

Joanna's Chairmans Report - Annual Parish Meeting 20th March '23

Welcome to the Annual Parish Meeting and thank you all for coming. I don't intend to take up too much of your time as I'm sure you're all keen to enjoy the refreshments and the opportunity to talk to Councillors, if you so wish. I'm now going to update you on the activities of our various committees.

Finance and General Purposes Committee

This year was fragmented for the committee, due to meetings being cancelled or being occasionally inquorate. Despite this however, the committee has been able to complete its work during the year. Local groups have continued to be supported with funding. This includes the Steyning and District Partnership (Food and Drink Festival), Steyning for Trees (Tree Guard for its recognition award-winning commemorative tree), the Steyning Society (co-funding the installation of their commemorative bench) and Steyning in Bloom (Flowers and planters) plus many more. The Festive lights in the High Street have been a great success and a new design is chosen each year, to bring variety, and indeed we have already agreed next seasons display. The committee agreed a Strategic Plan, together with an Action Plan, to inform both council members and residents of the tasks undertaken by the Council, current projects and its future aspirations. The Action Plan had 14 projects including – the Neighbourhood Plan being brought into 'legal force', commemorative tree and bench installations, the first PPG monitor installed within the local area, and the Rublees Allotments Water Service Enhancement, indeed only four projects are remaining to be completed.

The committee have managed the finances well and have overseen strong reserves for a council of the size of SPC and this diligence has enabled the Council to weather the financial issues imposed by the pandemic and was able to agree to recommend to Council a 2% increase in the precept as the minimum to cover rise in costs and to support residents 'during the cost of living' crisis. The committee was also able to agree salary increases in line with the NALC National Salary Award proposal.

Income has been affected by the loss of the nursery group but lettings for the space are improving, and through tenacious promotion and a flexible approach to room hire arrangements from our staff the short fall has almost been made up with new bookings such as the very successful monthly comedy shows.

The committee worked with HDC to finalise the plan for the refurbishment of the Newman's Garden car park, which should be completed in the summer.

The committee finalised the new 3-year contracts for the Grass Cutting and Street Cleaning and although the Street Cleaning costs had risen significantly, it was decided to go ahead with the contractor rather than rely on a less expensive option provided by HDC which would not have provided the same level of service. A one-year extension to the Youth service provision contract was also agreed and we are continuing to try and source suitable premises for the service to operate from, after the loss of the Cuthman Centre

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the members of the committee for the work that they have done over the last year, and thanks also to the Clerk, and the staff, for all their support which enabled the committee to complete its workload.

Communities Committee

The scheme to enhance the water supply to the Allotments was completed in time for last summer's heatwave and subsequent drought.

We have undertaken essential tree works on the Memorial Playing Field, Canada Gardens, Cripps Lane, Abbey Road, Rublees and Godstalls lane, which should ensure the continued good health and longevity of the Parishes' tree stocks. We purchased and installed a commemorative jubilee bench, which looks resplendent at the entrance to Fletchers Croft.

Memorial Benches have been agreed and installed on the MPF, and the Abbey Road rewilding project is receiving plaudits from the Sussex Wildlife Trust as its habitat becomes increasingly diverse and it becomes more of a welcome recreational resource, thanks to the work and enthusiasm of our wonderful band of local volunteers.

Improvements to the Bus Shelter were considered by the committee and after much discussion it was decided that this sits more appropriately with the Premises committee, who are discussing various options, however the doors and windows have been painted, new poster boards have been installed, there is agreement to relocate the notice board and new planters have already been attached to the Shelter as a completed first stage. These will be populated by Steyning in Bloom volunteers in late April, in time for summer.

Planning and Premises Committee.

It has been another busy year for the Planning and Premises Committee meeting on a monthly basis, making it the most frequently convened Committee on the SPC calendar.

On the planning front, the Committee has appraised 91 planning applications. Its advisory comments have aligned well with Horsham District Council planning decisions with an 85% mutual agreement. A significant planning application received by SPC this year has been the development of a Solar Farm in farmland on the outskirts of Steyning. Initially this application was rejected on the basis of scale and subsequent impact on the area, but a more modest plan has since been approved. In terms of housing development, Steyning falls in an area of compromised water supply and the requirement to ensure water neutrality has restricted multiple housing development plans. This has recently eased, and smaller development plans have been approved. But the issue is still very much at the forefront of HDC's planning considerations.

On a domestic planning level, the Committee has been mindful of its stock of smaller 'downsizing' and more affordable properties and has actively sought to prevent over development of smaller properties both in terms of property footfall and site area. Also, as part of SPC's climate action initiative, the Committee has drawn up a 'green checklist' in collaboration with Steyning Greening to aid in assessing the environmental impact of planning applications.

Moving on to SPC premises, the Committee has overseen several maintenance and improvement projects at the Steyning Centre, including an updated state-of-the-art audio-visual system and a new dishwasher for the kitchen. Bookings at the Centre are still going well after last year's post-pandemic bounce back, and the withdrawal of the regular preschool facility. Film nights are now regularly making a profit, and new social events, such as the monthly comedy night, are proving really popular.

My thanks go to Hazel, our wonderful Deputy Clerk for all her hard work on behalf of the Planning and Premises committee and her consistently sound advice and feedback. Also, to Tessa for helping out in the background.

The Council

As a Council we now have a “made” Steyning Neighbourhood plan - as the plan passed the referendum stage with a considerable majority. We, in common with all other Parishes in the Horsham District, are now awaiting HDC’s Local plan. It has however, continued to be a challenging year for Steyning Parish Council. As I’m sure many of you will know Horsham District Council (our Principal Authority) decided to commission a review of SPC following high levels of Code of Conduct submissions being received and brought in external consultants Hoey Ainscough (HA) to conduct this. HA concluded that SPC is a council that is, in the main, functioning well and effectively, but that there were concerns around Councillor behaviour and attitudes. They recommended that we, as a Council signed the Civility and Respect pledge and undertook to abide by its precepts, namely, to treat each other with civility and respect. The majority of Councillors have signed up to this, but it is disappointing that not everyone has done so yet. Additionally, we are working to fulfil our commitment to the process by completing actions set out within the mutually agreed implementation plan.

I would like to thank Paul and Michael, our Neighbourhood Wardens, and our Caretakers, Matthew, Steve and John G and John C, for all their hard work over the last year and John, Hazel and Tessa for keeping us all on track, juggling many conflicting deadlines and of course supporting all of us.

Indeed special thanks to Paul Conroy who has been a loyal servant to this and our sister parishes in the role of Neighbourhood Warden for more than 20 years now as he is due to retire in the next few weeks

Finally, a reminder that this is an election year, with polling day on May the 4th, please do vote, and if you would like to consider becoming a Councillor, please talk to anyone of us, or John.

The deadline for nomination papers to be with HDC, is April 4th.