments. Whilst there had been some emotional references during the meeting, it was clear that the basic issues were the potential lack of privacy to the residents, the generation of noise nuisance and the effect that the decision would have on the value of the properties. Members agreed that the land in question was very suitable for allotments and that was why the Parish Council had made the decision to proceed accordingly.

Cllr Acford stated that it was of concern that residents had not been consulted earlier and his personal opinion was that it would appear not to be a pleasant outlook for the occupiers of the houses and, if unchecked, could become intolerable. The Parish Council was bound by Article 8 of the Human Rights Act and had now met its obligation to consult. Having confirmed that the Parish Council was committed to providing allotments, a compromise should be sought. A suggestion was for 10 ft to be taken off the top and bottom plots and that a 20 ft buffer zone should be created to the rear of the houses. This would have the effect of moving the allotments away from the houses. It was further suggested that this buffer zone could be planted as a community orchard and that Mr Rob Street be asked to provide details on this provision.

The general consensus of opinion was that this suggestion was meritorious and would have the desired effect of ameliorating the concerns expressed by residents. Additionally, consideration could be given to extending the hedge line along the ditch to give greater visual protection. The tenancy agreement should be revisited with a view to strengthening the conditions and the situation should be monitored on a regular basis. It was felt that, as this was a community based matter, the PCSO should have the monitoring role included in his duties.

With regard to future management it was suggested that a Working Party be set up consisting of representatives from the Parish Council, the allotment holders and the residents whose houses adjoined the allotments and that the composition and the working party remit be discussed at the next Parish Council meeting.

A reference was made to the inconvenience that had been caused to the allotment holders in not being allowed enter upon the land, despite the fact that there had been an offer made by Mr Brian Durrant (acting on behalf of the Parish Council). Therefore, it was felt that for the first year the allotment holders should have one year rent free.

In conclusion it was RESOLVED:

- (i) to give effect to the suggestions as set out under Minute 6 above (Allotments) in relation to the creation of a buffer zone, the reduction in the plot sizes and the strengthening of the tenancy agreement;
- (ii) that an official letter be forwarded to the allotment holders and the residents setting out the Parish Council's position and how it proposed to move forward. Cllr Acford agreed to action this matter.

7. SUGGESTED ITEMS FOR NEXT PARISH COUNCIL MEETING

Composition and remit of the Allotment Working Party.

There being no further business the meeting closed at 9.20 pm.