

Coffinswell Annual Parish Meeting 16 April 2024 – Chair’s report

Personnel

This is the end of the first year of the current 2023-2027 Parish Council election period. Elections were held in May 2023 when all six seats on the Council were up for election, (including the additional seat granted by Teignbridge following an earlier request from the Parish Council to increase the number of councillors). Four people stood for election and were duly elected unopposed. These were Michael Atkinson, Stephen Avery, Cyrena Bell, and myself Nick Orchard. Ashley Brent and Sally Spokes were persuaded to join the Council again and were duly co-opted at the May Annual Parish Council meeting. So, together with Lucie-Anne Moore as our Parish Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer, we have had a year with a full and un-changed Parish Council, in contrast to the various upheavals of the previous year.

As well as the Parish Council elections last May, we also had Teignbridge District Council elections. We said farewell to our long-standing District Councillor Mike Haines who retired, and welcomed two newly elected District Councillors, Jane Taylor and John Radford, who both represent the South Devon Alliance Party. We thank Jane and John for their valued contribution this year, as we also thank our Devon County Councillor Alistair Dewhirst for his steadfast support.

Finance

Moving on to the Parish Council finances, I’m happy to report that these are in good stead. Our spending was within budget across the board and we have maintained our reserves at our target of about 12 months revenue spend. Last year we decided not to request an increase in precept from Teignbridge as we felt we would be able to manage with the same precept as we had for 2022-2023. With inflation running at about 10% at the time, we felt that this would be a small contribution to keeping parishioners’ cost of living down. This year, although inflation has reduced, we felt it prudent to request a 6% increase, representing an average increase of 3% over the two years 2023-24/2024-25, and this has been agreed by Teignbridge. I am therefore reasonably confident that our finances are adequate to cover our expenses over the next year.

Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) fund – as part of our plan to move to battery powered strimming and hedge trimming kit, we spent some of the CIL funds on a new hedge trimmer, plus some additional batteries and other accessories, so we now have a good selection of kit that all works together and in various combinations. Having used the kit for the past year or so we’ve found it just as effective as the old petrol powered kit, but much quieter and more reliable, and no need to pay for an expensive professional annual service. I’ll now look to disposing of the remaining petrol-powered strimmers.

Also paid for by the CIL fund last year was the purchase of a defibrillator kit, together with a polycarbonate housing, which has been installed at Dacombe Cross. This gives those

people living at the Dacombe end of the parish much better and quicker access to a defibrillator than if they have to go all the way to the Linny to get one.

We now have roughly £3,000 in remaining in the CIL fund and we would welcome suggestions for how to spend it.

Parish Paths Partnership (P3) funding – we received a P3 grant of £300 last year, which we requested in order to buy chippings to lay down on Footpath 1 round The Bothy. This path tends to get very muddy in wet weather, although considering the amount of rain we've had in the last six months, it's not been as bad as it has in previous years. For various reasons we have deferred the work to the 2024-2025 financial year, so we have not made a funding request to P3 for this year. Thanks go to Tim Rumball for volunteering to take on the management of the P3 work and the associated kit, and to Cllr Ashley Brent for his ongoing support.

Meetings

Last year the Council decided to revert to a bi-monthly meetings, as we felt that the monthly meetings trialled the year before had become a little onerous. This should not cause a significant problem as we are a very small parish with virtually no public facilities to manage, so the agenda is normally manageable bi-monthly. The only problems arise when planning applications are submitted and comments from the Parish Council are required before the next scheduled meeting. Our policy is that if the application is a significant one and is likely to affect parishioners, then we will call an extraordinary meeting to discuss the application. For applications that are unlikely to be controversial, e.g. tree pruning, repair work to a listed building etc., then we will discuss these informally outside the meetings and submit a consensus response to Teignbridge. We have operated this process a number of times this year and so far, we are happy with the way it's gone, so we'll be continuing with the bi-monthly meeting calendar for the 2024-2025 year.

Planning

In last year's report I mentioned that there had been some disquiet among a lot of Teignbridge Parish Councils that Teignbridge Planning Department was not performing adequately. Although a couple of meetings were held, which we attended, where it was agreed that it would be good if we could all work together, no one has yet volunteered to take on the onerous task of managing this new group, so little progress has been made. However, I believe that TDC has got the message and is keen to improve relations with the parishes and also to improve its handling of applications. We know that they have been having a lot of trouble recruiting and retaining good planning officers, but something needs to be done to get applications processed in a timely and effective manner.

