

Harrietsham Parish Council
Environmental Committee
Minutes of meeting held on Monday 16th January 2023

1. **Present:** Cllrs Dean (chairman), Dayes, Luck, Stanley, Mrs S Amos and
M Cuerden [MC] (RFO/Amenity Manager)
2. **Apologies:** None
Members of the public: None
3. **Minutes of the last meeting** (21st November 2022) were signed (without amendment) at the following Council meeting, another copy was signed for our records.
4. **Disclosures:** None.
5. **Amenity Contracts (Update):** MC reported that he had walked round all the contracted areas a while ago, and that they were all looking well maintained and litter-free. Various points were raised :

- The New Burial Ground and Garden of Remembrance seemed to be neat and tidy, with no litter.
- The Glebe Field was also looking very neat and tidy. MC noted that he had asked the incumbent contractor about installing the new rubbish bin, but was still waiting to hear back.
- The Medical Centre and Church Road verges are looking ok.

Woodlands Walk is also looking ok.

Both contracts are looked after by MBC, who are withdrawing from the work in April. MC reported that he had approached our three remaining contractors to see if they would like to take them on. One contractor failed to respond, leaving one who bid only for the Medical Centre/ Church Road Verges and one who bid for both. The prices offered for the two remaining years of the contract were:

Contractor A	Medical Centre	£2,205 / £2,205	Woodlands Walk	£3,858 / £3,858
Contractor B		£4,370 / £4,502		No Bid

It is clear that Contractor A offers the best price for the Medical Centre, but councillors were concerned at giving both contracts to just one contractor, and felt that the premium incurred by spreading the load was likely to be worthwhile. It was therefore agreed to **Recommend to Council** that A should be awarded the Woodlands Walk contract, and B should be awarded the Medical Centre. Proposed Cllr Dean, seconded Cllr Dayes, all in favour.

- All the benches are looking in good condition.
 - The war memorial is also in good condition.
 - The A20 road side verges continue to be well maintained.
 - The Saxon Place amenity land is also looking ok. MC noted that the community orchard is looking a little sorry for itself, but this is to be expected at this time of year.
6. **Teers Meadow:** MC reported that he had walked the field and all looked ok. He then showed the committee the proposed information boards that will form part of the lottery fund project, although they will be placed at various points around the village. Mrs Amos made several observations, noting, for example, that the drafts still referred to The Roebuck instead of Percival's Rest. Cllr Dean pointed out that the photo of the boat-house also showed her house, and she would prefer it if this could be changed. Mrs Amos would send her comments to MC, and he committed to passing them on. MC also commented that we are getting close to the end of the project, and he thought that a meeting with our consultant to review progress would be a good idea.
 7. **Woodlands Walk:** Cllr Dean noted that despite the hot summer, there had been little re-occurrence of the algae that used to plague the lake, and that the chalk treatments had, it seemed, worked. She therefore suggested that we should give the lake another treatment, having already skipped a year or two. (The last treatment being in December 2021 - £2,007). MC observed that this might mean that we didn't need the chalk, but that the aerators were doing the job, to which Cllr Dean pointed out that the chalk had been noticeably effective in previous years, and that to not repeat it now might be throwing away the benefits accrued by the earlier treatments. It was agreed that this could be considered a specialist supply as the previous supplier has now done

it at least a couple of times, and knows what is involved. It was therefore agreed to **Recommend to Council** that the previous supplier be approached to provide another chalk treatment for the lake, so long as the cost isn't massively inflated. Proposed Cllr Dean, seconded Cllr Luck with all in favour. Cllr Dean also mentioned that she was having the switch for the aerator moved as the current location is inconvenient. MC suggested that she got a separate meter installed at the same time as this would both be more accurate, removing the current guesswork, and be more convenient. Any cost incurred, within reason, would be covered by the council.

Discussion then turned to the duck-houses. Two of the three duck houses have been retrieved by MBC, who informed us that they were rotten beyond repair and should be scrapped. Cllr Dean had attended their depot to inspect them, and concurred. It is presumed that the third, which has now developed a pronounced list, is also going to be un-repairable. It was agreed that we should ask MBC to dispose of the remnants, and that we have no current plans to replace them.

8. **New Burial Ground / Churchyard:** MC noted that he had on previously reported that the current churchyard was getting full, and that he had started to lend thought as to what we would need to do about this with regard to the New Burial Ground (NBG). With this in mind, the Clerk had attended a course on Cemetery Management and associated matters, coming back with the firm view that this was an onerous subject with many pitfalls.

She did, however, discover that there is quite a lot to do before we even get to that point. It seems that the council bought the NBG in 1997, and may have conducted some tests as to the suitability of the land for burials. Unfortunately, however, we have no records to prove this, or show what was found. We shall therefore need to commission tests and trial holes/trenches to assess the area for archeological remains and environmental factors to ensure its suitability for burials. It is then entirely likely that we shall need to apply for planning permission from MBC as this is - presumably - a change of use. Having researched with the solicitor overseeing the training and a Clerk who has also been through the process, there appears to be one company who completes the assessments for Local Government and this is who the Clerk is currently in discussions with. AB has also contacted another company who has said they would need to 'read up on what is required with regards to trails pits for burial grounds'. The Clerk has also sent them information, but is not confident that the statutory requirements will be met, to save the Parish Council having issues in the future.

