

ANNUAL PARISH MEETING

REVIEW OF THE LAST 4 YEARS

As Chair, I am pleased to be addressing the Annual Parish Meeting particularly as we are coming to the end of the 4 year term of this current Council. These last 4 years have been one of the busiest and most rewarding terms but have also been some of the most challenging.

On the negative side Freedom of Information Requests (FOI), have continued to dog the Council, and were the root cause of two Steyning PC clerks' resignations and the break-up of the Steyning, Wiston, Ashurst and Bramber Neighbourhood Plan (SWAB). One of the clerks from the SWAB cluster also resigned; her resignation was heavily influenced by the constant harassment she experienced by the FOI requests and she wrote at the time; *".....it saddens me that people who are working to the best of their ability for the benefit of the local community have to suffer the effects of the law which means they have to endure constant negativity from such a small minority."* I echo and sympathise with these sentiments.

Responding to FOIs takes the Clerk away from performing his duties on behalf of the Council and the wider community. For an extreme example, from May 2015 to November 2016 (17 months) the Council received 166 FOIs and other requests. At an average of 2 hours per FOI taken in reading, researching and responding, 332 hours were used – 29% of the Clerk's time – and at a 'notional' cost of £25 per hour, cost the community £8,300.

In September 2017 the Clerk spent 53 hours dealing with FOIs alone.

These examples give residents the scale of the problem facing the Council, and I believe the overall 'notional' cost to the Community over the 4 year period is approximately £15-20,000.

It is the right of any member of the public to question the Council's processes for the good of the community, to ensure that better practice prevails, but, if in exercising that right it appears to be just to take satisfaction from formulating an opposing view then, I suggest, that an obsessive use of FOIs is not proportionate, and their use is merely to ensure that as much time and effort is wasted by the Council trying to prove otherwise. In my view, the use of FOIs

have not only been manifestly unreasonable, disproportionate, and aggressive, and intended to overburden the resources of the Council but, I suggest, were intended to undermine the Council. The Council has limited resources and these should not be disproportionately wasted, in extraneous and unceasing correspondence with hostile requesters to the detriment of the efficiency and effectiveness of the Council and the wider community.

So, what has the Council been able to do? With guidance from the Information Commissioners Office (ICO) the Council has taken a more robust and pro-active approach in processing and managing requests, and it has refused the majority of the more recent FOI requests as being 'vexatious and manifestly unreasonable', which has significantly released hours available to the Clerk to fulfil his normal duties.

The Council acts as a corporate body, by that I mean collectively, but reasonable requests by the Council to follow appropriate process and procedures and address all correspondence to the Clerk, have been largely ignored, and more troubling, some residents have targeted named councillors and other individuals.

As a result, the Clerks and the targeted Councillors have had to endure 4 years of verbal harassment as well as unfounded allegations of impropriety, relying mainly on innuendo and conjecture to demean and undermine those councillors' standing within the Council and the community at large; the continual scapegoating of those Councillors, even though the Council acts collectively, without any substantive evidence and, again, relying on conjecture and innuendo; relentless criticisms of the targeted Councillors who have had to endure obsessive scrutinising of any flaw, however minor, in every word they uttered and every action they took, intended, it would appear, to denigrate those targeted members regardless of the stress that it may have caused them; the constant seeking of opportunities to challenge every decision or action on the Council's part; vexatious accusations of the Council being undemocratic and yet any opposing view by the Council or, its individual members, was attacked very often spitefully and, personally, sometimes with thinly veiled threats of legal action.

Councillors, who are all volunteers, give up their time to serve the community, should be treated with respect, and should not be the target for sustained harassment. An extreme example of this, was the unpleasant and offensive nickname this group of residents had for one Councillor, which I won't repeat as it was offensive and used totally inappropriate language, but when confronted it was brushed off as being 'scatological' (I will leave you to look this up) and not in any way condescending, yet any person objectively reading this would find it not only condescending but highly offensive. This, in my view, was frankly an all-time low.

My experience is that, I have had to issue a warning to a member of the public about email harassment and that should it continue I would report it to the police to take action.

I suggest, that by taking the moral high ground with the excuse that they are bringing the Council to account, these residents have gone beyond the bounds of decency and propriety by singling out hard working Councillors in this manner. It is also noteworthy that in habitually questioning the behaviour and conduct of some Councillors they do not evince any insight or awareness of their own inappropriate or unacceptable behaviour. As they are well known in the town and all have some standing within the community, I believe their actions have been nothing short of shameful.

I would hope that as the new Council takes its place in May that this sort of behaviour ceases as it has, in my opinion, no place in a community like Steyning.

If by their actions, it was the intention of this group to try to bring the Council down their tactics did not succeed.

Despite all of this and, allegations of being 'dysfunctional', your Council has effectively carried out its duties on behalf of the community in the way that the community has a right to expect of its Council members, and, I would like to take this opportunity to thank those Councillors who have supported me as chair and, each other, with some stoicism I might add, during some very difficult and harassing times. I believe residents should be aware of the significant difference that members have made to the town's infrastructure during these last 4 years, which makes the town what it is today and, which will leave a lasting legacy for

those that follow - despite the determined efforts of some to undermine the good work being done.