We have not been particularly overburdened with planning applications this year, and most have been relatively uncontroversial. On the whole TDC has made decisions in line with our views and recommendations, although we are still waiting for decisions on a few contentious applications that may or may not go our way. The main decision made by TDC this year was the approval of the Court Barton Farm solar farm project. Although the Parish

Council voted to support this application, we asked for the decision to be made by the Planning Committee rather than being a delegated decision. We were a little surprised when the decision was announced without having gone to committee. When we questioned this, we were told we hadn't submitted the request on the proper form. And they wonder why we're not happy with their work. Work has not yet started on the solar farm and I don't have any information yet as to when it will start, but it's likely that there will be some disruption on the roads when it does, so I'll endeavour to keep the Parish informed.

Our main planning issues this year have been to do with enforcement rather than applications. You may remember that we had a caravan parked on Orestone Lane for several months last year and it took some effort to get it moved. Thanks to those who did eventually get it sorted, particularly Cllr Jane Taylor.

Strategic Plan

The strategic plan for the parish, created originally by my predecessor as Chair, Alex Parkes, was reviewed and updated this year. We have divided the plan into two parts, the first part outlines what the Parish Council does and how it does it, the second part is a list of activities that are on the current 'to-do' list, with a traffic light monitor. We thought it appropriate to reset the plan to match the period of office of the current council, so this version of the plan covers May 2023 to May 2027. The updating of Part 1 has been completed and was adopted at the last meeting of the Council in March this year. The original version of Part 2 covering 2021-2024 has been updated with progress on the activities, but this will be further reviewed and updated to cover 2023-2027 during this coming year.

Church Issues and Status

Although the Parish Council does not have an active role in managing St Bartholomew's Church, (that is done by the Parochial Church Council), we do still have an interest in the wellbeing of the church. It is an historic building, the focal point of the parish and also the only place where we can meet, quite apart from the spiritual role for which it was originally built of course. In common with many parishes, both town and country, church attendance has declined significantly, and this has had a serious impact on the church finances. If a parish church is unable to pay its way, then it faces the possibility of closure, and this has happened to many churches in recent years. There is also a problem with finding people to take on the role of Church Warden, and without Church Wardens the church is again under threat of closure. Our two Church Wardens, Michele Berry and Gordon Bower, have been doing this job for many years, in fact far longer than the six years that they are supposed to serve. The Parish Council does its best to support the church as best it can but for the last couple of years we have been told that we are not allowed to give the annual grant that we used to give, so the only way that we can legitimately give money is by hiring the church for meetings. We have money in the budget to cover more meetings than we need, so we are encouraging anyone who would like to hire the church for their meeting or event to apply to the Council for the cost of the hire.

Although a Church Giving scheme has raised more funds for the church it seems that this is still not sufficient to pay the annual diocese Parish Share in full, so the diocese is proposing

that St Bartholomew's Church will become a Chapel of Rest. This status will reduce the onus of both the Parish Share and the Church Wardens, while still allowing baptisms and funeral services to be held. Weddings may be held with a licence and people will still be able to be buried in the churchyard. We hope that this arrangement will prolong the active life of St Bartholomew's, but the Parish Council will continue to support the church in whatever way we can.

Roads and Footpaths

Considering the amount of rain that we've had over the last six months or so, our roads, gullies and drains are not coping too badly. Having said that, when the rain has been particularly heavy, a lot of soil has washed off the fields, down Connybear Lane, past the Linny and ended up between the Round House and Churchway path. Many thanks to those who have worked to clear the mess and kept the roads passable (mostly) but I fear that things won't get back to normal until we've had a reasonable stretch of dry weather and the land has drained. Devon CC has cleared some gullies, notably the one that was causing the cascade across the road at Dacombe Cross, but others are still blocked. I'm told that they will be carrying out their annual inspections of gullies in May, so hopefully improvements will be made then.

