

Chairman's Report May 2012

This will be my last report to you as Chairman of Cuckfield Parish Council.

As I hope you all are aware, since 2010 I have been Ward member for Cuckfield at Mid Sussex District Council. With two years experience of that role I have now been made Vice Chairman of District Planning and Vice Chairman of the North East Planning Committee. That, together with my membership of the Leader and Service Delivery Scrutiny Committee and Planning and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee, has led to advice from the District Monitoring Officer that there is potential for a conflict of interest and so I have decided that after nine years as a Parish Councillor, five of them as Chairman, I should stand down from the Parish Council.

The Council is, as you will see from this report, in a strong position to deal with the many problems facing all communities in Mid Sussex and I am confident that with the continuing help and support of our residents, Cuckfield will maintain all those characteristics that make it such a joy to live in.

The Parish Council

The radical changes coming to local government obviously fired our residents in 2011, so that a healthy number of nominations came forward for the Parish Council elections last year. As a result, we saw six of our Councillors returned, joined by four new members. Andy Burton, Giles Darling, Piers Harrison and Nigel Page. I sense that they found themselves on a steep learning curve; local politics being not quite as simple as it many of our residents believe! Cuckfield continues to "punch above its weight" in local government and to ensure sound governance and to maintain a high level of service, we employed Nicky Sage as admin assistant. Over the past few years Nicky has completed training modules leading up to the Clerks CiLCA course and I am very pleased that she will become a full Assistant Clerk to the Council when the post is ratified at the Council AGM.

Finance

The financial position of the Parish Council is sound. With good governance, strong budgetary discipline and careful management we have maintained our services to the community at the same level and, for the third year, will have no rise in precept for 2012/13. Income received by the Parish Council during the last financial year (2011/12) was £214,524.00 which was made up of £134,820.00 from the 'precept' (the tax levied by the Parish Council). The remainder was made up with £37,777 from the Queen's Hall, £24,435 from the burial ground, with the remainder from grants, etc. Reserves stand at £81,720.00. This includes earmarked reserves of £15,000 for the rebuilding of the Green Room at the Queen's Hall and £10,000 for traffic calming with further sums earmarked for replacement of capital items such as lawn mowers etc.

Planning

An active year, with not only a large number of small domestic applications, but some difficult decisions around new housing development. Following the decision of the Inspectorate to grant permission at Bylanes Close, the refusal of the Ardingly Road Appeal was welcome, but a new plan for this site has already been submitted by the developers and the field next to it on Hanlye Lane is also the subject of plans by a developer; there is no respite. However, not all development

is a bad thing. Many of us would not be living in Cuckfield had there been no development in the past and I am a firm believer that Cuckfield should not be a dormitory for a favoured few, but should have the sort of accommodation available for those young people with strong associations with Cuckfield to be able to remain in the community if they wish

Much has been written about the work done to develop a Neighbourhood Plan, (NP) so I will not go into that subject other than to say how fortunate we are as a community to have the wealth of critical skills and the people willing to give of their time to put together such a complex plan. Whilst the Neighbourhood Plan has become the focus of our attention, we should not forget the foundations on which this was built. The Village Design Statement would have been a useful document to have had adopted in the current climate and it is a shame that the support available for the NP was not available to Marie Dormer, Frances and Andy Burton at the time, as it might well have been adopted as a Supplementary Planning Document (which would have carried weight with the Inspectorate) but it has guided work on the NP; so thank you Marie and the NP team for all that is going into the Cuckfield Plan now.

Affinity Sutton – the landlords for social schemes within Cuckfield – have given notice that they intend to sell Horsgate House and are looking hard at Yew Tree Court. The Parish Council are concerned that we could lose provision for the elderly and we are keen to influence any decision on this site, and indeed on Horsgate House.

Traffic

Cuckfield is perhaps the only community in the District that has developed a Strategic Traffic Plan; which was put to consultation with the community at a recent ‘Open Morning’ in Queens Hall. We also have the funding; through development monies (S106). The plans have been approved by the local County Local Committee but getting the programme implemented by West Sussex Highways is proving nothing short of a nightmare! We continue to press our case. A continuing worry is provision for a “Winter Plan”. It is one thing to decide we need a programme to help residents in extreme conditions, it is quite another to have the expertise and volunteers to make an effective response. It really requires someone in the community to take this on as a single issue who will be able to build a team of volunteers and be able to take control of the situation should an event occur. If you have the skills and enthusiasm to develop a plan the Parish Council would love to hear from you.

The Queens Hall

We continue to have a wide variety of classes and activities in the Queens Hall. With continuing investment in the facilities and with the benefit of the new North corridor, it is a venue of choice for weddings and other functions; particularly with its intimate and attractive garden. The main building is sound but later structures were poor quality, and the same poor workmanship that emerged with the subsidence on the North side is now evident on the South side; with subsidence on one corner of the ‘Green Room’. The room will have to be demolished and rebuilt but the money for this is already put aside and so will have no impact on next years finances. Special thanks to our caretakers Chris, Ray and Paul for ensuring we have a well presented hall and a warm welcome to our visitors.

Environment

Cuckfield presents an idyllic face to the world with the floral street displays, clean pavements and exceptional well kept burial ground. Our sincere thanks to Dick and Brian our groundsmen for their work in both the churchyard and around the town and to Paul our orderly for keeping other areas 'ordered'!

If the first impression of Cuckfield for our increasing numbers of tourists and visitors, is our public lavatories - as it often is - then we must ensure they are of a high standard. It is fully seven years since we took responsibility from MSDC and undertook their modernisation, but it is time to 'freshen' them up again and this will be undertaken in the coming months; money is earmarked for that work.

Buildings

The Parish Council is still engaging with WSCC over the future of the Youth Hall in London Lane. I believe this building to be immensely important to Cuckfield both as a home for the nursery school as well as a centre for those youngsters who are uncomfortable with attending one of the faith based youth clubs. Piers Harrison and Jane Revell (ex Cuckfield P.C.) are pushing hard on our behalf.

I also wish at this point to make a comment about Holy Trinity Church. If you are not minded to be part of the congregation, we still have, in this building, the single major point of attraction in Cuckfield. Tourists visit from all over the world and marvel at the architecture, artworks and setting of this amazing building; and yet within the Town it seems to get little attention. It is currently undergoing a major (£1/2 million) restoration, and yet it is as though residents were wholly (no pun intended) unaware. This has to be partly due to poor communication out to the community from the Church, but if we are to pass on this amazing building to our descendants in good order, then it behoves us all to support the work being undertaken.

On a personal note I cannot finish this report without thanking all those who have supported me over the last nine years as Parish Councillor and the last five as Chairman. In particular I would like to thank those from whom I learnt the differences between the way industry deals with matters and the 'craft' of local government. We each come together with different strengths and weaknesses and learn so much from each other as we tackle the issues of the community. The learning curve for me was simplified and smoothed by the able advice of our Clerk, Frances Jones, who is well respected both in our community and by her fellow Clerks. The influence of past members of the council has been invaluable; Colette Collins, Colin Pitts, Paul Mantripp, Jane Revell and Ruth McIntyre spring to mind as giving inspiration in so many ways.

You learn a lot about both your community and what makes life tick in your local area so I can honestly say it has been a truly rewarding experience – if frustrating at times – and one which I would recommend to anyone interested in 'giving' something back to the community; and learning a tremendous amount about themselves!

Robert. Salisbury