

Minutes of STANFORD IN THE VALE ANNUAL PARISH MEETING
held remotely on Wednesday 5th May, 2021.

Present: Cllr.Lewis (Chair), 9 members of the public

01/apm/21 To receive apologies and reason (If offered)
District Councillor N.Boyd (Election duties)

02/apm/21 Welcome to the meeting by Chairman of Parish Council

03/apm/21 To receive the Chairman's annual report

So this is a summary, really, of the events of the past 12 months. This is by no means going to cover every single area that the Parish Council has touched, but calls out the highlights. If you should want more detail on any item, they're obviously recorded in the Minutes or we can hopefully cover those during questions at the end.

Following a change in legislation last year in light of the pandemic, the Annual Parish Meeting was postponed, albeit effectively cancelled. The pandemic has had a huge impact on not only the community but also our work over the course of the year, so the subsequent 12 months have been some of the most challenging that I can recall. We've had the closure of playgrounds at almost a moment's notice. We've seen many local businesses and services having to either change the way they operate or indeed not operate at all. The likes of the village hall and preschool will have suffered as you will be well aware. We are very cognizant of the large amount of effort that went in from a huge number of volunteers around the village to help those within the community who were self isolating, helping with the likes of shopping and medicines. Now whilst that wasn't primarily delivered through the Parish Council due to the scale of it, it was coordinated by Councillors Warren and Williams-Cuss who were able to make sure that we had members of the public allocated to different areas of the village and to help ensure that that was proceeding in a organized manner and that there was someone that could be called upon for any particular area as the need arose.

We have also been subject to, throughout that period, rafts of wide ranging and lengthy guidelines from central government. Many of those were issued with little notice and often with contradictory advice, which was not terribly helpful! I don't think I've read so many reams of paper at such short notice in my entire existence. I'm certain that I don't want to do so again, but it is testament to the degree of teamwork that ensured that each and every one of those changes were implemented in full accordance with the guidelines. I can't say that each and every one was perfect, closing parks overnight where you don't have gated entries with security systems that are designed to keep members of the public out because it is indeed a public facility is a challenge. It was really down to the efforts of not only our key contractors, Darren Rolls in particular, but also members who were really keen in terms of making sure that the right levels of notices and posters etc were posted. It was an ongoing battle. We spent the best part of the time that it was closed constantly replacing the notices because there were a good proportion of people who thought that they could just remove them and carry on as normal. Fortunately, the vast majority of residents didn't, and it was the vast majority who accepted those rules and they actually made it possible to keep things as they should be, and indeed kept the community as safe as possible. Our special thanks go to Steve Willis a local businessman, who was instrumental in loaning us a substantial quantity of Heras fencing which was required at various stages to fence off sections of the football field at different times to meet the varying elements of the guidelines and indeed has continued to support us with that with challenges we've had elsewhere, which will come onto in a little while. It's probably worth also mentioning that we worked with a number of those local organizations to make sure that they had access to the funding that was available from central government - I'm aware of various local businesses that we spoke with, but certainly the likes of the Village Hall, Preschool and football club all had access to government grant

funding to actually help them get through that 12 month period. I'm not going to say that it solves every hole in their books, but it certainly is a contribution that helps make that an easier path to take. I know in particular the Preschool had something of a struggle because of some delicacies around exactly how they were registered for business rates when it first kicked off, but that was all worked through and resolved.

The remainder of my report is what I might term business as usual, although in the context that business, was really not anything we've seen in this scale or in this way before. So in April 2020 we welcomed Nikki Middleton as a new member of staff, that was following the retirement after many years of service of Chris Stallard as our street cleanser. Thanks go to both. It is a service that we have maintained for a long, long time. I suspect it largely goes unnoticed, but you find that if we don't provide that litter picking service, very rapidly these little hot spots develop in areas - I'm not going to cite any particular areas - but where people gather can easily become the sort of concentration point. So a really important piece of work and Nikki's been doing a fabulous job since joining us.

