

Report to the Annual Parish Council Meeting held on 18th May 2020 by the Chair of Fittleworth Parish Council

Introduction

This report covers the first year of the Parish Council which was elected in May 2019.

After the election (at which the seven candidates were returned unopposed) we were left with two vacancies. Ed Brookfield put himself forward, and was co-opted on to the Council at the May meeting. Subsequently Robin Dunstan decided that he would like to re-join the Council (having been a member from November 2015), and he was co-opted at the June meeting. Robin is now Chair of the Sports and Social Club, which gives us a strong link to our principal tenant. Also at the June meeting, I was very pleased that Jane Claxton agreed to act as vice-chair and was unanimously elected to the post.

Attendance at monthly Council meetings was as follows: Jane Claxton and I were present at all 11 meetings, Tony Broughton, David Brittain and Kerry Coughtrey at 10, Mike Allin, Lee Scott and Ed Brookfield at 9, and Robin Dunstan at 8. Our Clerk, Louise Collis, was present at all meetings.

At all meetings we had a high level of attendance and were fully quorate. Usually one or two members of the public have attended, but this rose to eight at the December meeting, when the first public discussion of the pre-application for the proposed Limbourne Lane development took place.

We are also grateful for the frequent attendance of Janet Dunton, our West Sussex County Councillor, and Alan Sutton, who has been the Chichester District Councillor for Fittleworth Ward for the past year.

Finance

As usual, our November meeting was devoted to deciding on our budget for the next financial year (2020/21). We decided on a 20% increase in our precept (from £20,900 to £25,080). 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 November 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.

Although we have not secured any new grants for specific activities during the year, we expect to obtain an Operation Watershed grant shortly for the renewal of a culvert which goes under the road in Little Bognor, north of the hamlet. This culvert was unable to cope with the very heavy rainfall during the winter, which meant the road was badly flooded for several weeks. The grant is expected to amount to approximately £5,000.

Planning

In June Mike Allin stood down from the Chair of the Planning Committee; we are very grateful for his leadership of the Committee for many years. Thankfully, he remains a member of the committee which is now chaired by Lee Scott. Other members are David Brittain, Tony Broughton and Jane Claxton. This strong team has had much to consider over the year. As usual they have reviewed every planning application concerned with development in the Parish. This entails visiting the property and giving our views to Chichester District Council (CDC) 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 for most routine applications is carried out by CDC on behalf of the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) – but they do take our views seriously. The adjudication of major proposals is retained by SDNPA.

This year the volume of applications considered by the Committee has dropped slightly (see table below), but this has not led to a reduced workload, because a substantial number of these applications have been particularly complex and/or sensitive.

	2019/20	2018/19	2017/18	2016/17
New Applications	70	74	56	30
TCA (Tree in Conservation Area) Applications	12	17	11	10
Parish Council objections in Year	10	10	15	8
Applications refused	2	9	11	1
Applications Withdrawn	5	12	8	4
Appeals	4	2		
Enforcement Investigations	1	1		
Applications still in progress at 30/4/19	2	9		

Lee and his colleagues are to be congratulated on coping with this high level of activity.

For a second year, applications have been considered by scheduled (and subsequently minuted) Planning Committee meetings. The public are invited to attend these, and a number of applicants have done so.

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. Netwise, the website hosting and support provider, continues to be responsive to requests for information and support.
- Traffic – The Traffic Working Party, which is part of a wider grouping, containing representation from the Fittleworth and District Association and the Fittleworth Speedwatch group, has been regenerated in the past year, initially under the leadership of Kerry Coughtrey. It organized a village meeting on 16th July 2019, which was attended by approximately 35 villagers. After presentations, the meeting divided into a number of working groups, each of which considered a particular aspect of the problems affecting the village. A report of the meeting appeared in the August edition of the Village Magazine. In December, Kerry decided that pressure of other work meant that she needed to step down from the group; our representatives are now Lee Scott and Tony Broughton. Plans are being made to address the problems caused by heavy, fast moving traffic in the village. The Working Party is also 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. Another mild winter meant that we did not need to invoke the plan.

Our Council meeting on 18th May reviewed the responsibilities and composition of these working groups, and decided on a number of changes and consolidations which will be publicised in the minutes of the meeting.

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

We have reaped the benefit of our Clerk’s efforts to bring all our policies and procedures up to date. It is now a much more manageable task to review and approve and approve any changes to these documents at the correct times.

The operation of public, minuted meetings of the Planning Committee continues to work well, giving the public better visibility of the planning process.

Our Clerk continues to give the Council a high level of support; where possible she deals with routine correspondence herself without involving councillors unnecessarily. It is remarkable how much she manages to fit into the 12 hours per week for which she is paid.

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 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. It had been the intention to undertake a tendering exercise for this work in late 2019, but the pressure of other work made this difficult. Their contract was extended to cover 2020, but we hope to be in a position later in the year to invite tenders to carry out the work for the subsequent three years.
- Roof repairs to the Sports Pavillion – We have sought estimates to carry out work which we believe is needed to the roof of the Sports Pavillion.

