

## Wembdon Annual Parish Assembly

Held at Wembdon Village Hall on the 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2023 at 8.00pm

Present at the meeting were ten members of the Parish Council.

1. Chairman's opening remarks.

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the Annual Parish Assembly.

2. Minutes of the last Annual Parish Assembly held on 4<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

It was resolved to approve the minutes as a correct record of the Annual Parish Assembly. The minutes are available to view on the Parish Council website.

3. Report of the Chairman of the Parish Council Councillor M Solomon for the period April 2022 to March 2023.

The Chairman gave the following report:

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen and thank you all for joining us at this, Wembdon's Annual Parish Assembly. My name is Mike Solomon, and I am Chairman of Wembdon Parish Council.

If you were here during the earlier Parish Council meeting you will have heard that this will be my last parish meeting from this side of the table and as this will be my 12th Parish Assembly meeting in the chair and 20th year on the Council I hope you will allow me a brief indulgence in reflecting for a few minutes not only on the splendid work of your Council over the past 2 years, having missed last year due to COVID, but also in the developments in the fabric of this parish over the past two decades in this my "State of the Union" address.

Our playing fields are a source of pride to the village focusing as they do on providing facilities that are fully accessible to everyone regardless of ability. This year we have added three new Accessible swings to the Access for All roundabout and trampoline as well as soft resurfacing many of the other areas and it is a great delight to see these bits of play equipment being enjoyed by children of all capabilities. The playing field and play equipment was one of the projects that first sparked my interest after joining the Parish Council and having learned about the importance of successful grant applications, my first project was to revamp the play area in 2008. For the older children we added the new swings, the higher slide and the climbing frames and for the toddlers we added the new climbing frame. We also added the new bridge into the playing fields from what is now our Parklands, replacing the two narrow concrete planks that were there before, and then went on to add drainage to the playing fields which previously were pretty much underwater for about four months of the year and you needed Wellington boots to walk the footpaths when I was younger and then you often needed to be cautious that the water didn't overlap the tops.

In 2008 the Parish Council also embarked upon a major undertaking to produce a Parish Plan and it was very much the results of the community surveys, which were the summary of our community's aspirations, which became our Vision for Wembdon, and this plan has underpinned a great deal of the Parish Council's focus and time over the past decade. Let me just pick on a couple of points to report this Council's achievements.

Traffic was one of the major issues highlighted in the survey, with cars speeding along Wembdon Rise and Wembdon Hill. Your Parish Council reacted first by purchasing a speed gun and setting up the speed watch team and then in 2016 we bought our first speed indicating device - or SID - and we were the first parish in the county to do that. After much lobbying, and now armed with the vehicle speed data from the SID, we managed to get the zebra crossing agreed and installed on Wembdon Rise and I am pleased to note that only this week, one of our earliest speed management objectives, started back in 2012, has borne fruit and we now have a 20 mph zone being initiated throughout Wembdon. It shows just how determined and patient you need to be if you want to initiate change within the local authorities.

Improved recreational facilities and amenities were also key aspirations that Wembdon's residents identified in the parish plan survey and key goals were: to expand the Village Green, build a Village Hall and improve our sports facilities. Well, I hope you all think that our Village Green with its cricket, football and rounders pitches and this Village Hall speak for themselves but as many of you are aware it didn't happen without a few little challenges along the way!

Improved accessibility was another key objective raised in the Parish Plan and this was very much the foundation for our Access for All projects. Many will remember the narrow, muddy footpaths around Wembdon Village, regrettably some of which still remain, and my personal memories of trying to manage a pram or pushchair or even worse a mobility scooter along them. It was just impossible. The Parish Council have now laid good quality tarmac surfaced paths that enable everyone in the village to access the Park, The Church, The Parish Centre and The Village Hall and we have wherever possible included solar lighting to make it easier to see your way.

We have also tried to keep our recreational spaces and footpaths clear and free from the menace of dog poo, we have more waste and dog bins per head of population than any other parish in Somerset and yet we still occasionally have a problem, but I do believe that it is less of a problem in Wembdon than in many other areas. Nevertheless, this is a problem that this Council has decided to once again address in the coming year and as a dog owner, I really hope that this will be successful.

And I could go on to talk about all the new benches along the Common, the commemoration oak trees and daffodils that we have planted, the Queen's Copse, the wonderful Parklands recreational area, the purchase of the allotments with their magnificent views over the channel, now with its beacon as well as a long waiting list, and the joy that these open spaces have provided particularly during the lockdown period of COVID. Our

regular and immensely professional responses to all of the planning applications are another key achievement of this Council as well as the excellent website and our participation in all of the key meetings with the HPC teams.

And what of the cost? Tony will outline the financial situation in his report in a moment but not to steal his thunder let me just say that we are closing the books this year with a current year-end balance standing at around £60,000. It is just worth comparing that with the position in 2012, which happens to be the year that I first stepped in as Chairman, when in our current account we held £1838-68, but we did have a separate reserve account with 37 pence. For our performance as a Council and especially our financial performance I give my personal thanks to our Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer, Tony Jay. He has managed to keep me on the straight and narrow for the past nine years and has provided me and the rest of the Council with exceptional financial, legal as well as administrative support.

The Parish Council planning committee responds to planning applications in a most professional way under the excellent leadership of its chairman Councillor Peter Major.

