

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT FOR THE ANNUAL PARISH MEETING

16th March 2015

INTRODUCTION

This is my second Chairman's report for the Annual Meeting. Yet again it has been a very eventful 12 months both for the Council and for me.

Our new clerk, Teresa Strange has instigated a complete review of the office, and looked analytically at our tried and trusted ways of doing things. As a result we are a more efficient and streamlined organisation now, much more work is done on line (though we are still a long long way from being a paperless office!) and our revised meeting pattern should yield more but shorter meetings in which fatigue is not a factor in decision making! Teresa's innovation of an emailed weekly summary has already helped to keep meetings more focussed on the matters in hand, and we now have a Facebook page which will help us reach a younger demographic in the Parish. We made a very important appointment in May when Lucy Key joined us as our Finance Assistant. She is very well qualified and has been able to lift a heavy load from Teresa's shoulders. She has the knack of making complex issues seem almost straightforward!

COMINGS AND GOINGS

At Christmas we bade farewell to Margaret Mylchreest after 13 years of service to the Council. She was frequently the first port of call in the office, always welcoming and efficient, and totally supportive of the Council. We miss her.

Cllr. Trudy Fennell resigned just before last year's Annual meeting, and quite soon afterwards, Cllr Adam Nardell resigned too, as his work load made it difficult for him to play a full part in the affairs of the council. His detailed planning knowledge has been missed, and we thank him for his service.

We have been lucky to recruit two excellent replacement councillors. Jan Chivers is a very active person, and her detailed local knowledge and experience of social housing issues has been invaluable. Ian Tait, a long term Whitley resident, has also been very active in local affairs, particularly with youth work and the local church.

PRECEPT

The Precept set for 2015/2016 is £166,423.59, an increase which amounts to less than £1 per month on an average household. This increase was largely accounted for by the need to resurface the Shaw Play Area and refurbish the equipment

PLANNING

Reviewing and commenting on plans submitted to Wiltshire Council are an important part of MWPC's responsibilities, one we take very seriously. This year we received 93 planning applications, including 6 different large developments.

Without doubt the most exciting for the Council were those dealing with the building of the new pavilion on the Bowerhill Sports Field, which is even now being built. We have enjoyed a good and productive relationship with Herman Miller and particularly their contractors WINVIC during this process, and are looking forward to the handing over of the building in April.

This past year has seen a surge in large scale housing projects. We have considered proposed large developments on Pathfinder Way, East of Melksham and in Semington Road. We were particularly concerned about the plans for Pathfinder Way as it would have led to the coalescence of Bowerhill and Melksham, and we considered the plans in Christie Miller before a very good turnout of local residents.

Wiltshire Council was minded to refuse this application and it has subsequently been withdrawn. The other applications either await decision or are likely to be resubmitted when the Wiltshire Council have completed their DPD, Development Plan Document, on sites around the town.

This year saw the emergence of a predatory developer who boasted of their ability to get virtually any development through however unpopular. They have not targeted land in the parish so far, but their Shurnhold plans will affect our parishioners.

NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING

Melksham Without Parish Council is joining with Melksham Town Council to produce a Neighbourhood Plan for the whole of the Melksham area. Neighbourhood Plans enable local councils to influence future growth in their area, including issues such as housing and industrial development, transport provision, and environmental and recreational concerns. Wiltshire Council has now published their Core Strategy document and work is ongoing on the DPD covering land use in the County. The Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group have been meeting regularly, and their launch event takes place later this month over two days. As Chair of the Group I have been rather frustrated by the slow progress we have made, although everyone now seems to be working together to produce what should be a very important document for the future of the area.

COMMUNICATION

One of the fundamentals of writing a Neighbourhood Plan is to ensure that every one has the chance to contribute. The launch will help this goal and we have already carried out an initial on-line survey. This communication applies all across the business of the Council, and to this end we now have our own Facebook page, and have used social media very effectively in our engagement with Shaw and Whitley residents over the refurbishment of the play area and over concerns with flooding. It has become very clear that notice boards are not as effective a way of reaching parishioners as social media, especially for younger people.