Mike Allin 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 much 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 now seems to have been proved to be effective; School Lane did not flood during the heavy rainfall in February.

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. The supplier (Heartsafe) is no longer operating its monitoring service for the network and we are contacting the South East Coast Ambulance Service to see how we need to interface with them.

Considerable work has been done on trees this year. Mike Allin, who acts as Tree Warden for the parish, has led this, but other councillors have also been involved. Work has been done on trees on open spaces for which

the Council is responsible (principally the Recreation Ground, Hesworth Common and Birchwalks Wood), and trees on Council land which are next to roads.

There have been several instances of fly-tipping in different locations around the parish. CDC responds quickly to reports, and clears the rubbish away, but it is much better to capture information about offenders (registration numbers of vehicles, for example). Anyone offering to take away rubbish (for a fee) should be asked to show their permit.

The Sports and Social Club has been in a difficult financial position for the past year or two, and has been paying a reduced rent to its landlord, the Parish Council. We are working with the Club to draw up plans to revamp the facilities and provide a more comprehensive community resource. A questionnaire is to be issued to the village (online and on paper) to find out what residents would hope to see in new and improved Club facilities.

In May 2017 we published a Strategic Plan for the village to guide the Council in allocating its resources and energies over the following five years. One of the principal components of the strategy - the Village Shop – was achieved when it opened in October 2018; the Shop (now known as Fittleworth Stores) has been operating very successfully since then. A second component (the Neighbourhood Plan – see below) has now been completed. The Council is currently revising the Strategic Plan; the revised version will be displayed on the village website.

Neighbourhood Development Plan

At the start of this Council year, the Independent Examiner appointed by the SDNPA was evaluating our Neighbourhood Development Plan. His final report on the Plan was published on 3rd July 2019. It recommended that subject to a number of modifications which he had specified, the Plan should go forward to a Referendum of all eligible Fittleworth voters. He made some very positive comments about the Plan, and commended the Steering Group for preparing 'a clearly written and focused neighbourhood plan, which deals with the matters in a concise manner'. He congratulated 'Fittleworth Parish Council on grasping the opportunities presented by neighbourhood planning to allow the community to shape its planning policies'.

During the late summer the required changes were made to the Plan, and it was agreed with SDNPA and CDC that the date of the Referendum would be Thursday 7th November 2019. Voting, organized by CDC, took place in the Sports and Social Club from 7am to 10pm, with counting of the votes as soon as the poll closed, and an immediate declaration of the result, which was: **Yes 164 No 30** with one rejected paper. This represented a 25.6% turnout of voters, which sounds low, but is normal for local elections. Subsequently, the Plan was 'made', or formally adopted by SDNPA, and brought into the national planning framework, on 20th December 2019. The final version of the Plan, together with the full report by the Independent Examiner, can be seen on the Fittleworth village website.

Many thanks to all who contributed to this 5 year project. The Steering Group consisted of non-councillors Charles Clark and Adrian Webb, councillor until November 2017 Shelagh Morgan, and councillors Mike Allin and me. We owe the clear and effective design of the document to Eyelevel Design.

Coronavirus emergency

During the early part of 2020 the seriousness of this epidemic (subsequently reclassified as a pandemic) became apparent. The March meeting of the Parish Council was the last to be held physically; subsequent meetings used Microsoft Teams to enable members to participate using their own computers from home. The County and District Councillors, and even an interested villager, have also been able to join in the meetings in the same way. The same technique has been used for a variety of formal and informal meetings, so that Council business has been able to continue in a reasonably satisfactory manner. We did cancel the annual village meeting (usually held in the Village Hall) as we didn't feel that a virtual version would have provided an adequate alternative.

It was decided that we should establish a small working group for better coordination of village activities during the emergency. This has included representatives from Fittleworth Stores and the Parish Council together with the Rev'd David Crook. Initially it met (virtually) each week, but as the situation has become more settled, and the flow of urgent information has lessened, the frequency of meetings has been reduced. An important aspect of the meetings has been to monitor the ways in which help has been provided to those people in the village who have particular needs.

It should be noted that Fittleworth Stores has made an outstanding contribution to the wellbeing of the village during this period. They have adapted their services according to prevailing regulations and the resources available to them, but have continued to provide an excellent source of provisions delivered by friendly and helpful staff.

Information from the coordination group has been issued to the village via the Newsletter, a weekly email sent to any villager who provided their email address to the Clerk. An important function of this email has been to pass on information about the crisis which has come from CDC, WSCC and central government. We have also had significant guidance, particularly about the operation of the Parish Council itself, from Surrey & Sussex Association of Local Councils (SSALC). The Newsletter also contains local news, and is proving a partial substitute for the Village Magazine (which has not been produced since the April edition, and is unlikely to reappear until at least late summer) and had the advantage that urgent information could be circulated much more quickly than via the paper Magazine. A printed version of the Newsletter has been displayed on the windows of the Village Hall.

Much of the extra work in this area, particularly the production of the Newsletter, has been done by our Clerk, Louise. We are very grateful for her major contribution to helping the village through this emergency.

Chris Welfare

Chair, Fittleworth Parish Council

May 2020