

CHAIRMAN'S ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2020/2021

Introduction

This year has proved to be taxing, challenging and quite unprecedented. The ravaging effects of the Covid-19 pandemic have devastated many lives and livelihoods and West Horsley has experienced its share of this. Our heartfelt condolences go out to all who those have been badly affected by this terrible virus; our appreciation to the many volunteers and frontline staff who have worked tirelessly to support those who had to shield or were in need of care.

It has brought significant change to the way the Parish Council has operated over the past twelve months. It required an Act of Parliament to do so; the Covid-19 Emergency Powers Act 2020 enabled Parish Councils to meet virtually via videoconferencing so that it could continue to make decisions lawfully and for the public to attend. Interestingly, for each of the Council meetings residents have continued to attend in various numbers and the business transacted in an effective and efficient way. This has been greatly appreciated.

I was privileged to have been elected Chairman in May replacing Charles Hope who resigned immediately thereafter. I pay tribute to him for the steadfast commitment he gave to the Council over 20 years the last thirteen as Chairman.

Councillors

I am delighted to report that we are now at full strength having co-opted to the vacancies we have carried over several months. We welcomed Guy Murray in November 2020 and Angus Graham in March this year. Our Clerk, Sam Pinder, left the Council after seven years at the end of December and we welcomed our Locum Clerk, Joanna Cadman, in January. We are advertising for both a Clerk and Deputy at the time of writing.

The Council continues to operate with a number of focused task groups each lead by a Councillor supported by three to four others. This has enabled us to tackle a number of important issues in addition to the main statutory requirements of examining planning applications. Roads and road safety, improving the appearance of the Village, maintaining its assets, and expanding our communication with residents are just some of the important activities that absorbed us this year.

Finances

Our precept saw a marginal increase from 2019/2020 and with the grant from Guildford Borough Council stood at £83,172. We have invested in improving the Village appearance, continued with improvements to the Village Hall, gave grants totalling £5,000 to local groups and organisations, increased our spend on communications to bring news and information to residents through a more regular newsletter and updated website and contracted with a Planning Consultant to help us examine substantial & major planning applications. Like many small organisations a significant cost is staffing and training and the Council is no different in this respect.

Early in 2020, we were the beneficiaries of a significant bequest and spent several weeks considering the best use of this money in line with the benefactor's wishes. These were for investment in the Village appearance with particular regard to the planting of trees to replace those lost over recent years. In the

late Autumn / early Spring planting has taken place at Grace & Flavour, semi-mature trees have been planted on the Village Green and in St Mary's Churchyard and more will be installed along some roadsides throughout West Horsley identified by the Horsley Countryside Preservation Society on grass spaces / verges owned by Surrey County Council. In addition, the Council is to embark on a major restoration project in the Village Orchard and although the cost of this will be met by the Council, the purchase and planting of the trees and fruit bushes will come from the bequest. We very much hope residents will enjoy all the planting which will help to preserve the rural nature of West Horsley and also contribute to our climate change initiatives.

We are appreciative of a small grant from Surrey County Council which has enabled us to purchase a new picnic table for the Village Orchard.

Planning

To say that our Village feels under siege by developers is an understatement. Many residents have expressed their deep concern to us over recent months following the adoption of Guildford Borough Council's Local Plan. Opportunities are being taken for windfall & back garden development and infill alongside major development on the identified strategic sites. The Council, as a statutory consultee, is using all its endeavours with the advice and support of a Specialist Planning Consultant to constructively comment and, where appropriate object, to the plans. We are ever mindful of the adverse impact on our limited infrastructure, the propensity to flooding, the necessity to preserve the wildlife we enjoy and to maintain the rural nature and character, much of it historic, of West Horsley.

Our Neighbourhood Plan was adopted in the nick of time and has helped to evidence our arguments in response to the many planning applications received. It has also influenced design, density, and type albeit after considerable dialogue! The dark skies policy has proved valuable in trying to retain a very rural setting for the Village and avoid the tones of suburbia creeping in.

