

Chairman's Annual Report

It has been a very busy and fulfilling year for the Parish Council, with a multitude of issues requiring time and attention in addition to the regular Committee meetings. I would like to thank all the Parish committees for their time and attention on the matters which are important to Cuckfield and its residents.

I would also like to recognise Frances Jones our Clerk who is retiring at the end of March 2014, after 22 years of service. She has played a crucial role in ensuring the Parish Council meets its legal obligations and performs its duties to the community and District council. Frances will be replaced by Nicky Sage who has been our assistant Clerk for the past 2 years and clerical assistant before that. I would also like to welcome Jane Forester our new clerical assistant who will be working with Nicky.

We have also made improvements in our communication plan. We have successfully transitioned our newsletter to the popular Cuckfield Life to ensure value for money and distribution to all residents. We will also be shortly releasing an updated and improved web site which will take advantage of social networking such as Twitter.

Youth Club/Playgroup Building

Perhaps the most important issue we are facing at the moment is the proposed sale of the Youth Club/Playgroup building in London Lane by West Sussex County Council. Used by both the Playgroup to provide care and education to the very young of our village and surrounding areas, and Orchard House who care for children and young adults with severe learning difficulties, and other youth groups, 85% of respondents to our Neighbourhood Plan consultation felt that this building should continue to offer these very important services. With this in mind, the Parish Council has registered the building as a Community Asset which means we have until mid-June to put forward a bid for the property. The Council must now use this time to consider how to raise the necessary funds. Taking out a loan is the most likely possibility to enable us to achieve the asking price of £200,000 to purchase the building. Fortunately, if this course of action is agreed by councillors, it will not have any impact on the Council Tax as the last payment for current loan taken out to refurbish the Queen's Hall comes to an end in the summer. However, the costs of maintaining the current building are high and it is probable that a new building will be required in the future in order to provide the village with a long term, viable asset. If we are successful in our bid, you will be hearing much more of our plans in the years to come!

Play Meadow

Another extremely contentious issue we are facing is the proposed sale, by Mid Sussex District Council (MSDC) of the Play Meadow at Courtmead Road. Whilst we understand the points the District Council have made on the funding challenges they face, we believe, and the support from the village has been overwhelming on this, that the Play Meadow has a long term social value far beyond any short term financial gain by the District Council, and we have now taken the step to have the site listed as a Community Asset again giving us until mid-June to consider the options before any sale can go ahead. We were also deeply troubled by MSDC's approach to the planning application associated with the sale of this site given that outline permission was granted even though the building will be within Cuckfield's Conservation Area. Normally only full applications are considered in such sensitive areas. Furthermore, any building will fall outside the current 'Built Up Area Boundary'. This goes against MSDC's own policy as it has used this as a reason to refuse other applications in the area. We will continue to work as hard as we can to protect this open space and will keep you informed of any updates in the situation.

Neighbourhood Plan

The neighbourhood Plan has been the most demanding long term project the Parish has invested in and I am pleased to say we will shortly have the result of the Examination by Ann Skippers. The opportunity to be a Front Runner of the government's policy on Localism was taken by the Parish Council and required a significant effort to follow the legal and procedural guidance required to develop a plan which will define key decisions on housing, infrastructure, business and leisure for Cuckfield up to 2031. I would like to thank the community team involved in preparing the plan and the supporting evidence. I hope to have the outcome of the examination by 27th March. The final step will be then to submit the plan to the Cuckfield electorate for a referendum to adopt the plan to carry full legal weight. The Neighbourhood Plan policies and evidence can be found at www.cuckfieldplan.com and should now be considered for any planning applications.

Roads and Traffic Committee

Progress with the proposed new zebra crossings at Ardingly Road is taking longer than expected. Having agreed with West Sussex County Council that the Parish Council would take over management of this scheme, we had hoped to speed up the whole process. However, the amount of 'red tape' through which we have had to manage has been greater than anticipated, and it looks as though it will be the summer holidays 2014 before the crossings will be installed. It is also intended that the work on the new signage/road markings at Whitemans Green will be carried out at the same time.

Progress is also being made on the other schemes. Plans for a new puffin crossing in London Road have been agreed and this is scheduled for action by the County Council in 2014-15. The plans for the build-outs in London Lane are still in the programme and will be implemented as soon as sufficient funds are available. The scheme to improve the bus stops and parking along Broad Street is to be carried out by the County Council in the 2015-16 programme and there is also a longer term scheme to improve road safety at the Whitemans Green roundabout. The pavement along the High Street running north from the Queen's Hall is a real cause for concern. The County Council will be undertaking repairs and there is an ongoing conversation as to what the best course of action is to protect the pavement for the long term.

Environment Committee

Following the completion of the Chatfield Road Development, and the allocation of community infrastructure s106 monies which flowed from that, the public toilets in the Broad Street car park have been completely refurbished by local firm Helme and Hallett. An excellent job has been done and the toilets are now a far better reflection of the pride we all take in our community.

The Cuckfield Society has been busy fund raising for new playground equipment for the Worsley Memorial Recreation Ground. That coupled with more community infrastructure s106 monies which we are due to be allocated by Mid Sussex District Council, and a further £5000 from Parish council funds means that some fantastic new equipment will be installed. In addition, using Community Arts s106 monies allocated to us, we have commissioned sculptor Hannah Stewart to build a bronze resin Iguanodon for the play area which will be safe for the kids to climb and reflects the fact that iguanodon remains were found right here in our village.

We have also been assured by Mid Sussex District Council, that the paddling pool, which was out of action for such a long period last summer, will be repaired and up and running before the summer.

The cemetery continues to be beautifully maintained by our grounds men, and is still a wonderful asset for our village. Now that summer is approaching we hope all allotment holders will get busy on their plots. We still have a waiting list for Courtmead Road allotments, but we have no waiting list for the plots at Whitemans Green and there is even a plot standing empty! If you are interested in working a plot, do give the Parish Office a ring.

Queen's Hall Committee

The Hall continues to attract bookings – we have a full summer of weddings and other events, and our regular hirers are staying loyal. However, being an old and listed building, the upkeep of the Hall is expensive, with further work now required to fix a leak in the roof in the entrance to the Hall.

Planning

Work is now almost complete at Mantell Park/Bylanes Close which will provide 42 new homes of mixed size and affordability. We are working with the developers regarding the transfer of land to the rear of the development to the Parish Council. Management of this area will need careful consideration due to its location within the High Weald AONB. Residents and the PC have met on a number of occasions for community consumption meeting to hear feedback. Key comments which have been feedback to Taylor Wimpey has been Damage to Bylanes Close, compliance to working hours, Drainage Scheme and slippage of balancing pond, pedestrian safety where the tarmac crosses the new access.

The development of 6 new properties at the old Delmon House site is also progressing; we have had numerous complaints on the lack of mud prevention on the highway.

We also saw a number of applications for garden development and unneighbourly extensions which had a negative impact on neighbouring amenity space and street scene. We would encourage submitted plans to fully consider National, Mid Sussex and our own Neighbourhood Planning policies.

Post Office

The Post Office was closed for a short period during the year, which required a number of actions to avert a negative consequence for residents and traders in the village. The PO provides a vital community village asset and was considered imperative to retain. Although closed for a short period and regrettably over the Christmas period, the Post office will reopen shortly and continue to provide a long term asset to the village centre.

Finance

The financial position of the council continues to be sound. Once we have reached the end of the financial year in March, we will publish a full set of the accounts in our next newsletter which will appear in the June edition of Cuckfield Life.