

Chairman's Report – Annual Parish Meeting 21st March 2022

Welcome to the Annual Parish Meeting. 2021/22 has proved to be another challenging year for all, with the Covid pandemic only now showing signs of abating. Sadly, one Councillor Sarah Sullivan stepped down, due to ill health, but fortunately three new councillors have joined during the year, Ian Alexander and Richard Bell joined us in May '21, and Rona Parsons in October '21. All three bring a real spread of skills and experience and are proving to be proactive and valuable members of the council.

I'm now going to update you on the activities of our various committees

Finance and General Purposes Committee

The responsibilities of the F&GP Committee are set out under section 2.2 the new Scheme of Delegation that was introduced by the current council in May 2021. The primary functions of this committee are: the ongoing review of the council's financial position against budget; consolidating annual budget inputs from all other committees, preparing and recommending an annual budget for Full Council approval; overseeing governance issues on contractual matters, HMRC obligations, internal & external audit reports; risk management strategy and insurance cover.

At the time of writing, we are forecasting a small surplus for the current financial year, despite having delivered a high level of services for the year under difficult circumstances. This surplus should allow us to complete a couple of important projects earlier than anticipated, including some of the work on the allotment water supply and also the long overdue replacement of the industrial spec dishwasher in the Steyning Centre.

As usual, we are pleased to have supported various local good causes throughout the year including: the Steyning Business Chamber; Steyning in Bloom; Vintage Years; the Ouse & Adur Rivers Trust, The Steyning and District Partnership and the Steyning Area First Responders (SAFeR). We have also been able to replace the High Street Christmas lights this year.

We have also recently addressed what appeared to be an unnecessarily arduous grant application procedure and the council now has discretion to make small awards of less than £250 without the need for the charity concerned to submit full accounts.

For the forthcoming year 2022/23, the committee have recommended a small increase of 3.12% in precept funding. I am pleased to say that this budget will allow us to address the recommendations of an independent job evaluation report conducted on the clerk and deputy clerk roles. Such an evaluation was well overdue having not been undertaken for over 10 years, a period which has seen many changes affecting the nature and workload of these roles.

Also included in the new budget is an additional £20k towards the part funding of several important projects likely to include: playground equipment renewals at Chandlers Way; Clock Tower maintenance; upgrade of the Steyning Centre sound system; CCTV upgrades and renewal/extension of the Memorial Playing Field Changing room apron.

Finally, my thanks to my colleagues serving on the F&GP committee during what has been a challenging year at times. The council's finances are in good health, and we will be starting a new year in a good position to be able to deliver on a number of important projects for our community.

Communities Committee

The past year has been a busy and productive period for the Community Committee and my thanks to the members of the committee for their input, support and hard work.

The allotments:

A new tenancy agreement was completed.

The committee agreed the scope of works for the installation of the new water pipe and dipping tanks, to improve the flow of water to the allotments and this should be completed in the next few months.

The committee agreed to support the 'clear up day' by providing 9 skips for allotment holders to dispose of their rubbish that had collected over the winter months and as a result, during the summer the allotments were looking at their best for many years and continue to thrive.

Memorial Playing Field:

As part of a review of all the play areas in Steyning, the committee is pushing ahead with plans to replace the outdated play area, to update it and bring it in line with the recently refurbished Fletcher's Croft play area and is currently looking at how this can be funded. It is hoped to have this agreed and installed before the end of the year.

2 of the changing room hot tanks have been replaced to provide more efficient hot water output for the users.

The cricket club have been given permission to install an all-weather Astro-turf strip on the cricket square and new parking bays in the car park have been painted to improve the parking.

Other Play Areas:

The committee is looking at creating a 'pocket park' in Chandlers Way comprising a wild-life area with wildflowers, trees and shrubs; an area of tranquillity that it is hoped will attract wild birds, bees and butterflies. The play area will be upgraded for use by younger children to be more interactive. A letter has gone out to residents around the 'park' to explain what is planned and asking for volunteers to become part of the working party to make the best use of the area, which currently is underused.

Abbey Road:

The Abbey Road volunteer group have continued to improve the pond and surrounds helping to increase the biodiversity of the area. The Committee have granted permission for the group to plant an apple orchard. Our thanks go to Roger Brown and his volunteers for the hard work they have put into creating an ecologically enhanced and visitor friendly open space at Abbey Road Village Green.

