

## **Chairperson's Annual report 2024**

Presented by Cllr Brentor to the 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2024 Annual Meeting

As Chair of Downton Parish Council, I am pleased to present this report. Our Annual Parish meeting took a different format than we have had in the past and which was of interest to all present. For this reason, I am going to keep my report short and allow the Councillors and speakers to provide information on this year's achievements and other information about local matters.

However, the Council has changed during the year both in the way we operate and in ways that can be seen and enjoyed by residents. For this reason, it is important that I thank those who have made real contributions.

I would like to thank Cllr Dave Mace, who is vice Chair of the Council for the support he has provided throughout the year, Cllr North as Chair of the Staffing Committee, Cllr Watts as Chair of the Amenities Committee and all the councillors for the work that they have taken on during an exciting year.

I also want to thank the officers of the Council – Mel Camilleri, our Clerk has worked unstintingly to support councillors and to influence a change in our culture helping us to work as a positive and cooperative team and continuing to ensure our safe and legal operation. Similarly, the introduction of our Administrative Officer, Susan Barnhurst Davies last December has enabled a refreshing and front facing interaction with residents and contractors. She has facilitated tangible changes to those services that make a difference to the local environment such as gully clearing, liaison with the Parish Steward and supporting flood arrangements.

Thanks also to our litter pickers Max Bush and Ellie Philps who together maintain our village as litter free as possible.

Thanks go too to Lt Col (Retd) Bryan Morris and the RBL for organising the Act of Remembrance Event. Bryan is always sensitive and thoughtful

to all involved as well as very organised and timely in the arrangements for this event.

We have had no additions to the members of the Council which remains at a deficit of 7 councillors but the willingness of those who make up the council has been hugely appreciated and we are currently very hopeful for the potential for two new councillors to join us in June.

### **Throughout the Year**

The Council has continued to benefit from the regular attendance of Cllr Richard Clewer, Chair of Wiltshire Council, to all our meetings and events.

The Council recognises the benefits of working with members of the community.

- Community members made up the workgroup to review the Downton Neighbourhood Plan.
- The Council has also worked with the Downton Society to achieve 'heritage footpath and planters.
- With the primary school in discussions about safety in Gravel Close
- And with community policing meetings. PC Murphy has reported a reduction in catapults following the introduction of Public Spaces Protection Order. Sadly for us, PC Murphy is leaving as Neighbourhood Police officer for Downton, and we are looking forward to welcoming Marc Evans who starts today!

I'm going to very briefly mention some of the work that has brought achievements to the Parish but will leave most of this to my colleagues and officers. I will then outline some the more routine achievements that makes up the core business of the Council, including the budget setting and go on to talk about some possible plans for the coming year.

## **Ongoing and routine achievements**

- The Council continues to undertake its duty to comment on planning applications and to challenge where conditions do not appear to be implemented.
- Safe maintenance of the play equipment has been managed with monthly visual inspections by Cllrs Jalland, Mace and Carter.
- Representations by Councillors are also maintained with twelve local trusts or groups – these can be seen on the Council's website.
- The defibrillators are regularly checked – and thanks to Mr Ladds for taking part in this. Training on their use has been provided by Wessex Heartbeat with, we hope, another session to come.
- Our Council meetings have consistently been long ones with always a lot of business to get through – thank you to the patience but full involvement of all councillors.
- Cleaning and replacing breakages to the local bus shelters.
- Liaising with housing developers about potential plans and with Wessex water and the Environment Agency about flooding in the Parish.
- The Council has also taken part in local consultations affecting the Parish.

## **Budget setting**

The Council understands the impact of the current cost of living problems and worked hard to limit the increase in the Parish element of the precept, but an increase was inevitable – full explanations have been made available. With a Council of our size and turnover and which manages significant resources and services, a strategy to build up reserves will be unavoidable and future rises sadly cannot be ruled out.

