



Itchen Valley Parish Council

Itchen Valley Parish Council. Chairman's Report for 2019/20.

The year started with election of a new Parish Council. Six of the previous years' Councillors stood for ten places and consequently were re-elected unopposed. It should have been seven but due to a rule left over from the past and which fails to reflect population changes in recent years, to be elected six members have to come from Easton and Martyr Worthy and four from Avington and Itchen Abbas. There were five prepared to stand from Itchen Abbas and Avington but that would have necessitated an election although there were only two from Martyr Worthy and no one from Easton. One of the potential candidates from Itchen Abbas therefore stood down. However, once the election process was over we were able to co-opt anyone from the Parish as a whole. That brought us up to seven by the end of summer. Not having a full membership of ten does result in the difficulty of spreading the load and one meeting was lost due to insufficient members being able to attend to make it quorate. To help it was decided to have all Council members on both of our committees (Planning and Finance & General Purposes). As the year has progressed, we have been fortunate to been able to co-opt three more members and we now have at least two members representing each of the four villages.

The unwelcome occupation of the playing fields at Couch Green by a group of travellers at the end of June required quick and decisive action. Fortunately, advice from a local resident who had dealt with situations of this nature on a number of occasions in the past was of great help. On his recommendation the Parish Council called in a firm of specialist bailiffs who with the aid of the police succeeded in getting the travellers to vacate the site in under forty-eight hours from the time of their arrival. Although this all took place in a short space of time the aftermath took much longer. The playing fields and a length of the Watercress Way had to be cleaned up and damaged play equipment repaired. It was also decided that it was necessary to make it physically more difficult for travellers to access the site. A number of measures have therefore been taken including ditches, extra fences, an extra set of gates between the two fields and boxing in the padlocks to the car park barriers. All of this has naturally incurred costs but were considered worthwhile. Fortunately, some of the costs have been covered by our insurers.

Another event which requires our attention each year is the Boom Town Festival. This year's festival seems to have run with less disruption to traffic than in previous years. Two Parish Councillors were, with others from neighbouring councils, given a tour of the site including a visit to the control room. Overall, the organisation was impressive. After the tour we were able to wander over the site which is vast. The atmosphere was friendly with helpful staff and officials. The only downside was the amount of litter being produced. The organisers were

working hard to keep it under control with teams of litter pickers and numerous bins provided. Unfortunately, this is going to continue to be a problem everywhere (not just at Boomtown) until there is both legislation and a culture which supports reusable containers for food and drinks.

The other aspect of Boomtown is that they provide a small fund to the Parish Council to distribute to local causes. The rules are quite strict, but in the past funding has been provided to a variety of causes from Wild Verges to First Aid Training. Normally applications for these funds are made in the early months of the calendar year. Unfortunately, there was a delay in the funds arriving, rapidly followed by the lockdown due to the Covid-19 outbreak. This has prevented holding the meeting where applicants present their case. Therefore it has been decided to postpone the process until restrictions are lifted and a proper meeting can take place.

As ever planning matters have occupied a significant amount of time. For much of the year with a depleted number of councillors it has not always been possible to visit neighbours close to every property where an application has been notified. We have continued to look at each application in turn and make comment based on planning policies (especially where the South Downs National Park is concerned). One application to which we gave considerable time and attention was the proposed extension to a cottage in Avington. Despite the fact that the Parish Council and over twenty residents of Avington supported this application it was turned down by the Planning Committee in Winchester on the casting vote of the Committee Chairman and was subsequently turned down on appeal despite continued local support. As has been seen in the past, it would appear that the views and concerns of a parish, its council and its residents are of no interest to our planning authorities.

We have also made comment on three major projects which although not all wholly within the civil parish none the less would have a significant impact on us. First was the proposed "Wheelbarrator" incinerator at Barton Stacey. As the company concerned decide to abandon the project, over which we had expressed our concerns, there is no more to be said. The second is the proposed M3/A34 link at junction 9. Along with many others we have expressed our view that the proposed layout will produce a dangerous situation for local traffic coming from the Winnall roundabout and exiting onto the A33. We have also expressed our concerns and asked for more detail as to how the Itchen Valley will be protected from traffic noise and other environmental risks. A response is still awaited from Highways England. The third project is the proposal by Southern Water to install a drought relief system consisting of a removable, over ground, pipeline temporarily installed with underground sections permanently installed. This pipeline will discharge into the river at the Itchen Abbas fish farm. Our concerns are the detrimental sight of the over ground section within the National Park as well as the permanent up stands for connections to the underground pipes. It is also not clear as to what considerations have been given to the environmental issues should the volume of

water exceed the normal discharge rate of water from the fish farm. This application is still ongoing.