So, far from being 'dysfunctional', over the last 4 years the Council has:

- Been financially responsible and ensured that it has worked within its annual budgets
- Increased its reserves to make the Council financially healthy with sufficient emergency reserves as well as other reserves which have, for example, enabled the Council to finance the new play area in Fletchers Croft
- Sought and received over £100k of grants from outside bodies and these have funded;
 - New adult exercise equipment in Fletchers Croft – to be installed in April
 - New and improved basket-ball facilities in the MPF to be installed in the next few months
 - New LED lighting in the Steyning Centre to reduce our energy use and carbon footprint
 - New mens' urinals in the High Street toilets
 - Additional street lighting over the footbridge across the A283 to improve pedestrian safety
 - Improved drainage works to reduce the flooding of Mouse Lane and Dog Lane
 - New concreted end of the bridleway off Mouse Lane as part of the flood prevention works
 - New secure fencing and gates to the North and South ends of the Rublees allotments which has greatly increased security

Our thanks go to the Wilson Memorial Trust, Rampion, WSCC and the Wiston Estate for their continued support of the community through their grants.

The Council has also;

- Worked with local parents to create the new play areas in Fletchers Croft and the MPF. Fletchers Croft is now complete and the MPF should be installed next year if funding can be found
- Worked with HDC to create an updated Conservation Area Appraisal Plan to include an enlarged Conservation Area
- Worked to get an Article 4 Direction to further protect the town's heritage – this is on-going
- Initiated a refurbishment programme of the Steyning Centre which has already got new signage, upgraded curtains. New seating has been approved, which will be wider and more comfortable.
- Put in place a Legionnaires Disease protocol for the Steyning Centre and all our other facilities to protect the health & safety of users
- Created a hedgerow sub-committee lead by a local resident which has worked hard to create natural hedgerows around the Rublees allotments to naturally fence them in and also to hide the newly installed wire fencing
- Appointed an allotment Manager who is working closely with the allotment holders to ensure that allotments are maintained correctly and, worked closely with the allotment association and other allotment holders to hold 'clearance' days so that unwanted debris on the allotments can be removed – as a result the allotments are in the best order they have been for years
- Initiated a 3 year tree works programme to protect and preserve the trees in the town and its green spaces through proper maintenance
- Worked to finalise a new CCTV installation to provide the latest technology to protect the safety of children and mothers using the play areas in the MPF and Fletchers Croft and to increase security in the High Street and Fletchers Croft Car parks and the bus shelter. This, hopefully will be put in place in the next few months
- Worked with other partners in the town such as the Business Chamber and the Steyning and District Partnership on joint initiatives such as providing a ATM in the High Street

- Worked closely with HDC on the charges being applied to the rural car parks to ensure that the charges reflected the use of the car parks. The upside of these charges is that Fletchers Croft car park refurbishment is now complete and the other car parks will be fully refurbished over the next 2 years
- Created the Joint Parishes Youth Committee which put the youth service onto a good footing. The current contractor has given notice that it is withdrawing from providing the service at the end of March but the JPYC was in a good position to seek alternative solutions to continue the service
- The planning committee continue to try and prevent unwanted development in the town such as the Lloyds Bank development in the High Street and to ensure that unapproved development is stopped
- Worked with local residents to oppose the initial plan to extract soft sand from Ham Farm – this is continuing with a new application and consultation period
- Formed a new Neighbourhood Plan Committee as a result of the disbanded SWAB plan and this has accelerated under excellent leadership to the point it is hoped that it will go for consultation in October 2019
- Appointed new grass cutting contractors for the open spaces which saved a significant amount of money
- Continued to manage the bin-emptying in the High Street and the MPF
- Actively supported the Orchard Group

As you can see this has been a very busy term of the Council and projects have been put in place that will be of benefit for generations to come and I hope that the new Council will be equally as successful.

On behalf of the Council and the wider community, I would like to thank John the Clerk and Hazel the Deputy Clerk, and Tess the clerks' assistant for the dedicated way in which they have performed their duties – sometimes in very difficult circumstances. I would also like to thank the caretaking staff for the way in which they look after the Steyning Centre and its users as well as Claire who does such a fine job in maintaining the gardens.

I would also like to thank Paul and Michael, our Neighbourhood Wardens for the valuable work that they do in limiting the anti-social behaviour and for the great work they do for the elderly and vulnerable in the town, in helping to prevent loneliness and isolation.

Finally, my thanks and those of the Council to those members of the public who have supported the Council and also to the large number of volunteers who give up their time, whether it be for driving the less able to the shops, litter picking, clearing hedgerows or, working with the numerous volunteer groups that make Steyning that very special place to live.

My best wishes to the new Council for the coming 4 years.