Trees and Hedgerows:

The trees and hedgerows are being maintained in line with the programme and a new tree 'conditioning report' will be prepared next month. The committee is also reforming the hedgerow working party in the near future.

20's Plenty: The committee has formed a working party to support the 20's Plenty Campaign which is a community project being run by people drawn from the community who have compiled draft plans for the implementation of a 20mph speed limit throughout Steyning, backed by a public consultation with the majority in favour. The project has gone forward to WSCC for approval.

Other projects:

The committee has agreed to improve the fingerposts to the Memorial Garden in the MPF to make it easier for visitors, particularly the disabled, to find the garden.

In cooperation with Steyning in Bloom the bus shelter is going to be enhanced with troughs of flowers, freshly painted toilet doors and new notice boards. There will be a re-cycling bin also positioned close by – the position has yet to be agreed.

The committee agreed to the purchasing of diversion signs for major events that can be used by any community group, like the Jubilee Street party and has agreed to purchase a bench to celebrate the Queen's Jubilee. Different sites where it can be placed are being considered.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Clerk, the deputy clerk and all the staff for all their continued hard work in supporting the Community Committees projects over the last year and to the host of volunteers without whom Steyning would not be the place that all of us feel privileged to enjoy living in.

Planning and Premises Committee

During the year the Council has advised Horsham District Council (HDC) on over 120 planning applications and met a total of 16 times, reflecting the continuing trend to 'improve not move'. Recent correlation figures show that of 100 applications both Steyning Parish Council (SPC) and HDC agreed no objection to the applications. Only one application to which SPC had no objection was subsequently declined by HDC. The Committee can therefore be confident that its decision-making is predominantly in line with HDC's planning approach. To its credit, the Committee has not failed to meet and submit comments to HDC on all planning applications received.

There have been several controversial planning applications this year which have attracted a full public gallery to Committee meetings, most notably: Rock Common Quarry Development, Washington; Enso Solar Farm development, Huddleston Farm; and Richborough Estates development for over 260 homes at Glebe Farm. The Committee is thankful for local residents' interest and their valuable contribution to the debate.

In June the Planning Committee embraced the premises element of the previously known Amenities Committee to establish a more evenly spread workload across the Council. The Planning & Premises Committee has met since then on the fourth Monday of each month. The premises element of the Committee oversees the running of the Steyning Centre and the High Street public toilets.

Room hire and use of the Steyning Centre has clearly been affected by the pandemic and need for social distancing. However, the Centre is now back to pre-Covid booking levels with previous clients returning, new ones joining and people booking the halls for functions and events.

At the end of academic year 2021 the manager of the long-standing Steyning Pre-school facility retired, and the Committee was charged with agreeing a new playschool provider. No pre-school would have left the village with a greatly reduced pre-school service, and the Council a substantial reduction in annual income. A new credible provider was eventually found, and the Committee agreed its appointment in time for the beginning of academic year 2022.

Film night attendance is picking up post-Covid and is benefiting from the easing of restrictions in terms of numbers and standing delivery of refreshments from the hatch in the Saxon Room. 75 attended the March screening.

In terms of equipment/facilities, the Steyning Centre has completed the change to LED Lighting throughout the building and purchased the following items: a card reader machine to allow customers to pay by credit/debit card; camera and recording equipment to record Council meetings and upload these to the SPC website; and a new projector to replace out-of-date equipment.

Looking ahead, the Council has agreed to the immediate installation of a new dishwasher after 25 years. A ramp for the bus shelter has also been requested and is under discussion and awaiting quotes for costs.

The Committee would like to thank the Deputy Clerk for all her hard work in researching projects, sourcing quotes, clerking meetings and for excellently carrying out the wishes of the Committee members over the past year

The Council

As a Council we have had two main issues to address this last year – the progression of the Neighbourhood plan process and having to deal with Covid.

We have now responded to the Examiners questions concerning our Neighbourhood plan, and earlier today we received further update from the Examiner which draws us ever nearer to a public referendum.

The biggest challenge this last year has been trying to cope with Covid related issues, not least having to navigate our way both in Council Chamber or Zoom and at the Steyning Centre through, and then out of, the many levels of Covid restrictions

Finally, once again I would like to thank our Neighbourhood Wardens and PCSO's, my fellow Councillors and all of our partner organisations for all their hard work over the year and John, Hazel and Tessa for their support, patience, hard work and unfailing good humour.