

Cuckfield Parish Council

Chairman's Annual Report 2014/15

This is the final year of a four year term for the current Parish Council and a new Parish Council will be elected at the upcoming general election. I will come back to the new council at the end of my report, but my report for this year is focused on the completion of the projects we set out at the beginning of this term in 2011 and a summary of our committees during 2015.

The achievements were only made possible by the dedication of the Parish Councillors, some of whom left us over the term and others who joined mid-term. I would like to take this opportunity to formally thank all the Parish Councillors who have served during the past four years.

We also welcomed Annette Jones this year as Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer, replacing Nicky Sage who left to take up a new career after five years with the council. We wished her well in October. Jane Forester also joined as our new assistant in the office last March.

There are also a number of staff who work behind the scenes either as caretakers or grounds people to keep the Queen's Hall and Cemetery operating as people expect. I would also recognise Dick Taylor who retired as our grounds person this year after 13 years of service. Our Village Orderly, Paul Frost, will be retiring this month after four and a half years with us.

I am pleased to summarise the completion of the following projects.

Neighbourhood Plan - Now adopted and part of the MSDC Development Plan.

The Neighbourhood Plan was made part of the Mid Sussex Development Plan on 1st October 2014 and was the 25th plan nationally to complete the process and the first in Mid Sussex. This took four years of work which culminated in over 50 people working on the project and thousands of hours preparing evidence and policies. Importantly the Parish Council learnt a lot on consultation and how to communicate with all age groups in the Parish which will benefit future projects.

The Plan is now used on all planning applications and we have monitoring indicators to review decisions. We have a number of examples which demonstrate the impact of the plan and are being used on a daily basis to determine planning applications. A good example is the open space in Broad St, where an application for between 6 and 20 houses in a very sensitive part of the village was determined by the policies in the Neighbourhood Plan and delegated powers by the planning officer. It was subsequently refused based on the policies in the Neighbourhood Plan.

The role of Permitted Development has caused a few surprises especially with regards to change of use for business purpose, with The Ship conversion to a convenience store being an example.

The draft District Plan and associated housing allocations are causing concern, as the evidence from our Neighbourhood Plan is currently not being taken into account and this is something we need to address.

Youth Club Building - Safeguard and Acquisition.

I am pleased to announce that we completed the purchase of the Youth Club building in London Lane, Cuckfield and we now own the building and freehold for the site. The completion marks twelve months of negotiation with West Sussex County Council who had put the building up "For Sale" in 2014.

The Parish Council took the decision to safeguard the building when it heard of the sale, as the building provides a unique location close to the Medical Practice and Holy Trinity Primary School. The building has been the home for many years to groups such as Cuckfield Pre School Playgroup, Orchard House Youth Club, Kumon Learning Centre and a local karate club. These groups would have been threatened with closure due to lack of local space if the building had been sold to a commercial party.

The building is identified in the Cuckfield Neighbourhood Plan as an essential community building and one which should be protected. Policy CNP 20 seeks to safeguard the building with 85% of the community being in favour of this specific policy during the consultations.

The Parish Council will run and operate the building "as is" in the short and medium term and will identify value for money maintenance projects. We will be using our experience of running the Queen's Hall and Churchyard Cemetery and have set up a new Community Building Committee to ensure the building is run with the required financial and regulatory responsibility. The new committee has met with the current users to ensure a smooth transition and looks forward to working with them.

Long term the Parish Council's vision is to seek funding and grants to allow a new purpose built facility to be built. This will be a significant undertaking and will require the Cuckfield Community spirit to achieve this. This will form an exciting project for the next Parish Council.

An opening ceremony is being planned for the spring with a new name being sought to mark the ownership by the Parish Council. A competition is being planned for the community to nominate a suitable name. Importantly the Parish Council plans to increase the utilisation for use by other groups and therefore ensure viability.

Highways' Safety Improvements

Highways is always a source of public concern and generates the majority of comments to the Parish Council and one we take very seriously. The majority of the issues are the responsibility of West Sussex Highways. We have seen an increase in traffic especially HGV, due to the number of development projects outside of the Parish but generating through traffic. We have also seen a rise in parking on pavements to the point of obstructing pedestrians. The current legal position on this is tenuous and we continue to ask people to be considerate on this matter.

Whitemans Green has seen new marking and speed reduction measures in place. We also worked with Highways to quickly address the flooding on the roundabout which was causing pedestrian safety issues.

The two crossing points in Ardingly Road, one near to Bylanes Close and the other at Longacre Crescent are being replaced by zebra crossings. The scheme has gone through a lengthy process from design stage through to approval from West Sussex County Council. Unfortunately, there have been a number of setbacks along the way that the Parish Council have had to deal with, the latest being an objection to the scheme during the public consultation period. The issue raised has now been resolved and on 26 November we received the final Highways sign off. This now means the scheme can go ahead and a date for highway contractors to implement the work is during May 2015.

Street Lights – Replacement Programme

All street lighting and illuminated road signs within Cuckfield are currently being replaced as part of a West Sussex County project. This is a government funded project to ensure all lighting columns conform to current safety and energy efficiency standards. I am pleased to report it is nearing completion but this required a significant amount of unexpected work by the Parish Council.

