

Report to the Annual Parish Meeting held on 21st May 2019 by the Chair of Fittleworth Parish Council

Introduction

This report covers the fourth and final year of the Parish Council which was elected in May 2015.

We started the year with a full complement of nine councillors, but there was one resignation during the year. Alison Welterveden, our vice-chair, left in January, having decided, quite understandably, that the community shop (and spending some time with her family) had a stronger claim on her time. It is hard to believe that Alison spent just 3 years on the Council; she was a major driving force in pushing forward the plans for the new shop and playground, but also played a full role in the Council's other activities.

Attendance at monthly Council meetings was as follows: Kerry Coughtrey, Tony Broughton and I were present at all 11 meetings, Mike Allin and David Brittain at 9, Robin Dunstan and Lee Scott at 8, Mick Foote at 7, and Alison Welterveden at 5. (Because of clashing dates, we had a single meeting to cover June and July, but an extra meeting, in February, to discuss and approve policies and procedures, brought the annual total back to 11). Our Clerk, Louise Collis, was present at all meetings.

At all meetings we had a good representative attendance and were fully quorate. Usually one or two members of the public attended.

A regular attendee at our monthly meetings has been Mike Stanbridge, chairman of the Sports and Social Club, who as a long-standing tenant, has been able to bring particularly useful input to our discussions. We are also grateful for the attendance of Janet Duncton, who until the May election was both our District and County Councillor. Janet has stood down from the District Council (our newly elected CDC councillor is Alan Sutton) but is to be congratulated on her election to be Chair of West Sussex County Council.

The elections for Parish Councils in West Sussex took place on 2nd May, which meant that councillors needed to put themselves forward for election for the next four years period. Mick Foote decided not to stand again, principally because of the enormous workload he has taken on looking after the shop (and post office!). We are very grateful for all he has done for the Council during his three and a half years with us. Robin Dunstan has also been a valuable voice at meetings for the same period, and has done much unsung work clearing litter from the village while our usual picker has been unable to do the work. Other activities are currently taking Robin's time, and he decided not to seek nomination at present. This meant that we had six existing councillors nominated for election. We were very pleased that at the last minute we were joined by Jane Claxton, who has a strong record of voluntary work in the village.

With only 7 nominees for the Council, the Returning Officer was able to announce on 3rd April that we had all been elected. We needed to co-opt two more people onto the Council within seven weeks of 7th May to bring the Council up to full strength (although Chichester have in the past been flexible about the timescale). We were very pleased that Ed Brookfield put his name forward, and at our first meeting on 20th May, he was co-opted on to the Council. We don't expect to have much difficulty filling the one vacancy remaining.

Finance

Our November meeting was devoted to deciding on our budget for the next financial year (2018/19). We decided on a 10% increase in our precept (from £19,000 to £20,900). A lower increase would have threatened our ability to maintain our reserves at the recommended minimum level while continuing to meet necessary expenditure. We were able to finalise and sign off the budget at the December meeting.

Under an agreement with the Countryside Stewardship Scheme relating to Hesworth Common (which started in 2013), we shall continue to receive £2400 a year for 10 years.

We have again been able to secure grants for specific activities during the year. These included grants and donations for the new playground and its equipment, and the later components of the Operation Watershed grant for the work on drains in School Lane. Full details in the Clerk's Financial Report.

Planning

Mike Allin has continued to lead the Planning Committee, supported by David Brittain, Tony Broughton and Lee Scott. They have reviewed every planning application concerned with development in the Parish. This usually entails visiting the property and giving our views to Chichester District Council via the Clerk. This process (depending on the complexity of the application) can take considerable time. The Parish Council has an advisory role – the adjudication is carried out by CDC on behalf of the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) – but they do take our views seriously.

This year the workload of the Planning Committee has again seen a sharp increase, as is shown in the table below:

	2018/19	2017/18	2016/17
New Applications	74	56	30
TCA (Tree in Conservation Area) Applications	17	11	10
Parish Council objections in Year	10	15	8
Applications refused	9	11	1
Applications Withdrawn	12	8	4
Appeals	2		
Enforcement Investigations	1		
Applications still in progress at 30/4/19	9		

Mike and his colleagues are to be congratulated on coping with this much higher level of activity.

Applications are now considered by scheduled Planning Committee meetings, which the public are welcome to attend.

Working Groups and Representation

There are a number of less formal groups working in specific areas. They do not have the power to take decisions; any proposals are taken to the full Council for ratification. These working parties offer the opportunity to spend more time on specific issues than would be possible in a full Council meeting. Active working groups have been:

- Hesworth Common – Under the chairmanship of Mike Allin, this group has continued to manage the 100 acres of the Common owned by the Council; it has organised several working days for volunteers (mostly from Worthing and via South Downs, with a small number from the village), and liaised with the SDNPA.
- Communications/Community/Youth – The communications working group (consisting of the Clerk, Margaret Welfare, and Kerry Coughtrey) has continued to supervise and update the village website and Facebook site which were set up in 2016/17. They are both widely used to publicise village activities, and Netwise, the website hosting and support provider, has been very responsive to requests for information and support.