Your Parish Council, this Parish Council has worked tirelessly for many years, purely as volunteers and living in Wembdon, as we all do, we have all benefited from their dedication and their efforts, so I end by thanking each of the counsellors past and present for the unwavering support that they have given to our community and to me as their Chairman and I assure them that I promise never to attend another Parish Council meeting unless invited.

Thank you all for your time.

#### 4. Financial report for the period April 2022 to March 2023.

The Parish Clerk gave the following report in his role as Responsible Financial Officer:

At the start of the financial year the parish council's bank balance stood at £59,222. At the end the balance was £59,256, so it would appear that the parish council's reserves remained basically unchanged. However it is not that simple. The starting figure of £59,222 included £37,340 in grants and donations held towards the now installed accessible swings. Therefore in reality the parish council had £21,882 in reserves at the start of the financial year. This figure was too low to satisfy the council's auditors, and therefore a decision was taken to increase the precept figure in 2022/23 from £98,200 to £110,992 in order to increase the reserves figure. The current reserve figure of £59,256 should be much more acceptable to the auditors.

There is currently great uncertainty about the forthcoming financial requirements of the parish council due to the newly formed Somerset Council. We do not know how many of the services that were previously provided by Sedgemoor District Council and Somerset County Council will

continue under Somerset Council. It is possible that the parish council may have to pay for services that were previously provided free of charge, We simply do not know at the present time. Therefore, it is even more important for the parish council to hold a healthy reserves figure.

The parish council has one public sector loan which funded the entrance to the Village Hall. The outstanding debt currently stands at approximately £151,000.

The precept demand remains at £110,992 for 2023-24, the same as the previous year. As there will be a few more council tax payers in the parish in 2023/24 compared to 2022/23 then everyone will play slightly less, meaning a reduction of 2.6% in the amount each household will pay to Wembdon parish council next year.

I am very confident that all financial decisions taken by the parish council have been the correct ones.

I would like to express my personal thanks to Mike Solomon for his great help and support during that last eight and a half years that I have been your Clerk. In my Clerking career I have worked for eleven parish councils, either in a permanent role or in a temporary 'locum' position. I have worked with fifteen parish council chairman in this time. I can state without hesitation that Mike has been the most helpful, approachable, and proactive chairman that I have ever worked with. I am very sad to see him leave, but am looking forward to having an equally fruitful working relationship with his successor who will be appointed at the Annual Parish Council meeting on 15<sup>th</sup> May.

5. To thank Councillor M Solomon for his twenty year service as a Parish Councillor and as Parish Council Chairman for the last twelve years.

Mr Peter Reed, the Secretary of Wembdon Village Hall Trust gave the following speech:

Mike, you have left a huge legacy to the people of Wembdon.

Over your 20 years as a councillor, 12 of them as chairman, the council, with you heavy involvement and/or leadership has procured amongst many other things, the allotments, the acquisition of Parklands from Persimmon, the children's playground, the zebra crossing, reducing traffic speed, footpaths, lighting, CCTV, the Parish Paper and, of course the village hall and playing fields.

I first met Mike in 2007 when we both volunteered to join the steering group which arranged a postal survey of the village and subsequently produced the Wembdon Parish Plan. One of the main issues which that survey revealed was that the village wanted a village hall and playing fields.

We next worked together in 2010 when I was co-opted onto Wembdon Parish Council. Being a Wembdon councillor in those days wasn't much fun. We spent a large chunk of each meeting discussing dog poo and the principal aim of most of the councillors was never, ever to change anything.

Sadly I only lasted 6 months on the council but Mike stuck it out and became the main driver of what soon became the most dynamic and proactive parish council in Somerset.

Later that same year I got an invitation to have a coffee at Mike's house and there the Wembdon Recreational Development Group was born, with the intention to build a small village hall with a kitchen.

Our ambitions changed somewhat when, inevitably with a large input from Mike, we obtained a £900,000 grant from Viridor Credits. The group morphed into the Wembdon Village Hall and Playing Fields Trust, and we formed alliances with Wembdon Cricket Club and Wembdon Junior Football Club. It was the most challenging project imaginable! We had a lot of 'interesting' meetings with Joe Notaro negotiating his 'donation' of the land; some of the people and organisations that we had thought would be helpful caused difficulties and long delays. The cost of building materials soared and when I had to leave the Trust in September 2013 because of other commitments I believed that the project was going to die. Not so Mr Solomon! With an incredible display of dogged determination, not least when the contractor building the hall went bankrupt causing another huge hike in costs, he and the other trustees refused to give in and eventually, in July 2017 delivered the magnificent, £2.3 million facility that we have today. Mike remains a village hall trustee and recently excelled himself by negotiating the conversion of a large loan from the District Council to a grant. He is always willing to get his hands dirty and until very recently has been the voluntary maintenance man at the hall and he is still a regular participant in the village Give a Day work.

If you need to get something done you need a person with drive, limitless energy and a determined focus. It helps if that person has leadership and negotiating skills, Mike Solomon has all of these qualities in abundance. Mike, thank you on behalf of the people of Wembdon for everything that you have done for us. We owe you a great debt. The Parish Council will not be the same without you, but I am sure they will continue your great work. Have a long and happy retirement.

Councillor A Reed presented Councillor Solomon with a framed oil painting of Wembdon Village Hall.

The Parish Clerk said that it gave him great pleasure in awarding Councillor Solomon the Freedom of the Parish of Wembdon. This is the first time that the Parish Council has made this award, and it is richly deserved.

Refreshments were served to all in attendance following the Assembly, which closed at 8.30 pm.