In the first instance the Parish Council will need to arrange for a Groundwater Assessment to be completed to establish the sustainability of the site for burials. The completed assessment would then require Environment Agency approval to the findings of the report, before the Parish Council looks into planning permission for change of use (if required). There is some confusion over this point as, having checked the Title Deeds, they state that it can only be used as a burial ground. This would probably need to be double checked with a solicitor or MBC. The cost of the Assessment is unclear at this stage, as there are different tiers and the preferred company has offered to complete a Preliminary Risk Assessment, which they will complete free of charge and the Clerk has already supplied the information required to start this process.

Once we have a quote, then Council will be asked to either approve the expenditure, or if it is a massive amount we have the option to keep the NBG as a green field, in which case the parish won't have a cemetery once the churchyard is full.

Assuming that the assessments and permissions are all ok, then we can either (a) elect to become a civil authority administering burials on behalf of the community or (b) hand the NBG over to the church (who don't have to take it - they could refuse, and leave us "holding the baby").

Following the course, the Clerk is fairly clear that the council taking on the role would be fraught with difficulty, onerous responsibilities and extra costs, including, possibly, an extra member of staff on a part-time basis. After some discussion, it was generally agreed that the council would prefer to church to take the land, and continue doing what they do now.

That leaves us with option (b) - the church takes on the NBG. The church may prove reluctant to do this because of the extra strain the additional costs will impose on the already strained finances. As things stand, if they refuse, then they will save the costs of the churchyard, and not incur any for the NBG.

Once the churchyard is full, there are three possibilities. The first is that it becomes a closed churchyard, in which case the parish council gets asked if we wish to take it on, and if we refuse then MBC has to. This would leave us at MBC's mercy on matters of maintenance, including grass cutting etc. It also means that MBC might become responsible for mending the north wall, a scenario which, in another parish, resulted in a massive

charge-back from the district to the parish, causing a huge spike in Council Tax. Alternatively, the church could take the NBG as an extension to the current churchyard, and just carry on as before. Finally, the churchyard is closed – as just discussed – and the church takes on the NBG; effectively the straight swap envisaged back in 1997.

As mentioned, the church might decline the NBG because of the extra costs they would face. Were the council to offer the NBG but agree to maintain it “on behalf of the community”, then this would address this problem, and not, in fact, cost the council much more. We already maintain the NBG, so we could just carry on with that, and we also already give an annual grant for half the cost of maintaining the churchyard, so were we to take that on after it was closed, the additional cost would be relatively minor.

The other major issue to be addressed is the hole in the north wall, much beloved – and used for over 20 years – by dogwalkers. Were the church to not do anything about it before the churchyard closes, then the council will inherit the wall along with the land – and therefore, probably, the responsibility to repair it. It therefore might be in our interests to approach the church with a proposal to split the repair costs, maybe 1/3 church, 1/3 council and 1/3 Friends of St John ... but only after we have ascertained that the NBG is suitable for handing over!

It was therefore agreed to **Recommend to Council** the following course of action:

HPC to undertake all necessary assessments, planning permissions etc

(option to abandon process and keep the NBG as a meadow if costs are prohibitive)

If assessments or planning fail, then we keep the NBG as a meadow

All being well, we seek to get the church to take the NBG on, either as a new ground or as an extension

To help them decide to agree the council offers to maintain the NBG and the churchyard in perpetuity.

All being well, we offer to share the repairs to the north wall to get rid of that particular problem.

Proposed Cllr Dayes, seconded Cllr Dean, all in favour.

9. **Pre-school hut:** MC reported that the pre-school at the church have been told by the Diocesan Architectural Committee (DAC) that the hut cannot stay where it is, and has to either move or go – although no timetable has been specified, it needs to happen soonish. If it goes, then the pre-school may well have to close, which will cost the community a valuable facility which the council would wish to retain. Someone has suggested to MC that maybe it could be re-located over the wall and into the NBG. In order to achieve this, several things would need to happen. Firstly, the pre-school would have to apply for planning permission from MBC – which would come to us for comment, and we would (presumably) support it. They will also need to apply to the DAC for a faculty (church planning permission) to make a foot entrance in the Grade-1 listed wall to allow the children to access the hut from the church. Assuming both are forthcoming, then a path could be laid (on top of the grass – no digging) under which there could be electricity and water supplied.

One consideration is whether or not we really want to be a landlord to the pre-school. If we were, we could charge a modest ground-rent. However, should the events discussed under item 8 occur, it would be for only a short time, because the church will take over the NBG, and all the issues resolve themselves.

It was therefore agreed to **Recommend to Council** that we inform the pre-school that, if they wish, we would support their application for planning permission to move the hut on to the New Burial Ground. Proposed Cllr Dayes, seconded Cllr Dean, all in favour.

10. **Date of next meeting** – Monday 20th March 2023 at 7:30pm in the parish office.

Meeting closed at 8:55 pm.