Grants have been made by the Council for the following:

- To support the coronation event on the 21<sup>st</sup> June following the coronation of King Charles.
- Brian Whitehead Sports and Social Association for structural repairs.
- The production of a new service order for Remembrance Day services

- Donation to Royal British Legion for a poppy wreath

### **Coming Year**

- Cemetery phase 2
- Bulb and planting projects around the Parish – we hope to include residents of all ages in this project.
- Taking part in the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary marking of D-Day landings on 6<sup>th</sup> June.
- Work with the Brian Whitehead Sports Association to consider how best to manage the future of the premises in Wick Lane.
- The planting of hedging plants in the cemetery and possibly the Memorial ground with plants from the Wildlife Trust
- A second event in the Summer to showcase the Moot Lane Play equipment with a Teqball display – those who braved the rain to come to the event in March were very impressed!
- Intro of government email addresses for all councillors which has been delayed due to other pressures but which we believe is now a priority - thanks for the work on this to Cllr Mace.
- A Council website refresh which we believe will make our information more accessible and easier to find – thanks to Cllrs North and Mace for work on this.
- A tree audit will be undertaken of all trees on Council owned land.

At this stage coming plans are not fixed in stone and we want to work with the community not only for ideas and support but to engage people in continuing to make Downton a positive environment.

Lastly, I would again like to encourage residents to consider the role of a Parish Councillor and would be happy to discuss this with anyone who would like to consider taking on this often fulfilling role.

Colleague councillors and officers then proceeded to outline actions over the past year in a little more detail as follows:

Cllrs Randall and Jalland talked about the exciting progress that has been made this year on the implementation of new play parks at Moot Lane

Recreation Ground and in the Memorial Park. Both playgrounds are now open with wonderful new equipment. Cllr Jalland described the opening events held in each of the parks, when we overcame torrential rain in each case but the joy showing on the children and young people's faces told its own story! Both playparks are now being very well used.

...and talking of joy, Cllr Jalland also outlined the event when the lights were lit on the Christmas Tree on the Maypole Green. The Council, as short notice, purchased and installed the tree, lit by 6,000 led lights and the approximately 200 people who attended were given free mince pies, mulled wine and chocolates.

Cllrs Randall and Watts gave us an outline of the work now completed in the cremated remains area of the Downton Cemetery, where a new pathway has been installed, stone kerbing put around the area and all the memorial stones raised above stone pebbles. They went on to talk about future plans to improve the look and feel of the whole cemetery over several stages to make the site a respectful and restful place in which to visit lost loved ones.

Susan Barnhurst Davies, our Admin Officer, together with Cllr Roberts gave an update on the progress with our emergency planning, with an updated flood plan now in place and all volunteers fully involved.

Susan also updated us on the progress on the implementation of the Speed Monitoring Device which will be regularly seen on the Borough or on Moot Lane. This has been a long time in the planning but now, and with the involvement of a small team of local residents who have volunteered to be trained to remove the device and refit the batteries, will now go ahead as soon as we confirmation of the registration from the Police.

Cllr Mace described the extensive work now completed and funded by the Council on the Memorial Centre. As part of the lease with the Memorial Centre Trust, the Council had agreed to significant work on the building to make it fit to hand over. This has been delayed

somewhat but has been achieved this year with work on the gutters, the roof, the portico and minor paint repairs internally.

Mel Camilleri, our Parish Clerk, outlined the work carried out with the Council's contractor IdVerde to engage with them to complete the bin emptying and grass cutting. After some very poor experiences and with the help of members of the public reporting regularly, contract meetings were held, and the contract enforced. Unfortunately, the Council had to demonstrate our unhappiness by reducing payment, but we believe that there is now full cooperation and we look forward to a better year of service ahead.

Mel also provided a little background to the Wiltshire Towns programme which is designed to improve local footfall and use of the village centre. Mr Paul Leo is coordinating this and planning the use of the grant which has amounted to £10,000 over two years. (NB Cllr North was to provide a fuller update but was unfortunately unable to attend at short notice)

I went on to explain the progress of the reviewed Neighbourhood Plan which, following extensive work by approximately 25 residents and full Parish consultation, is now complete and has been submitted to Wiltshire Council with a 'Modification Statement' and the view expressed by the Parish Council that the changes do not amount to major change. We are awaiting confirmation from Wiltshire Council that a further referendum is not needed and that our reviewed plan will be accepted in order that it can have a due level of influence on local planning.

Cllr Carter is our Councillor representing Charlton-all-Saints and he told us of the fitting, during this year, of the defibrillator in the phone box in Charlton and the pleasure that young visitors have experienced using the updated play park in Charlton play area. He went on to highlight the main issue for Charlton-all-Saints as being associated with flooding on Warren Lane.

Last year also saw the ending of the contract with our longstanding toilet cleaners. Huge thanks go to Martin and Angie Easterbrook for all

their sometimes demanding and unpleasant work for over seven years. We have now welcomed Downton Cleaning Company to provide our future service.