

East Dean and Friston Parish Council – Chair’s report 2019/20

To describe the past year as challenging would be somewhat of an understatement, even without the current pandemic which resulted in the cancellation of the Annual Village meeting and the reduction in scope of this annual report, which covers the period from May 2019 to April 2020.

Organisation

The year began in May 2019 with high hopes as the existing seven councillors were all elected unopposed at the May elections. Prior to these elections, a majority of councillors had been co-opted members and this limited by statute any new initiatives that the council could undertake. Following the election, the council was able to regain its “General Power of Competence” and so make plans for the future. Two councillor positions remained unfilled following the election and these have now been filled by co-option. Initially we were pleased to welcome Beatrice Wheatley and Joyce Walker to the council. Joyce, however, decided to step down at the end of 2019 and has now been replaced by Daniel Wild. Pleasingly, both Beatrice and Daniel have helped to lower the average age profile of the council considerably and it is good to have a younger person’s perspective on our deliberations.

In the chair’s report for last year, I welcomed Stephanie Mills as our new Administrative Assistant. Regrettably, she resigned for personal reasons just prior to the Annual Village meeting. A replacement was recruited in August, but resigned almost immediately, having obtained alternative employment with more hours than the council were able to offer. Finally, in December, we were able to confirm the appointment of Debbie Picknell to the post, which has since been renamed “Administrative Officer” to better reflect its role and status. Debbie has now fully taken over work for the Planning Committee and the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group, allowing our hard-working Clerk, Katrina Larkin to reduce her hours, which has been a long-standing desire. The council are extremely grateful for the work put in by both Katrina and Debbie to ensure the smooth running of our operations, particularly during the current difficult circumstances.

Neighbourhood Plan

Prior to the 2019 Annual Village meeting, our Neighbourhood Plan proposals were launched and a Steering Group established, consisting of some councillors and volunteers from the community. The first stage of the plan preparation was to conduct surveys to find out what residents wanted from our village, what to retain and what to improve. Survey questionnaires were circulated at the Annual Village meeting and as an insert to the Parish Magazine. A stall was also used at the Village Fete to explain and obtain feedback on the plan proposals. The aim of the Neighbourhood Plan is to give the community a voice in shaping future development, based on thorough consultation, and facilitate the updating of the Village Design Statement which had been produced prior to the finalisation of the SDNPA’s Local Plan. The NP consultation process, backed by government funding, would allow the Neighbourhood Plan to attain the same legal status as other documents that formed part of the SDNPA’s statutory development plan, once it had been approved at a referendum. Thereafter, applications for planning permission must be determined in accordance with the development plan, unless material considerations indicated otherwise.

Unfortunately, further progress stalled following the resignation of not one but two administrative officers and did not fully get going again until the beginning of 2020. At this point the Steering Group established four Working Parties to consider (1) Housing and Development; (2) Environment, Heritage and Countryside; (3) Traffic and Transport; and (4) Community, Infrastructure and Business. These groups had begun their deliberations when the Coronavirus lockdown forced another halt to progress. It is still hoped to resume the meetings of the Steering Group and the individual sub-groups when possible.

Finance

During the financial year, the Parish Council received £60234 from the council tax precept. For a number of reasons (partly due to the coronavirus) expenditure was £8593 less than this, so the surplus was added to reserves and carried forward to next year. £1,000 had been budgeted for re-fencing the play area; and £5,000 for maintenance of the pavilion, of which £815 had been spent. Of these, the fence was overspent (using metal posts for maximum durability) and the pavilion underspent. £2,500 had been budgeted for refurbishment of the War Memorial railings. £500 had been budgeted for maintenance of the bus shelters and the most urgent item was the replacement of the rotten floor of the East Dean south side shelter with marine ply (cost £50-£100); however, both the East Dean shelters and the Friston south side shelter, all made of timber, might need to be replaced within the next 5 years. Any unspent budget from 2019/20 would be carried forward for this purpose. The biggest single unbudgeted expense was the rebuilding of Friston bus shelter following its damage by vandals. The East Dean south side bus shelter is earmarked for rebuilding in the next year.

Planning.

During 2019/20, the planning committee considered 63 planning applications. No objections were raised to 48 of these and most were then approved by the South Downs National Park. A few (14) were recommended for refusal, either because they would be out of character with the village or they would lead to a loss of small property through over-enlargement. Of these 9 were approved, 3 were refused and 2 were withdrawn. Currently, the future criteria for planning decisions is uncertain, due to changes in SDNPA rules and also to national government proposals.

