

Stratton Parish Council – Chair’s Report 2023/24

As my first year as the Chair, and (somewhat alarmingly) my fourth as a Councillor comes to an end, I find myself in a reflective mood.

Our community has a lot to be grateful for. We live in a beautiful part of the country, our community is strong, and, whilst rural life has its own set of challenges, we are insulated from some of those challenges that prevail in a more urban environment.

I am personally grateful for the support of my fellow Parish Councillors – you all contribute more than maybe you think, our Dorset Councillor and the wider community. Especially those who turn out to our meetings where it has been encouraging to see more people get involved.

Thank you all – it would be a rather thankless task without you.

People

We started the year with four councillors and no Parish Clerk. We ended the year with five councillors and no Clerk.

Councillors Beth Cooke & Brad Pimm joined us as co-opted councillors in January and were welcome additions to the team.

Councillor Cheryl Hobbs resigned from the council in April. We are all grateful for the years of service that Cheryl has provided to the Council.

Wayne Lewin joined us in July on an interim basis as Parish Clerk. We were able to benefit from Wayne’s experience but unfortunately he felt unable to continue past January. That this is the third Clerk to have come & gone in as many years is something that the Council should reflect on.

Business

The Council’s financial position remains strong with a total of £53,854.26 held at 31 March 2024, compared with £56,553.65 at the end of 2023. Of which the Village Green fund currently stands at £37,716.72 vs. £39,049.13.

The previously adopted financial strategy of retaining the capital in the Village Green fund and investing in short term bonds has generated revenue (interest) of £1,551.11 which in turn contributes to a relatively low precept increase despite rising costs and an asset base that requires more maintenance.

2023/24’s precept was £12,200. A precept of £12,600 has been agreed for 2024/25.

A reserve has been created with a view to the medium term requirement to replace the fort/slide in the children’s play area on the green.

The Council's banking activity has largely migrated to on-line improving efficiency and reducing reliance on cheques.

Through the Section 137 grant scheme, the Council was able to provide a modest financial grant to eight groups which support our local community.

Achievements & Projects

At long last, the Council has taken ownership of the red BT Phone box on Dorchester Road, effectively saving it from removal after efforts to have it listed failed. We will be canvassing residents for ideas for its future use and for volunteers to help maintain it.

The fencing around the play area on the Village Green was replaced in March 2024.

The Council ran a competition for the 'best house' and awarded a small prize to the householders that were judged to have the best floral display over the weekend of the Village Fair.

The trees planted to mark the late Queen's Jubilee have largely survived, with many having been adopted by villagers. Our thanks to Lee Cook (Wrackelford Farms) for providing the watering facility and Alan Goldstone (AG Tree Services) for the bark mulch.

An alternative contractor was utilised to clear the drainage ditch (stream) at the bottom of the playing field to a good standard.

Replacement goal posts have been acquired for the playing field as the old ones are nearing the end of their life. They will be installed as soon as weather, people & time coincide.

As in previous years the Council provided a commemorative wreath at the war memorial on Remembrance Day.

Challenges

Despite the efforts of both the Parish Council and our Ward Councillor (David Taylor) we have still not received a meaningful update from Dorset Highways regarding the A37 – flooding, ice build-up and pedestrian safety remain a serious concern. There were two further accidents in January and March – fortunately without serious injury to either occupants or pedestrians. How long that luck will last is a matter of guesswork.

Being without a Parish Clerk has made the job of councillors more challenging effectively picking up the activity associated with a paid role to keep the council running. Systems & technology (such as it is) also do not help the smooth running of the council.

Future

The election results are in and it is good to see that we have four councillors appointed which means the council is still quorate. That does leave a further three positions vacant.

After probably more years than he is willing to commit to public record, Cllr Andy Aylott decided not to stand as Councillor again at the election. As a community we are grateful to Andy for all his years of service, as a council we are grateful – without Andy there probably wouldn't be a council and I am personally grateful for Andy's support, guidance & at times challenge. I'd hope we agreed on more than we disagreed on though. We all wish you well.

Again, my thanks to everyone who has played a part in the small differences we were able to make as a Council.

I wish the new council well and would advise that securing the services of a clerk will be crucial.

Matt Garner
Chair – Stratton Parish Council
May 2024