In all, well over 150 planning applications have been received since early 2020 and more are flowing in as I write this report. We will reach saturation point but, in the meantime, the Planning Team is keep a watchful vigil on them all and the Council is making fervent comment to the planning authorities. At this time, the Council anticipates that some 350 new homes will be created if all applications are pursued. This is in addition to the applications for extensions on existing properties.

Initiatives

All the Task Groups (TG) have been active and taken very opportunity to pursue improvements to Village life and experience. The one Group that has suffered most from the pandemic lockdown is the Community (Events) TG which, by their very nature, had to be cancelled. It has not stopped planning though and with well-being added to its brief in recent months the Group is well on its way to provide activities later in 2021. That said, it has one very significant triumph as I illustrate below along with the headline achievements of each task group.

- Community TG – establishment of the West Horsley Youth Council. This is a significant step forward in enabling the youth of the Village to play a part and have influence in the Village. With a constitution, 7 Youth Councillors (who have elected their Officers to mirror that of the Parish Council) and a small budget they now have a voice and are planning some interesting activities in 2021.
- Communications TG – with a new style of newsletter being produced three times a year together with an updated website and regular posting of key information on Nextdoor we hope to keep residents connected and informed of what is happening. This is work in progress. The initiative to have superfast broadband installed was a major piece of work against the clock that successfully resulted in Openreach's confirmation that the rollout to the Village would be achieved late 2021/early 2022.

- Roads & Road Safety TG – attention has been paid to developing good working relationships with officers at Surrey County Council in particular to help seek improvements to a number of road & road safety concerns expressed by residents. This has already seen benefit with road signs repaired or replaced, potholes and wet spots addressed and now a scheme for Visual Activated Signs to be installed to assist traffic calming measures. A close liaison with the Community Speed Watch team has also been fostered and this too, has helped to improve awareness of speeding with a view to its reduction.
- Asset Maintenance & Village Appearance TG – An investment programme to replace the noticeboards, most of which are showing signs of rotting, is underway along with new signs to define the Village boundaries as the ‘Gateway to the Surrey Hills’, new and replacement benches and litter bins are also being addressed along with improvements to the tennis court and repair to certain bus shelters. The Group led a project to provide a public toilet outside the Village Hall but, regrettably, the building and installation cost together with on-going running costs proved too expensive for the Council to afford at this time.
- Finance TG – a close eye has been kept on financial management and a decision taken by Council to install a more robust accounting system than the Council has used hitherto. It also set up a Grants Working Group to identify where the Council might apply for funds for specific projects without recourse to its own resources.
- Personnel TG – as an employer, the Council must adhere to good employment practice and the establishment this year of this Task Group has enabled focussed attention on policies, procedures and ways of working to ensure the Council is a good employer of its workforce.

A look to the future

It has been a full and exacting year but still given us the opportunity to take stock and think ahead. During next year we plan to:

- Work towards achieving the higher status of “council with general competence” in May 2023. This will enable us to do more for the Village than our current powers allow
- Address the increasing concerns that Climate Change is presenting
- Continue the plans for improving road safety and village appearance
- Review and update our Neighbourhood Plan
- Support and enhance the Youth Council ensuring they have a voice
- Improve our engagement with residents keeping them informed in a timely way

We will be publishing our updated strategic plan and business priorities for 2021/2022 in May and our forward look to 2022/2023 later in the year.

And Finally, My Thanks

I am immensely grateful to all the Councillors for their unstinting commitment to delivering the best outcomes for the benefit of all and for their unwavering support to me over my first year as Chairman. I am very appreciative too for the help and support Joanna Cadman has given not least in coming to our aid as Locum Clerk. And to our residents, I hope you will feel that the Council continues to work earnestly on your behalf to ensure West Horsley holds true to its rural nature and character in these most challenging of times and remains a great place to live and work.

***Elaine Best, Chairman West Horsley Parish Council
April 2021***