- Traffic – The Traffic Working Party has been regenerated in the past year under the leadership of Kerry Coughtrey. In addition to councilors Lee Scott and Tony Broughton, it includes representatives from the Fittleworth and District Association and the Fittleworth Speedwatch group. Plans are being made to address the problems caused by heavy, fast moving traffic in the village. It is responsible for the Winter Maintenance Plan which follows the model recommended by WSCC; they deliver bags of salt to a contractor chosen by us, and the contractor distributes the bags around the village (on our instructions) when severe weather threatens. A mild winter meant that we did not need to invoke the plan.
- General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) – This is an EU regulation which came into effect on 25th May 2018 governing the use which organisations make of personal data about the individuals with whom they deal. The group currently consists of the Clerk and Kerry Coughtrey.

Our Council meeting on 20th May reviewed the responsibilities and composition of these working groups, and decided on a number of changes and consolidations which will be publicised shortly.

Parish councillors regularly attend a range of meetings organized by Chichester District Council, West Sussex County Council, and the South Downs National Park Authority. These meetings can be very useful – we learn about District- and County-wide initiatives, and have the opportunity to put forward the village’s viewpoint.

Administration

Louise, our Clerk, has pressed on in a determined fashion with putting our administrative procedures in order. We held an extra meeting in February specifically to review all our policies and procedures; this has put us a sound position for the coming year.

The establishment of public, minuted meetings of the Planning Committee is a reform which Louise encouraged; this has worked well, and given the public better visibility of the planning process.

Assets and maintenance

The Council’s Asset Register consists of a long list of items for which we are responsible, and for which maintenance is needed from time to time. Activities have included:

- Mowing of recreation ground - Grasstex, the contractor appointed after a tendering exercise at the start of 2012 to mow the 3.5 acres of grass, and carry out other regular work in the village, have continued to perform well. In January it was decided to extend their contract to cover 2019, but we will be undertaking a tendering exercise later in the year to decide on a contractor for the subsequent three years.
- Testing of electrical circuits and equipment in the Sports Pavillion – This was carried out in April.

Mike Allin, Mick Foote and other members have continued to carry out a good deal of minor maintenance work themselves; this has saved the Council a substantial amount of money. Robin Dunstan has undertaken substantial footpath clearance work during the year.

Regular Health and Safety inspections have been carried out by councillors on all the public areas for which the Council is responsible, particularly the playground and its equipment.

Events and activities

The work on drains in School Lane (funded by Operation Watershed grants) which was completed in April 2018 appears to have been effective, although the relatively dry winter did not provide a conclusive test.

The defibrillator installed outside the Village Hall in November 2013 has still to be used in an emergency, but is checked regularly, and batteries replaced when required.

Our regular litter collector employed by the Council has been unwell for much of the year, but Councillor Robin Dunstan stepped in to get the job done. Thanks are due to him, and to the other councillors who volunteered to make sure that all parts of the village were as clean as possible for the Garden Trail in early May.

In May 2017 we published a Strategic Plan for the village to guide the Council in allocating its resources and energies over the next five years. One of the principal components of the strategy - the Village Shop – has been accomplished, and we hope another (the Neighbourhood Plan – see below) will soon come to fruition. The Council will be revisiting the strategy in September, and ideas and suggestions from people in the village will be welcome. The current version of the Plan can be seen on the village website.

Neighbourhood Development Plan

Progress with the Neighbourhood Development Plan in 2018/19 has again been slow, but the end of the process is now in sight. In early 2018 there was a period of six weeks public consultation on the pre-submission version of the Plan, which resulted in the receipt of 13 representations on the Plan from individuals, and 9 from statutory consultees. We considered very carefully (in conjunction with South Downs) what we should change as a result of these, and by the late summer, we thought the amended version of the Plan was ready for submission. A new problem arose at this point, which became popularly known as the 'Sweetman judgement'. This was essentially a conflict between UK and EU regulations concerning the Habitat Regulations Assessment (an Appendix to the Plan). Many Neighbourhood Plans across the country were held up by the same issue. Eventually a solution was agreed, which involved some re-writing and agreeing changes with Natural England, and needed some changes to regulations which were implemented by the government on 28th December 2018. The Submission version of the Plan was eventually approved by the Parish Council at its January meeting, and submitted to SDNPA (together with other supporting documents) on 23rd January. The South Downs then ran a 6 week public consultation of their own, which ended in April. Following this, they appointed an Independent Examiner, who has already produced some Initial Comments on the Plan. These are encouraging – no major criticisms and a supportive tone. When the examination is complete, we shall discuss with South Downs and the Examiner what further changes to the Plan are needed. It is hoped that the Referendum will take place in October.

Village Shop

The shop and playground have now been operating for over 6 months, and the initiative is widely regarded as an outstanding success. Apart from showing that a local enterprise like this can be commercially viable, it has transformed that part of the village into a real social hub. It is heart warming to see villagers meeting and talking to each other much more than they did before. Fittleworth Community Shop Limited has for some time been quite independent of the Council (apart from the Council's role, through the Recreation Ground Charity, as landlord), but we are proud of the part we played in enabling the enterprise to get started.

Chris Welfare

Chair, Fittleworth Parish Council

21st May 2019