

Chairmans Report May 2015 ~ April 2016

This year we have seen the full complement of 9 councillors serving Church Knowle Parish Council. I would like to begin my report by paying tribute to the councillors both individually and collectively; every single councillor is committed to serving the Parish of Church Knowle with diligence, care and integrity for the benefit of the whole community. We have, I believe, an exceptionally strong council; part of its strength lies in the local knowledge held by councillors who have lived and worked in the parish for years ~ even decades. They bring a wealth of information and experience; they are not afraid to voice strongly held opinions or beliefs if they feel it's in the interests of the community. Goodness knows they have needed that strength during the course of this past year with allegations of misconduct (unfounded as it turned out); a record number of planning applications; complaints made to the parish council about unlawful building, mass cycling events, traffic problems to name but a few.

Planning Issues:

The Parish Council received 20 planning applications to consider: of these 11 had no objection from the parish council ~ 2 had no objection but were subject to comment. 2 planning applications received objections with comments from the parish council but were passed by PDC then subjected to a number of amendments. In addition there was 1 planning application for Agricultural use the council commented upon. 2 Mineral extraction applications were received to which the council recorded No Objection and were also passed by PDC. The council received 1 application for a Certificate of Lawful use; although the council had no objection the application was withdrawn. Tree work applications ~ 4 applications were received to which the council recorded No Objection.

The council also had to consider 4 cases of Unlawful Development ~ these ranged from changes to original planning permission to no application having been submitted.

In addition the parish council participated in 2 public enquiries ~ firstly The Navitus Bay Wind Farm Application which was subsequently Refused; secondly the Certificate of Unlawful Use issued by PDC against Bucknowle Farm's use as a campsite, subsequently this was overruled by the Planning Inspector.

The parish council participated in and responded to 3 Reports: Purbeck District Council's Taxi Policy; the Partial Review of the Purbeck Local Plan and The Dorset Heathlands Planning Framework 2015-2020.

St. Peters Church Cemetery

Concerns about overgrowth in part of the cemetery were brought to the attention of the council by a parishioner. The "yew tree" thought to be the main concern was in fact a cupressus leylandii which the council voted to be cut back together with adjoining shrubbery and the area around it tidied up. This was carried out successfully and the cemetery is much improved. The council received 2 requests for new memorials which were approved.

One area of concern was the question of burial fees which had not been reviewed for a number of years. We compared the current level of fees with those of other local councils; not surprisingly there was considerable variation between councils. The council considered burial fees from 5 other local parishes and took an average cost for the various forms of burial requirements which necessitated a slight adjustment to our own fees. New fees were proposed, approved and implemented (details are published on the Church Knowle Parish Council website).

Highways

Cyclists continue to be a cause of vexation to many parishioners. The vast majority of leisure cyclists are reasonable and courteous road-users; who understand and respect our lanes with potential “hazards” such as horse-riders or walkers around the next bend.

Unfortunately there are still those who see our lovely hills and countryside as just a challenge to speed through as fast as possible with little regard for the Highway Code, the Countryside Code, other road-users, parishioners or animals. It’s unfortunate this minority pay little attention to the Cyclists’ Voluntary Code of Conduct drawn up by the police, Purbeck District Council and several Parish Councils in conjunction with cycle clubs and cycling event organisers; how easy it is for a few to spoil it for the majority! Incidentally the same problem is being experienced and reported in other parts of the country which are privileged to have a beautiful and scenic environment; those councils and organisations affected (the New Forest, the Lake District to name just two) have also agreed similar Voluntary Codes of Conduct. However as is the case with our own situation it remains a **Voluntary** code.

The BOAT (Byway Open to All Traffic) also continues to be a topic of lively discussion amongst councillors. As it affects our neighbours in Corfe a small committee has been set up consisting of 3 Corfe Castle councillors together with 3 councillors from Church Knowle Parish Council to try and resolve some of the problems arising from conflicting interests. We have met with officers from Dorset County Council to look at ways of reducing the impact on the environment by the few who abuse the right of way by straying off the “highway”, leaving previously closed gates open or simply being abusive to other members of the public who are enjoying the beauty of our lovely parishes. At this point in time it’s a case of “work in progress”.

Maintenance of the roads and lanes is also a regular Agenda item. Various potholes, road edge slumping and other surface deterioration have been reported by our ever-vigilant councillors and some successful repairs and resolutions achieved. However we do recognise that with DCC facing difficult budget-making decisions progress is not always straightforward.

Flooding has been a cause of concern to both councillors and parishioners this past “wet” year. Again, given the scale and extent of flooding in the County with major A-class roads having to be closed it is surprising our local problems have been cleared as quickly as they have. Special thanks to DCC Councillor Mike Lovell for his work in getting a flood-relief programme to Furzebrook Road so quickly.

Special thanks must go to DCC Councillor Mike Lovell again for using part of his allocated budget to purchase a salt/grit bin for East Creech when the winter ice or snow arrives also for 2 new replacement finger-posts to be made and erected in the parish.

Whilst as yet no Speed Limits have been set for the lanes or roads in the Parish some progress has been made by giving the relevant officer from DCC's Highways Department a guided tour of the Parish so she can see what we are actually requesting, its position and its relevance. Whilst she was sympathetic to our requests as yet there is no further progress. Another funding issue??