Rights of Way

Negotiations continued with ESCC Highways over the proposed safety kerb buildout at the top of Friston Hill. This is being undertaken under the County Council's match funding scheme. Verge in Downsview Lane –the verge had been strimmed to a width of 1m but the hedge left untouched. This had apparently been done by ESCC, who were entitled to complain to Eastbourne Borough Council as the landowners. It was agreed that the parish council should organise the hedge cutting. Bark chips had been laid on a number of footpaths around the village and Downlands Estate. The donation of the bark chips by Climpsons was appreciated, while the help given by ten volunteers had been invaluable.

Rejuvenation of Shopping Area –East Dean in Bloom

As part of the Parish Council's continuing efforts to smarten up the shopping area in Downlands Way, funding was put in place by the council, the Residents Association, and the shopkeepers to purchase a series of flower tubs and planters suitably equipped with plants and shrubs. The council also installed two new Notice Boards and councillors undertook a

couple of weed clearing and tidying up sessions. The project was well received by residents and shop owners.

Christmas Event -The event was held on 1st December, reviving an old village custom of lighting the village Christmas tree and forming a roving carol singing troupe. The procession formed at the village hall, where mulled wine was served; took in The Grange care home on its route; and finally returned to The Tiger for the lighting of its tree and further refreshments. A bucket collection was held and £215 raised for the council's charity of the year.

Coronavirus Emergency Response

The Parish Council first adopted an emergency plan following the severe weather of 2011, which resulted in the village being cut off for a number of days. That plan was revised at regular intervals, the latest revision being in 2018 when it was updated following guidelines from ESCC, WDC and the emergency services. Since its original adoption the PC Chair has been *Ex Officio* the Emergency Plan Co-ordinator with the Vice-Chair acting as deputy. During the 2018 revision, a number of criteria were adopted for the triggering of the emergency plan, one of which was the threat of disease within the village. It was further agreed by the Council that, upon triggering the plan, the Co-ordinator or his appointee could incur expenditure of up to £500 without the need to seek further Council approval. Following the UK Government's statement on 9th March 2020 detailing the measures to be taken as a result of the Coronavirus outbreak, the Council Chair decided to invoke the emergency plan.

The first priority was to ensure that official advice was effectively communicated, particularly to residents who do not have internet or email access. The second priority was to ensure that the village had a team of volunteers to provide aid and assistance (where possible) to any affected residents. On 10th March the Council Chair called a meeting with the editor of the Parish Magazine, the co-ordinator of Community Watch and the Church's Pastoral Care co-ordinator. It was agreed that any communication had to be up to date and, although the Parish Magazine was an effective way of reaching residents, the long lead time between going to print and distribution made this impossible.

It was decided that leaflets were the most effective way of communication and, subsequently, the agreement of the Rector and the PCC was obtained to use the Church's Photocopier to produce leaflets. The first of these were produced on 13th March and distributed at a Gardening Club meeting that afternoon (the last major gathering in the Village Hall before its closure due to lockdown). These leaflets were also distributed to the Churches' congregations and placed in the Barn Stores. Incidentally, WDC issued guidelines that only official statements should be used in local communications and this was adhered to in the leaflets.

The second priority was to provide support for residents who found themselves in self-isolation at home, either because they were showing potential symptoms of Coronavirus (or had been in contact with someone who had the symptoms) or because they had an underlying health condition that would affect them more severely if they contracted the virus. Here, it was agreed that Community Watch would take the lead in providing support in three particular ways. Firstly, by providing a shopping delivery service for those who were unable to do on-line shopping.

The second area of support was identified as collecting repeat prescriptions for those with pre-existing conditions and the Community Watch co-ordinator agreed to liaise with the GP surgery to facilitate this.

The final area of support identified is the provision of telephone contact to give moral and practical contact for those in isolation. The Church Pastoral Care co-ordinator took on this

task and agreed to recruit volunteers who would make contact (on a non-sectarian basis) with those in home isolation.

A further contact meeting was held on 14th March which was additionally attended by other members of Community Watch. It was agreed at that point that we could not look any further into the future than the publication of the Parish Magazine at the end of the month, which contained an insert from the PC giving the latest information. This magazine with its information leaflet was distributed just as the Government lockdown came into force so it proved very timely. With the lockdown came the introduction of daily government briefings, broadcast on radio and TV, so it was then decided that the Parish Council's role in additional information dissemination was no longer needed. Liaison and financial support for Community Watch and other volunteer groups continue and will do so as long as is necessary.

Following the lockdown and closure of the Village Hall, meetings of the Parish Council and Planning Committee have been held remotely, using the Zoom platform. The decision to move to these remote meetings was made in anticipation of emergency legislation permitting them, so the March council meeting had to be deemed "informal", meaning that no binding decisions could be made until the new regulations had come into effect. The remote meetings continue to be held monthly and arrangements are made to allow public observation and submission of items for consideration.

The next year looks very uncertain but the council will continue to do its best to serve the needs of the village and its residents.