



Annual Chair's report 2020/21

Last year I began my annual report with the words *“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”*. Regrettably, these words still remain relevant to this year's report which covers the period from May 2020 to May 2021.

Organisation

The year began with the country under its first lockdown, aimed at slowing the spread of the Covid 19 virus. As a result, the Parish Council were unable to meet physically and had to rely on use of the Zoom remote conferencing platform to conduct business. This was a learning process for all of us, as it was for so many in the country, and it is to the credit of our Parish Clerk, Katrina Larkin, and our Admin. Officer, Debbie Picknell, that we were able to carry on with the essential business of the council in this remote fashion. Debbie has, in fact, become our Zoom “Gatekeeper” and is likely to continue in this role even when physical meetings resume.

Regrettably, the stresses of carrying on council business during the first lockdown contributed to a major disagreement among councillors, which in turn led to the resignation of three members in July 2020. All three had contributed strongly to the work of the council in previous years and I was personally sad to see them go. In normal times, the resultant vacancies would have been advertised by Wealden Council and then either filled by candidates for election or co-option with minimal delay. However, under emergency legislation, no elections could be held until 6th May 2021 so, when ten residents requested an election in August 2020 (as they were legally entitled to do), they were effectively reducing the council to six members for the next nine months. Fortunately, my fellow councillors stepped up to fill the gaps as best they could, while the Parish Clerk took on the full financial burden of the council without a lead member for finance to work with her.

In September 2020, we lost a further council member, this time under happier circumstances as Beatrice Wheatley graduated with her law degree and moved on in her career. We wish her well and thank her for the contribution she made during her time on the council. This time there was no request for an election so the council was free to fill the vacancy by co-option. Two residents put their names forward and the council was pleased to offer the vacancy to Simon Thorogood at the November meeting. Simon had recently moved to our village but he had previously been a Parish Councillor, Tree Warden and Council Chair in the village of Brasted in Kent, so he brought much valuable experience to the team.

Following Simon's appointment, the council decided to create the role of Lead Member for the Environment, incorporating the position of Tree Warden. This Simon has accepted and is now working with members of the Residents Association and others to enhance the environment of the village.

Finally, in this section, I am pleased to report that a by-election was finally held on 6th May 2021, which resulted in the election of three councillors, Grant Fowler, Christopher Lees and Hollie Milligan, bringing the council back up to its full complement of nine.

Activities

This first period of lockdown saw the council supporting the Community Watch volunteers as they, in turn, provided help and assistance to the many villagers who were self-isolating. The council was also able to recommend Community Watch to Wealden District Council as deserving of a special commendation for their work. This was awarded at the end of 2020.

During the Summer of 2020, once the first lockdown period had eased, the village experienced a high level of traffic, particularly in Gilberts Drive and the Birling Gap Road. This has steadily got worse as holidaymakers, unable to travel abroad or stay in hotels, are resorting to day trips to the coast and countryside. A group of residents and landowners are involved in lobbying for restrictions to be introduced to prevent the situation becoming intolerable. The Parish Council supports these aims, but is also trying to mitigate the effects of excess traffic using the existing powers available.

To this end, a Traffic Management Working Group has been set up under the chairmanship of Cllr. Paul Seeley, who is also Lead Member for Rights of Way. This group, which includes councillors and invited residents have brought forward two main initiatives, the first being to set up a "Speedwatch" team. This is a national scheme in which volunteers are trained by the police in the use of portable traffic speed sensing equipment. Evidence of motorists exceeding the speed limit is passed to the police who, in the case of repeated offences, can prosecute. In addition, the presence of highly visible volunteers with speed detection equipment, has a speeding prevention effect on its own. Training of volunteers was supposed to start in January 2021, but was delayed due to the second lockdown. It is now hoped to begin shortly.

The second traffic calming initiative is to install a moveable speed detection warning sign at a number of fixed locations around the village. A budget for this has been approved and it is hoped to have the sign in operation during Summer 2021.

Essential Works

Despite the periods of lockdown, a number of essential maintenance works have been carried out during the year. The first of these involved the children's play area which required repairs and extension of the perimeter fence, due to damage caused by people trying to get in while the gate was locked under government restrictions. This was simply vandalism, all the more regrettable because the perpetrators appeared to be parents with children. When restrictions were eased and it was possible to re-open the play area, the council took the decision to carry out regular disinfection of the play equipment and our lawn mowing contractor was commissioned to do this.

Speaking of lawn mowing, the three-year contract for mowing verges and public spaces within the village came up for renewal during the year. Competitive tenders were sought and, pleasingly, the best value quote came from our existing contractor, who has now been reappointed for a further three years.