RECREATION

We have been delighted to be able to improve our recreation facilities significantly this year.

The Hornchurch road MUGA was completed in September 2014 and immediately became a very popular facility for young people in the area. The planning process had been rather drawn out, but support from the vast majority of local people had supported the development.

The Shaw Play Area playground had become in need of substantial renovation and a working group with two co-opted local parents met in the autumn to plan the works needed. By February we had installed new safety surfaces, refurbished the equipment and plans were well underway to purchase another piece of equipment for younger children. These plans were informed by extensive surveys carried out by local people, who also planned the siting of new seats and picnic benches.

Our next task will be to repair the edging to the safety surfaces in Beanacre play Area.

FLOODING

Once again the Parish has been badly affected by flooding, especially by the freak event in September. At a very well attended meeting at Shaw School residents were able to talk to representatives from Wiltshire Council, and get some answers. We convened a later meeting at which we recruited flood wardens and planned for the next flood. Sand bags are now stored in the parish, and flood warden training has taken place. Meanwhile a survey of the area has been undertaken and some ditch clearing has begun.

COMMUNITY GROUPS

There are currently two active residents groups in the parish, BRAG and BASRAG. However we now have three. As a result of widespread community involvement in flooding issues and in the refurbishment of Shaw Play Area quite a large group of enthusiastic volunteers emerged, and in February two meetings under the aegis of the Council led to the formation of the Shaw and Whitley Action Group (SWAG). We look forward to working closely with this group in the coming years

THE FUTURE

The New Forest & Sandridge School

Construction of the new Forest & Sandridge School is well underway and will include meeting rooms and sports facilities which will be available to the community. The new East of Melksham District Centre should be open January 2016.

The Wilts and Berks Canal

The year has seen some very ambitious plans launched by the Wilts and Berks Trust and their commercial partners. The plans involve very significant house building in the countryside which we are told are needed to fund the canal cut. It will be interesting to see how these plans tie in with the County's review of building land supply and needs of the town. Some aspects of the plan are quite exciting, particularly the provision of a wet land near the river, but the final decision will need to be judged on the totality of the scheme.

Bowerhill Sports Pavilion

As I speak the pavilion is rising from the ground and just a few days after completion the old pavilion will be demolished and Portal road finally extended to Bowerhill. The new pavilion includes changing rooms for four teams plus officials, and also a club room which we hope will be a base for a revived youth club for the area.

The future of Melksham Without

As a result of the governance review undertaken by Wiltshire Council, two alternatives are being put forward for the future of local government in the town. The first sees the incorporation of the new East of Melksham developments within the town boundaries, whereas the second proposal sees the dissolution of both Melksham Town and Melksham Without and the creation of one overall Melksham district Council.

My view, one shared by the large majority of our council, is that the interests of the separate villages of Shaw, Whitley, Beanacre, Berryfield and Bowerhill are best served by the continuing existence of our council. The interests of Town and villages obviously meet in many ways, but all the villages have a distinct character which we have served to maintain since 1894. We believe that our non political approach in which we try to involve our parishioners in all decisions offers the best model for the future.

A PERSONAL NOTE

Finally I'd like to thank the hard working staff who always deliver a top class service whatever the workload or the occasional provocation. Teresa has settled very quickly in to her role as Clerk, and her changes have definitely led to a more efficient council, though we are all concerned that Crown Chambers has become her second home!

Lucy has been a friendly but steely guardian of the finances, and somehow seems to enjoy burying herself in a spreadsheet.

Jo is a very cheery but efficient presence, always ready with a joke and a cup of tea!

Terry continues to excel in his role as parish caretaker, and just as importantly as the public face of MWPC.

They all support us wholeheartedly and are the very heart of MWPC