

Drinkstone Annual Parish Meeting

12th May 2016

Parish Council Chairman's Report

2015 was the year not just of the General Election, but also of an election for the Parish Council. For the first time for a number of years we have a fully elected council, and the councillors you see before you were voted in on a 78% turnout of the electorate.

Governments would give an arm and a leg for that sort of turn out at an election. So thank you to the people who have placed their confidence in us. We are going to do our very best to deliver some real benefits to the community over the next three years.

The first and most urgent task facing us was to recruit and appoint a Clerk. Doug Read, who had been acting as Clerk since the beginning of the year kindly agreed to stay on until we could find a permanent replacement. I would like to thank him for the invaluable help, support and advice he gave me as a rookie Chairman. Poor man was pestered daily with questions, some important and some which must have made him roll his eyes in despair.

Councillor Lambert had already done an excellent piece of work to benchmark the salary we were offering against what similar councils were paying their clerks. Her researches established that what we were offering was way below the going rate for the job.

People aren't actually queuing up to be clerks, so the combination of that and an uncompetitive salary probably explained why suitable candidates hadn't been beating a path to our door for the preceding year.

We also decided that it was time to combine the role of Clerk and Responsible Finance Officer, to bring us line with good practice and effect a clear separation between financial management, which is the responsibility of councillors, and keeping the books which is the task of the finance officer.

Once the council had approved a realistic salary and the SALC recommended number of hours for the job, we readvertised and within weeks had responses from not just one, but two well qualified candidates.

Our new clerk, Paula, joined us at the end of August, and we have been fortunate to have found a highly qualified and experienced clerk to keep us on the straight and narrow!

I cannot let this moment pass without thanking Councillor Cousins for her many years of work as our treasurer. Thank you Sue.

With our new clerk in post it was then time to move on to some more housekeeping.

Having to pay our Clerk the going rate for the job blew a bit of a hole in our budget. Councillors Schofield, Lambert and I got together to examine the budget and work out ways of accommodating financial reality within the limits of both low income and depleted reserves. In this financial year we were able to reassign sums from underspent or unspent budget lines and make judicious use of our limited reserves to break even.

However we have had to raise the precept considerably for next year in order to run a sustainable budget. Money needs to be found to replenish the election fund and build up reserves in case any

work needs doing on the large old trees on the newly acquired section of the Cricket, aka the Cheese Wedge. New audit costs have also been passed down to Parish Councils.

I would like to continue with the idea of a working group to carry out the annual budgeting process. Compared with other Parish Councils of a similar size, Drinkstone has very little money, so it is even more important for us to have a rigorous and transparent budgeting process. We will be making sure that our precept can be justified. It is the budget that determines the precept. Councils have been known to decide to increase the precept and then tweak the budget to make it add up to the new number!

Other aspects of the council's activity also needed bringing up to date. The most significant of these was the requirement of new transparency legislation. This makes it obligatory for councils to publish all their financial information, the policies which govern their operation and behaviour, as well as minutes of meetings and all supporting documents.

The Parish Council section of the village website has been revamped to make all this information available as soon as it is created. I would like to thank Lynne Woodward for the hours of work she has put in restructuring the PC web pages. She had to put up with a lot of grief from a picky Chairman, including questions like "Why does the website have to be so BLUE?"

Now all this has been a bit inward looking, but I hope it means that we as a council are now running a tight ship.

So let's look outwards.

Planning

There have been some changes this year, the effects of which are still unknown. HM Government declared MSDC's local plan to "out of date", and thus in future the presumption will be in favour of development. This is regardless of the settlement hierarchy which designated Drinkstone a "countryside village" and thus protected from any new housing development.

It would appear that we are still unlikely to experience much in the way of new build, as we do not qualify as a "sustainable community" under the new National Planning Policy Framework. Mid Suffolk and Babergh are developing a new local plan which should be going out to consultation later this year. So its a case of watch this space.

True grit

We set up a volunteer register this year for spreading grit where needed at junctions. Yes, I know, it was a pretty mild winter. By registering their willingness to help, the volunteers are covered by the council's indemnity insurance. Thanks to Councillor Otton's generous contribution from her locality budget we have been able to buy 4 grit bins to tidy up some of the unsightly heaps of sand and stop them killing people's hedges. Thanks to Penny, and to the volunteers.

Highways and footpaths

The online reporting system for problems seems to bring results - eventually. There are ongoing problems with a couple of drains which we are chasing, and the usual issues with overgrown footpaths. The county council operates a very limited cutting schedule and by July some of the paths are impassable until the farmers cut the crops and also clear many paths at the same time.

I wonder if there is any mileage in an "adopt a footpath" scheme? What do you think? Perhaps coordinated maintenance with SCC, volunteers and landowners might improve things for walkers in the summer.

In any case I would like to thank those landowners who keep their paths in good order. The footpaths are a valuable and much appreciated amenity.

Broadband

This is a bit of a pet subject for me. Adequate broadband provision with acceptable speeds is essential for rural communities - for children's education, for businesses and for all of us to access government services and not just the latest movies on Netflix. I'm hoping to persuade a couple of the more technically savvy blokes I know to help get some clarity out of the smoke, mirrors and moving goalposts which are characterising the roll out plans for so-called superfast broadband in Suffolk.

A few thanks now. I'll try not to go on as long as an acceptance speech at the Oscars!

Thanks to my fellow councillors who have put in a lot of work this year. To my Vice Chair Lorna for taking meetings brilliantly in my absence.

To Councillor Otton for her support, not just financial. You seem to be the only person who can get useful information out of MSDC planning department!

Thanks also to Paula whose patience, experience and expertise demonstrates beyond doubt the value that a good clerk brings to a council.

And finally thanks to all of you, who take part in our meetings, alert us to problems, bring knowledge and advice and generally keep us on our toes.

Daphne Youngs
Chair, Drinkstone Parish Council