During the Summer and early autumn, it became apparent that reed and weed growth in Friston Pond was becoming a hazard to wildlife and also blocking motorists' views along the A259. Contractors were appointed to clear the weeds and also make sure that the overflow drain, which diverts excess water under the road and into Friston forest, was unblocked.

Finally, due to the very heavy rain in the winter, many of the Twittens (footpaths) around the village and Downlands Estate became slippery and hazardous for walkers. In previous years the council has used volunteers, including council members, to spread bark chippings along the paths. However, this

year because of government lockdown restrictions, it was necessary to pay for a contractor to spread these. The job was very well done and a number of residents have expressed their thanks. The council is, in turn, grateful to Climpson Bros. for donating some seven van loads of bark chippings for this work.

Capital Projects

The largest project in terms of financial outlay was the completion of a safety build-out of the Kerb on the south side of the A259, at the top of Friston Hill next to the Crowlink turning. The Parish Council had lobbied East Sussex highways for this during the past four years and were pleased when match funding was agreed in 2019. However, it still took a further year for the work to be carried out with completion in September 2020, but the result means that cars can no longer “undercut” stationary traffic at the top of the hill, resulting in a much safer crossing for pedestrians.

A further capital project came to fruition in 2020. This was the relocation of the cricket square on the recreation ground. This had become necessary due to the housing development adjacent to the field and the resultant risk of damage to properties by cricket balls. The work was undertaken by specialist contractors, as the specification of a cricket square is quite critical at the level which the village cricket club play at, and the total cost was nearly £17,000. The Parish council contributed £5000 towards this cost, a sum that was matched by the Gilbert Estate in recognition that the estate had benefited financially from the building of the houses. The balance of the sum was raised by the cricket club with donations from the Residents Association and other bodies, together with fund raising activities such as a challenge cricket match between the club and a past/present Sussex County cricket team. The work was carried out in September 2020 in order that the pitch would be ready for the 2021 season.

At the end of 2019 the Friston North Side wooden bus shelter had suffered substantial vandalism damage and so had been rebuilt in brick. The result of this was so impressive that the council decided to replace the East Dean South Side bus shelter in the same way. This work was carried out in the autumn of 2020 at a cost of around £2300 and the result has been praised by many residents.

Neighbourhood Plan

Following the first lockdown in March 2020, activities of the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group were suspended and this suspension has continued until the present, due largely to the continuing Covid restrictions on meetings and also the reduced number of councillors available to participate in this. There have also been doubts expressed concerning the ability to produce a feasible plan following the government’s proposed changes to the planning system. Further assessments will be made as and when normal meetings can resume.

Planning Committee

Despite the Covid restrictions, the Planning Committee continued to meet (remotely) on the third Tuesday of each month throughout the year. A total of 55 planning applications were considered by the committee of which 45 were notified to the South Downs National Park Authority as either “approved” or “no objection”; while 7 were recommended for refusal, comment was reserved on 1 application, and 2 were withdrawn. The SDNPA subsequently approved 43 of the applications supported by the committee, while approving 5 against the committee’s wishes and refusing 2 in agreement with their recommendations. The balance of applications were either withdrawn or are still awaiting decision.

Financial Report

The closing balance at 31 March 2021 was £66,421.80 as reported at the council meeting on 1st April 2021. This compares with £65,761 in the previous year. A summary of the income and expenditure for the year is as follows:

	2018-19 Actual	2019-20 Actual	2020-21 Actual
SUMMARY			
Receipts	73,809.23	76,853.78	78,570.00
Payments			
Council Office	16,150.56	17,538.56	16,586.00
Professional Expenses	2,543.76	4,141.51	3,223.00
Councillor Expenses	322.55	172.05	372.00
Major Projects	11,649.26	19,481.76	28,178.00
Asset Maintenance	4,098.59	7,745.16	7,205.00
Services	17,311.23	19,181.56	15,581.00
VAT on payments	4,688.99		6,764.00
Total Payments	56,764.94	68,260.60	77,909.00
Surplus/Deficit	17,044.30	8,592.68	661.00
Opening reserves	40,123.93	57,168.23	65,761.00
Closing reserves	57,168.23	65,760.91	66,422.00

Further details can be seen in the full report to the Annual PC meeting held on 6th May 2021.

The Future

Following the partial easing of lockdown restrictions, the first physical meeting of the council for fourteen months took place on 29th June 2021. At this meeting I announced my intention to stand down from the role of Council Chair. Following my formal resignation, an extraordinary council meeting was held on 20th July at which Paul Seeley was elected as my successor, with Simon Thorogood succeeding Paul as Vice-Chair. I wish both of them well in steering the Parish Council in the future as it continues to serve the residents of East Dean and Friston, Birling Gap and Crowlink.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'M. Keller', with a horizontal line underneath.

Mike Keller, Council Chair 2017-2021.

23rd July 2021.