Finally the Bucknowle Badgers are triumphant once again with earth spoil now causing further concern to all road users as it encroaches across the road on a particularly nasty bend. Sadly one feels it will require a particularly nasty incident with potential injuries before any long lasting effective remedy is provided.

Website

All councils are now required to have a web-site to keep everyone with an interest in their region informed of developments, meetings etc as part of transparency and openness. CKPC finally published its website at www.churchknowle-pc.gov.uk in March. It now needs regular updating to keep everyone with an interest in the parish au fait with Council matters. This is normally done on a monthly basis although the Minutes of our Meetings can only be published when accepted and approved at the next subsequent Meeting.

Code of Conduct & Allegation of Misconduct

Probably the single most disturbing episode that affected the whole council was the allegation of misconduct and failure to disclose a pecuniary interest that had been levelled against one councillor. This allegation was made to Purbeck District Council and was of such a nature that the Monitoring Officer was obliged to report it to the police as it was deemed to be a criminal offence. The fact the allegation was made by a person or persons who had not attended any parish council meeting during the year; the fact that the councillor had declared a pecuniary interest at every council meeting which involved said interest; the fact that it was the Parish Council who had asked that councillor to provide further explanation and information so the Parish Council could make an informed and impartial decision; the fact that each and every councillor had acted in good faith to ascertain the facts regarding a planning application ~ all these were deemed to be of no consequence. During the police investigation which lasted 6 long months the final conclusion reached by the investigating officer was that the named councillor had acted in good faith on the advice given and there was no case to answer. All this at a cost to the tax payer for the police investigation as well as the financial and mental cost to the named councillor.

Perhaps some good may have come from this debacle as a meeting was held with PDC chief executive Steve Mackenzie together with PDC Cllrs Malcolm Barnes and Gary Suttle and attended by several councillors from Church Knowle Parish Council. A frank discussion took place with the anomalies of the Localism Act 2011 brought into sharp relief. Such anomalies include the fact that it would appear that councillors forfeit their personal rights for a fair hearing under the 2011 Localism Act; parish councillors cannot directly question one of their

own councillors in order to make an informed judgement instead would have to question via “an agent”!

A further consequence was the attendance at our February meeting by the Monitoring Officer, David Fairbairn. The Localism Act 2011 was causing a considerable amount of concern to many, if not all, parish councils within Purbeck and Mr Fairbairn was visiting each and every one of the parish councils to explain and clarify the issues raised by the Act. The general tone of his resume to the council was to be seen as “whiter than white” no matter how trivial the matter being discussed and whether dispensations were or were not required. It also highlighted the necessity of ensuring correct advice and training on changes to various Acts pertaining to Local Government was available. All this for unpaid councillors who voluntarily and willingly give up their time for the benefits of the local community!

Finances

The parish finances are in good order; In April 2015 we had £5,829.27 in the general or current account and a balance of £4,755.95 at the April 2016 Account. Major costs included renewal of the notice boards (£477.31), roadside grit bin for winter salt at East Creech (£170.40) and the creation and development of the Parish Website (£468.99) ~ the latter 2 being funded retrospectively by Dorset County Council through Cllr Mike Lovell and the Dorset Association of parish and Town Councils (DAPTC) retrospectively for the website. NB The audited accounts are based on a summary of receipts and payments for the year ending 31st March 2016 ie they summarise the total receipts including the precept, cemetery fees etc received during the year, similarly they summarise the total payments made during the financial year including Capital Items such as Playing Field equipment.

Other accounts included the Scottish Widows (Savings Account) which commenced with £2,417.92 in April 2015 and £2,427.64 in April 2016.

The Playground Fund commenced with £2,778.91 in April 2015 and following a Gift of £100 from a parishioner closed at £2,880.17 in April 2016. Major costs included £861.60 for new goal posts and nets largely paid for by generous donation from Viridor.

Major considerations were given to the burial fees for the parish which had not been reviewed for several years (see the paragraph on the Cemetery above).

The council was advised to consider raising the precept as we were informed of the likelihood of all council taxes and precepts being “frozen” in the near future. The council after much deliberation increased the precept for the forthcoming year to £6,000.00. This decision was reached reluctantly on the basis there would be a moratorium on future increases and with increasing costs we could be faced with deficit budgets in due course. Bearing in mind that the council is not allowed to set a deficit budget we have hopefully safeguarded the future.

In conclusion: this year has provided a number of “challenges” and these are only going to increase during forthcoming years. Not least will be the question of how we retain the tranquillity of our lovely rural parish and meet the increasing demands from planning applications, mass cycling events, more coaches to local attractions such as the Kimmeridge Fossil Museum etc, etc.

I would like to thank all councillors for their dedicated and unpaid commitment to the Parish of Church Knowle once again for another year. In particular I am personally grateful to Cllr Mrs Hazel Parker as vice-chairman; to Cllr Mr Les Bugler for his unstinting work on the Village Playground and to each and every councillor for their support. My thanks also to our indefatigable Parish Clerk, Alastair Wallace. To DCC Cllr Mike Lovell and PDC Cllr Malcolm Barnes for their advice, support and information which assists the Parish Council in their impartial but informed decision making. I should also like to thank those few local residents who, as parishioners, have attended meetings for Public Discussion and have brought important matters to the attention of the council.

Tony Higgs, Chairman 2015-16.