

Chairperson's Annual report 2021

Presented by Cllr Brentor to the 12th April 2021 Annual meeting

I am pleased to present the annual report for Downton Parish Council. I am presenting this as the current Chair of the Council but would also like to thank Cllrs Cornell, Mace and Hall for undertaking the role of Chair and Vice Chair during periods of the year.

A strange and difficult year for all

This has been an exceptional year. Firstly, I would like, on behalf of the Council, to express our sympathies to all those in the Parish who have lost friends or relatives affected by the Covid virus.

The virus and the national restrictions have made planning and implementation of many of the Council's activities difficult and uncertain. Despite this, many projects have been progressed and I would particularly like to thank Bev Cornish, Parish Clerk, for enabling these to be achieved safely due to her attention to ensuring full risk assessments, seeking expert advice and suggesting and purchasing appropriate protective equipment on behalf of the Council. She, like all of us, has been working in unprecedented times and has enabled safe and compliant procedures in all of the activities in which she has been involved. The Council has continued to meet virtually using Zoom and this has enabled ongoing attendance by members of the public – although the impact of so called 'Zoom bombing', when the meeting has been interrupted by noisy and disruptive apparent non locals recently, has been troublesome.

Achievements during the Year

- Although the public toilets and play area have, at times, had to be closed to meet national guidelines, in each case they have been opened as soon as allowed. Regular playground inspections have been maintained throughout. A £10k Government Business Support grant was applied for by the Clerk and granted.
- Recently five road signs which were broken or removed have been replaced and a project to refurbish some of the existing signs is planned.
- Although the Downton In Bloom project was unable to go ahead because the national project was cancelled, the planters agreed by the Council were purchased in Autumn and were planted up by volunteers with 600 daffodil bulbs.
- The Borough Green Kerbing at the West end of the village was installed in June last year. This was jointly funded by the Longford Estate, Wiltshire Council and the Parish Council and has considerably improved what had been muddy edging to the Green and a lack of clarity about the width of the Borough at that point.
- A tree survey has been carried out and subsequent work to remove or reduce overhanging or dangerous trees has been commissioned and is ongoing. A memorial bench and tree policy was agreed to improve clarity for residents about responsibilities of those wishing to install memorial benches or trees and plants.
- The Council's play equipment is, in some cases, up to 40 years old but it is well used. The Council has undertaken the repair of play equip in the Memorial ground, the Charlton all Saints and the Moot Recreation ground play areas and plans to consider new equipment in the coming year.

- A commemorative bench was installed on the Borough Green and a refurbished bench installed in Moot Lane as well as replacement of other benches in the village.
- Following an inspection by three Parish Councillors, the Council has undertaken repair and improvement work to the cemetery including new notice board, new signs at the entry to the cemetery, new gates and posts and the removal of overgrown shrubs.
- 8 of the Council's 22 public litter bins were replaced October and some further refurbishment is planned.
- Liaison has been maintained with the police and the Council has, throughout, encouraged members of the public to report any incidents. Sadly for us, PC Matt Holland, who was well known in the village, retired in July but good relationships have been continued with the police and two liaison meetings held virtually. In relation to ASB the council has funded repairs to bus shelters with shattered panels and replaced some panels with anti-graffiti material.
- Liaison with the Environment agency has continued and several sessions of drain clearing have taken place
- The Council has also provided grants to The Scouts in support of the replacement of the Scout hut and the BWSCA in support of the refurbishment of the club house.

Representation with local groups and organisations.