We took the decision that this was a once in 30 years project and wanted to make sure to maintain the heritage of the village and bring uniformity back to some of the light fittings which had previously been replaced on a piecemeal basis. Therefore the Parish Council is funding, via S106 funds, some of the columns so that all Conservation Areas will have Heritage style columns and the main through routes (London Road, London Lane, Ardingly Road and South Street south of the Conservation Area) will have a combination of heritage columns and 'swan neck' brackets. All side roads will have standard columns with a new WSCC initiative operating time and will switch off between approximately midnight and 5am to reduce energy consumption.

Committee Update:-

Planning

We continue to see an ever increasing number of applications for conversions and extensions which are generally of good quality, design and construction.

We also saw the completion of Mantell Park (Buttinghill Drive) which provides 42 new homes and Bevan Bank with 6 new homes. Building on Ardingly Road is now starting and will deliver 14 new homes and a Public Open Space and the new road will be known as Horsefield Green.

Mantell Park will also deliver a new Public Open Space but I have to report we have significant concerns over the drainage scheme and the slippage which has occurred during and after construction. This has led to a significant reduction in the drainage scheme which may have consequences downstream, but locally means a sizable amount of open space is potentially unsafe. We are working with MSDC and Taylor Wimpey to ensure this is resolved so we can take on the land as per the legal agreement.

Yew Tree Court redevelopment will start shortly. Whilst a long term benefit to the provision of affordable homes in the centre of the village, it will mean a period of disruption while the old building is demolished and the new one constructed. The access and location near to the school are factors which the Parish Council has fed back to Planning Officers and the developer. We will monitor but will need some patience on all sides for this programme of work.

A few Disappointments:-

I would identify some disappointments for the year as well. The Parish had worked hard to try and safeguard the Open Space at the end of Courtmead Road, but was unfortunately unsuccessful. Full planning permission has now been granted and we expect a substantial single dwelling to be built.

The Inspector's decision allowing the Penland Farm appeal is a major decision for both Haywards Heath and Cuckfield. It will have significant impact on the Infrastructure of Cuckfield and impose on the Strategic Gap between Cuckfield and Haywards Heath.

Our village centres continue to be vibrant and the heart for Cuckfield and Whitemans Green. The sale and conversion of the Ship Public House to a convenience store caused a lot of frustration and concern around the whole village. The ability to make this change in a Conservation Area with minimal planning consent was a shock to everyone and in fact highlighted a national trend and weakness in policy on Permitted Development.

Unfortunately despite enormous effort from the Parish Council and led by our community groups, there was very little that could be done to stop the conversion without it being fully considered in terms of planning. The Parish Council is now hoping to work with the Co-operative Group to ensure the current Co-op in the High Street is retained (as it was planned for closure) and we continue to monitor this.

Subsequently there has been significant attention to this matter and looking at ways to make sure we retain our pubs as community assets. We are investigating what is needed for Assets of Community Value (ACV) applications to be made on our remaining public houses.

Lastly we would ask all traders to take into the account the Conservation Area appraisal and comply with it to ensure we retain a vibrant village centre which retains its character and attracts visitors and at the same time provides local services.

Environment

The Environment Committee has focused on ensuring the churchyard and cemetery is well maintained and provides a beautiful and tranquil environment with stunning views to the South Downs. Our regular grounds person, Dick Taylor, retired last year and we have put in place a regular maintenance contract with a local business to work alongside Brian Smith, our part-time grounds person.

We also ran our biggest and most successful Christmas Street Festival this year, with lots of festive activities and cold crisp weather attracting lots of people and making a good start to the festive season.

The Observer Field (Newbury Lane) continues to be a long term project to develop and maintain a natural zone for wildlife and ecology. The introduction of bees has been an important development for this year. We have also supported the volunteers with the renovation of the Royal Observer Corp Nuclear Bunker, as part of Cuckfield history, which has attracted many visitors at weekends and is located in the Observer Field.

Queen's Hall

The Queen's Hall continues to be a key asset to the village and one which takes a lot of time and effort to maintain and ensure we deliver a good experience for our regular hirers and community groups. We have seen a good use as a wedding venue and continue to attract very positive feedback. We have also worked hard to minimize any impact on our neighbours at the end of the events which are strictly managed and monitored.

Communities Building Committee

This is a new committee to manage the Youth Club building as per my earlier point on this. I am pleased to report that Jane Revell and Mary Crouch agreed to join this committee and provide vital knowledge and insight of the running of the building given their experience working with the playgroup. I would also thank our new councillor, June Seale, who joined the Parish Council and who is now involved with the moving forward of the Youth Club.

Finance and General Purpose

I am pleased to report the Parish Council still holds sound reserves and continues to operate within the financial power vested to us. We have increased the precept this year by 3% which equates to £88.36 per year for a Band D household.

New Council from May 2015

A new Parish Council will be elected to coincide with the general election. I would encourage all members of the community who are eligible to vote in Cuckfield to consider this rewarding and challenging contribution to the community to think about becoming a Parish Councillor. I have personally learnt an enormous amount about Cuckfield and the community spirit which makes this village the special place it is.

If you would like to understand more about being a Parish Councillor then please get in touch with Mid Sussex District Council. Details are available from the Parish office.

Thank you

Nigel Page

Chairman

5th March 2015.