Following that in May 2020, Councillor Warren stepped down from being vice chair after several years of helping to keep council business in good order. I know I certainly welcomed her invaluable dedication and efforts throughout her tenure. But Councillor Middleton has stepped into those shoes has been equally invaluable throughout these past 12 months, in terms of making sure that the very many and varied activities that we undertake are on track and being progressed. That probably takes us to the biggest of those activities, which has been the ongoing creation of the Queen Elizabeth Second Recreation Field, which Council is trying to establish at the top of Cottage Road. The Environmental Committee, again led by Councillor Middleton, have been working through a planning application to get the site levelled that has unveiled a range of different requirements. Whilst we took pre-application advice and we thought we had pretty good idea in terms of what those requirements are going to be, a substantial amount of time and effort has been expended in terms of making sure that those requirements from planning are met ahead of submitting a formal planning application. The formal planning application has then been submitted. Unfortunately, the consequence of that is that we now getting more feedback and more demand from elsewhere within the planning system, so that's what we're currently working our way through there, but a really substantial amount of effort went into getting us this far forward. There is some funding available to us from S106 monies, that we're also looking to secure that because of the deadlines on those are potentially passed, albeit for reasons beyond our control, but not being able to hit them. So there is an ongoing discussion around extending those deadlines. There's also a peculiarity around exactly how the dates were selected, so hopefully that will be resolved in due course.

Last year, pretty much as the pandemic hit. We purchased a number of fruit trees with the aim of establishing a community orchard alongside the community woodland. Because of restrictions around social distancing it wasn't actually possible to get those planted, so they've been containerized for the best part of a year. But nevertheless, in the early part of this year, those have now been planted up, and hopefully they will actually start to really take root and bedding in there. It will be the start of several years' worth of effort to establish that orchard, but nevertheless that creates another community asset that will be welcomed and enjoyed by the community as a whole.

We have seen a number of issues with the skate park in these past 12 months. All play equipment is inspected annually and as part of that process the inspection gives us some estimated lifespans. Unfortunately, the skate park has worn more quickly than was envisaged and that's led to a safety defect which has meant we had to fence off one of the pieces of equipment, and indeed there's a challenge around repairing it because the method of construction - those works and investigations are ongoing. But certainly something that Council is mindful of at the moment. We were able to deliver some improvements to the bus stop at Shellingford crossroads which, whilst outside of the village, is definitely inside the parish. There were some challenges with the bus service in that vicinity that we've been working our way through.

We've been doing a lot with countryside access issues this past 12 months, with everyone being at home, there's been a lot more use of footpaths and bridleways across the parish as a whole that's brought with it some challenges around upkeep of bridges, stiles and the like. We've been working with both County Council and land owners where appropriate to make sure those are repaired or replaced as appropriate. It takes longer than we would like but nevertheless we do work our way through them and we do ensure that those requests are followed up on. I think we're in a much better position now than we probably were, at the end of last summer. And we've also had ongoing work with a local gardener who's been tending the flower boxes for us at the top of both Cottage Rd in the High Street, which have been producing a nice display throughout the period that everyone's been, can I say "stuck" in the village, but hopefully enjoying life in the village. We will continue to progress that over the course of the next 12 months as well.

We were also battling with Thames Water over their ridiculously long running road works in Bow Road. And whilst it's not exactly a sign of success, we are pleased at least that the hole is finally filled and the traffic lights have been removed.

Finally, slightly outside of the Parish Council but never less working alongside, the Neighbourhood Plan (which has been progressing now for several years) have submitted and formally created a strategic environmental assessment, which is one of the sort of key elements required prior to actually being able to bring a plan into existence. Unfortunately, these things, whilst they are designed to be led by communities, are constructed around a raft of legislation which makes the creation more complex than might be first envisaged. So it's again the result of lots of hours of work and lots of input from third parties to ensure that those are likely to be compliant. And indeed, when they were sent out to consultation, there were very few feedback points, which is testament amount of effort that went into creating that.

Finance

You'll see on the screen a summary of the (draft) finance reports for the year ending 31 March, 2021.

Key points to note:

- Income is similar to the previous year, with some minor adjustments to be dealt with as part of the year end process
- Expenditure – you'll note that there are reductions across most budget areas compared to the previous financial year, some caused by one-off items such as previous year's election costs, but the majority just down to the operational changes that the pandemic has brought.
- The most significant change is to Legal & Professional Fees which is almost £16,000 more than in the previous year. The vast majority of this is attributable to the commercial appraisals and landscaping assessments that were required to support the planning application for the QEII Recreation Field.
- Overall, this gives us a deficit in the region of (£5,000) for the year. Considering that we incurred £16k of unusual expenditure, which we were expecting to fund from reserves, this is actually a very good position to be in.

04/apm/21 Questions/comments from parishioners

There were no questions, but members of the public thanked Councillors for their efforts and hard work, especially during the past 12 months.