- Immediately prior to the lock down that began in March last year, a long running project between the Downton Society and the Caring Community group of the Parish Council to install a slide show with information about local organisations in the GP surgery came to fruition. The aim of this project was to reduce loneliness, encourage community participation and provide local support to vulnerable people or people new to the village. A laptop was funded by the Parish Council to enable this slide show to be shown. Unfortunately, visitors to the surgery have been restricted during the Covid regulations so the slide show has been seen by very few but will be reinstated from June.
- Working with the Council led BWSCA working group, the BWSCA tendered for a provider to run the leisure centre and this was allocated at the end of the last Civic year. Dave Taylor of Gymies won the contract and opened in March 2020 only to close days later due to Covid. However, he has made considerable investment in the Centre and the working group has supported applications for grants and promotion of the Centre when open.
- A new working group was set up in late 2020 to consider a review of the Downton Neighbourhood Plan. As Wiltshire does not have a 5-year housing land supply, the influence of the existing Neighbourhood Plan in planning decision is limited as it is now over two years old. This working group has also drafted the response to the Local Plan review. Cllr Hall is the representative on Wiltshire wide group of Parish Councils with Neighbourhood Plans.
- A lot of work is being undertaken by the Football club to refurbish the old social club and the Parish Council agreed to provide a councillor representative – Cllr Watts will provide this role although the working group has been unable to meet due to restrictions.

- The Council has also commended the work of the Plastic Free Environment group on their work to reduce the use of plastic locally.
- Sadly, the Council's long running project to create a bridge over the Avon to link the West and East parts of the village has stalled recently due to the reversal of the Estate's permission in principle to cross their land. The Council has funded surveys to prepare for this project but will retain the research for future use should the Estate change their views at any time in the future.

Council administration

New personnel policies have been introduced as well as a comprehensive risk register review. A revision of the Burial regulations has also been approved which came into force from 1st April. In addition, a complete photographic asset list has been produced for use with the Council's insurance.

Due to unavailability of councillors, the Water Meadows and Flood Defence Committee has been unable to meet.

The Council has spent significant time on personnel issues during this last year and, because of the confidential nature of the matters involved, these cannot be shared but I feel it is important to acknowledge the impact that these have had on councillors and the administration of the village. Members of the public have commented on the potential costs involved but I can report that only a relatively small amount of the agreed expenditure has been required. During this year, the Council appointed South West Councils as HR advisors.

Work Still to do

Some activities have had to be put on hold such as the installation of bollards, cycle stands and lighting to Borough Cross, the installation of the Speed Indicator Device, signage for Church Hatch to reduce inappropriate use by lorries being amongst these. In such difficult times, I believe the Council has managed to proceed with several improvements and the new Council after elections will no doubt progress these as the Covid restrictions ease. There are plans for Website maintenance and IT support to be outsourced and payroll management will be outsourced by the end of this month.

Representation on local groups

The Council continues to represent the community on the following groups:

Brian Whitehead Sports and Social Club Association

Downton Moot Preservation Trust

The Downton Memorial Centre

Downton Millennium Green Trust

Downton Allotment and Leisure Gardeners Association

Southern Wiltshire Area Board

Southern Wiltshire Area Board – Community Area Transport Group

The Carver Trust Cottages

Downton Cuckoo Fair

The Downton Link Scheme

Stockman and Woodlands Trust

Chalk Pit Management Committee

The last five of these have not had reports to the Council due to Covid restrictions causing reduced meetings.

Thanks

In addition to the thanks which I have already given to Mrs Bev Cornish for all her work as the Parish Clerk, I would like to thank the following people:

Over several years Mr Bob Moody has undertaken work for the Council providing a handyman service. Due to ill health, Mr Moody has had to stand down this year and will be sadly missed. I would like to express our thanks to him for his long and versatile service provision over the years.

Thanks to Paul Cornish for providing IT support and maintaining the Council's website without charge including making it fully compliant with accessibility legislation.

Thanks to Alison McGowan for completing her first full year in post and for her support during the absence of the Clerk. I am pleased to say that her contract has now been made permanent

Thanks to Mr. Rick Ladds for his weekly, voluntary, but mandatory, inspections of the defibrillator in the centre of Downton and to Mr. Bob Tanner who voluntarily collects litter around The Borough area.

Our thanks also to our litter pickers Alex Hastie and, more recently, Ellie Hatch and Ellie Philp who have continued to work, whenever restrictions have allowed, to maintain our village as litter free as possible.

My thanks too go to Christine Pearce, who has been committed to her duties as a Parish Councillor over several years but has sadly had to resign due to personal circumstances.

Lastly but not least, I would like to thank my colleague councillors for all the work and commitment that they have shown over the year despite the Council having been operating at half strength with seven vacancies.