The lengthsman scheme has continued and is an essential element in keeping footpaths clear in the summer. The Ramblers Association has continued with their programme of replacing stiles with kissing gates to give better access to the less able. The potential danger of trees (especially ash) has resulted in a programme of removing ivy, trimming, and felling where advised as necessary at Couch Green. On the west side of the playing fields the decaying copse is being cleared by a local volunteer and a new hedge is being planted.

Another change at Couch Green has been the arrival of a new storage container for the football club. At present it is located close to the car park but when the ground is in a suitable state it will be moved onto the existing concrete pad. Maintenance of playground equipment has continued but has temporarily been halted during the present lockdown due to the Covid-19 outbreak. Similarly, the bus shelter opposite the Village Hall in Itchen Abbas was due to be replaced, but again this has had to be postponed while the lockdown is in place.

On administration, we have invested in a new financial computer package to speed up the accounting process; this will be seen in the way our accounts are presented throughout the year.

The final months of the year have ended with the Covid-19 outbreak and subsequent lockdown. Fortunately, when social distancing and lockdown became a prospect the Parish Council was already looking at what might need to be done. When social distancing was first advised the difficult decision to cancel the annual litter pick was made. Subsequent advice from Keep Britain Tidy justified this decision. The next action was the production of two sets of notices both to help distancing. One is a simple reminder for walkers to keep 2 metres apart and the other is a series of one-way walking routes to help people keep their distance on the narrower sections of the more popular footpaths round the Valley. The former seems to have worked reasonably well but the suggested one-way routes have had more mixed results. The third action in conjunction with the Itchen Valley Churches was to produce an information leaflet. Its first aim was to encourage people to form neighbourhood groups which would be able to help each other and also act as a communication network to provide and feedback information as the situation evolves. This has been quite successful although there are pockets where for whatever reason groups have not been formed. The groups that have been formed appear to be working well. The second aim of the leaflets was to circulate, to as many homes in the Parish as was feasible, as much of the helpful information we received from national and local organisations as possible. We are very grateful to all those who worked hard as volunteer leaflet distributors. As soon as the leaflets became available, they were distributed round most of the Valley which was fortuitous as the lockdown followed very soon afterwards. As more information has come to us, we have been able to distribute it via the neighbourhood groups as well as by electronic methods.

The directions that came with lockdown informed us that playgrounds and football pitches had to be closed. Where possible goal posts have been removed and stored. Playgrounds have been closed with gates sealed or, surrounded with barrier tape and notices have been posted in both cases. Although there were some who were slow to respond to these precautions it now seems that the message is understood. Once access is permitted playgrounds and pitches will be reopened but will have to undergo safety inspections and any necessary remedial work first.

With lockdown in place it has not been possible to hold Parish Council meetings in the normal way. Early on to keep up with fast developing events it was decided to hold, with those able to participate, remote daily "catch-up" meetings using Zoom. As time progressed and lockdown become more routine, it has been possible to reduce the frequency of these meetings to a weekly basis. Learning to conduct remote meetings has stood us in good stead. In order to keep the Parish Council running with our monthly Full Council Meetings plus the two committee meetings we have continued to hold these remotely using Zoom including the opportunity for public participation and observation. These meetings were initially held using National Association of Local Council Guidelines and eventually following the legislation as it caught up with the situation. This has worked well and much of our end of year work has been completed. Two cases where it has not been possible to complete our end of and beginning of the next year tasks are the Annual Parish Meeting and our Annual General Meeting. As these are both meetings that need to take place in public, legislation has allowed for these not to be held.

As can be seen this has been an interesting and eventful year. I would like to thank all who have helped the Parish Council over this time; our Parish Clerk Michelle has worked especially hard over the last two months, our County and City Councillors who have come to our meetings and given help and advice, and finally my fellow Parish Councillors; the five of whom with me were re-elected a year ago and the four who joined us as the year progressed, all have worked hard and given freely of their time. We look forward to calmer waters but hope we can achieve as much if not more in the forthcoming year.

Patrick Appleby,

Itchen Valley Parish Council Chairman.