

Chairman's Report May 2019

The Parish Council year May 2018 to April 2019 has once again been a hectic one, despite the relatively small number of planning applications and direct parishioner input. Repairing playground equipment, concerns over the offices at Stevens Walk, dealing with the new recreation project and Hountwell have all taken up time and considerable personal councillor effort. As a result the precept had to be increased slightly to cover the extra hours involved by our Parish Clerk, the new employment of a Parish handiman to carry out some repair and maintenance jobs, a cost provision for future parish election expenses and the new responsibilities placed upon us by the move to a new unitary body, such as catering for adverse winter conditions with the provision of salt and snow ploughs .

To cater for our highway responsibilities, the council has purchased 3 salt bins which have been placed in strategic locations around the village. These are for parishioners to access for local pavement and road use. Thankfully the sandbags have not been needed this year, but the sand store has required replenishing. Mr Morse continues to be our local flood warden receiving alerts and responsible for the sandbag store, and we extend our appreciation to him. One of the key, newly repaired fingerposts has been reinstalled at the crossroads next to the school and our thanks go to Cllr John Baker for so freely giving his time and skill to replace the fingers and lettering. On the grass triangle outside the church the ash tree (planted some years ago by the late Ellis Durrant) has been removed as it was interfering with power cables and the churchyard trees. This has been replaced by a mixture of more appropriate shrubs.

Prior to the important centenary WW1 commemorative celebrations, the parish council cleaned the war memorial in the churchyard. As this was refurbished and rededicated in 2011 it is in a very good state.

The children's play area has received weekly inspections courtesy of volunteer Mrs Caroline Durston along with its June annual equipment inspection. The boundary fences has been repaired. Both the Basket Swing and the Zip Wire failed during the year and have been repaired in house by councillors to required specifications. The parish field has been kept well mown under our contract to the County Council, and continues to be well used by both the school and parishioners. However, aware that we could do a lot more to utilize the full potential of both the Parish Room and the field, we embarked on the most important project the Council undertook during the year, which has been to find out, from parishioners, how best to use a refurbished Parish Room and how to upgrade recreational facilities.

The Parish Room is a potentially valuable but underused parish asset, largely because the structure is in a poor state, with little money having been spent on it since its erection in 1871 as the coal store for the parish poor. Given its strategic location on the recreation field it offered several possibilities and the field itself is a wonderful space within the heart of the village that could certainly offer more in terms of recreation linked to the adjacent potential multi-use games area (MUGA) identified in the Neighbourhood Plan. By mid-summer, parishioners had given us most of their thoughts, which included a running/cycling track on the field, a number of specific sports equipment and converting the Parish Room as a sports Pavilion with decent toilet facilities.

Our task was then to identify grant funding. Throughout the year we have been keeping our eye on and exploring external funding opportunities, particularly Lottery grants for both Hountwell and the recreation project. Hountwell proved impossible to find funding for, but for relatively urgent safety, underspent funds from the 2016-17 budget enabled us to cover both the installation of protective

fencing and an attempt to reinstate the well. Efforts to save and cap the well were unsuccessful as the chalk sides had crumbled over time. The well position is now marked by an outflow pipe, should it be needed in future.

Efforts to secure funding for recreation facilities have been more successful, but grant caps mean that the entire recreation project needs to be done in 2 phases: Phase 1 being to renovate the Parish Room into a sports pavilion and create a half kilometre running track around the field; Phase 2, to include sports equipment and development of the "MUGA" space in the adjacent field. Phase 2 is unfunded and will be considered after completion of Phase 1.

In August an EU grant opportunity arose through the LEADER Dorset programme with a time-limited deadline. Intense and rapid work by all councillors to create the necessary plans, obtaining planning permission and put out to sealed tender, allowed us to put together a successful application with a grant for 80% of the costs being awarded in November for Phase 1: the pavilion conversion and track. Sealed bids were opened at an Extraordinary Parish Meeting on the 10th September and contracts were awarded to the lowest bidder in late winter. Work started on the Pavilion in March 2019 with a projected completion date of early August. Work on the running track will take place during the summer of 2019.

With the new Neighbourhood Plan now in place, a number of good ideas have been raised by parishioners which fit in with the aims of the plan. These include strategically placed information boards and wooden fingerposts to indicate the principal features of the village. On the development side we anticipated at least one building project to come forward which would test the integrity of the plan. The first to come forward is the 3 open market/ 3 affordable homes project in the "Field north of Brookfield RES 3". Discussions prior to submission of a planning application in early 2019 tested the plan in unexpected ways; in particular clarity on the timing and build mechanism of the affordable home element and the fact that the residents of the newly built neighbouring properties adjacent to RES 3 were unaware of the existence of the plan.

Throughout the year, our County Councillor, Jill Haynes has kept us up to date with the evolving new unitary County matters and liaised valuably on our behalf with officers when needed. We are grateful to remain as part of the chalk valley ward (ex3 valley's ward) despite ward boundary changes. Our local community police officer, Alison Donnison has kept us abreast of police matters and alerted us to crimes within the locality; both attending Parish Council meetings when able. The Parish Clerk has been in regular contact with DCC Highways over repairs required to pothole and road issues within the parish

Finally, I would like to extend my real appreciation to my co-chairmen, Jane Collins and Mark Needham who have stepped into as required and to the extraordinary level of collaborative teamwork of all members of the parish council and the untold hours of voluntary work put in by them. Also to pay tribute to the skills of our Parish Clerk, Sarah Mitchell, who so competently copes with a job that is both complex and demanding.