I think the bad weather has also been the cause of the increase in potholes, which seem to grow from a small dip to a significant depth in a matter of days sometimes. Again, DCC have filled in some potholes but other remain to catch the unwary. I can remind everyone that you can easily report potholes on Devon CC's website, and this is the best way to get a pothole on their repair list.

One thing that is often raised regarding the roads is the matter of speeding cars, particularly when there are problems on St Marychurch Road, and cars and vans divert through the village. It would be nice to have a 20 or 30mph speed limit instead of the national 60mph limit, but it seems this is not possible without significant other changes, e.g. we need lamp posts spaced at about 30m intervals. We are not allowed to erect signs on the sides of the highway if they look like official signs, so it seems that the best we can do is to put '20 is Plenty' signs on our bins, as these will only be seen temporarily while the bins are out. The Council has agreed to purchase a stock of these stickers and we'll distribute these to anyone who would like one in due course.

Thanks to Matt Redmond for volunteering to become our Road Warden this year.

Thanks also to Tim Rumball for managing the footpaths this year, he's done a great job of keeping the paths passable. We don't claim that they're perfect but on the whole they are all looking good. We'll be hoping to get the chippings to lay on Footpath 1 shortly which should make that path less muddy.

The only problem we've had this year on the paths has been a spate of cars and motorbikes using the bridlepath past the quarry as a race track/joy ride. When stopped they claim that 'Google sent me this way'. Some additional signs at the bottom of the hill near Romany

Jones and some at the top seem to have worked and I've not had any more reports of nuisance cars recently.

Policing and Neighbourhood Watch

I'm pleased to report that we've had a relatively quiet year regarding policing and Neighbourhood Watch issues. We had a few thefts from cars in Dacombe, and some fly-tipping to deal with, but mostly things have been civilised. Teignbridge have been quick to act on fly-tipping reports and removed them relatively quickly. Fly-tipping can be reported on Teignbridge's website.

First Aid Training

Following a suggestion that some first aid training for parishioners would be beneficial, the Council agreed to spend some funds on supporting some first aid courses. We arranged two courses at the end of last year and a total of about 20 people were trained in first response and life-saving methods. We had an excellent trainer from First Aid Exeter and I think everyone who attended felt it was very worthwhile, particularly as it removed some of the mystery about using the defibrillators. This training benefits not only the people who receive it, but of course the rest of us who may at some time need their new expertise, so we think it was money well-spent.

Having mentioned the defibrillators, the Coffinswell unit has been taken a couple of times recently as a precaution, but I'm pleased to report that it was not actually needed in the event. I think having easy access to a defibrillator, and also having more people confident in using it, helps us all.

Thanks

Many people contribute to our parish and its life, and I'd like to thank everyone who does a little, or a lot, to keep the parish going, looking good, and being a great place to live.

Thanks to the farmers who manage the landscape, cut all the hedges, remove fallen and diseased trees, and when they've done that, grow our food.

Thanks to the team that looks after the church. As mentioned above, it's been a difficult year for the church and they're all working hard to try and ensure its future.

Thanks to the well area gardeners, Sheenagh and Sue, for their expert gardening skills, and to Jed and Roger for bringing and taking away. Sue also keeps the area around the Coffinswell sign on Under Way look nice, and Sheenagh has given the triangle opposite the Linny a makeover recently. Paul and Gail at Hillside have cleared all the brambles and weeds from the plot at the top of the hill next to them and it's nice to see the brook again.

Thanks to Vince Flower for his work managing the teams of litter pickers, and the litter pickers as well of course. Vince has now handed this role to Sheenagh Orchard as part of her Neighbourhood Watch role and she's in the process of reviewing the list of volunteers following some departures and new arrivals in the villages.

Thanks to Sheenagh for the work that she does as Neighbourhood Watch coordinator. This year she has also combined this with the role of Police Liaison as it avoids duplication of effort.

Thanks to all those, too many to mention, who keep their front gardens and neighbouring verges etc so neat, tidy and beautifully planted. A walk through the village at any time of year is always a horticultural treat.

Finally, thank you again to my fellow councillors, past and present, and to Alistair, Jane and John, for their work and their support, and finally to our Clerk Lucie for the great work that she does keeping us all in order, and I look forward to the next year.

Nick Orchard

Chair – Coffinswell Parish Council

16 April 2024