

This meeting is the time when parishioners can have a voice on how the Village is performing overall. My report will be biased toward what has happened over the last year and in particular what the Parish council has been up to.

Firstly I would like to report on the Parish Precept. This is in effect the Parish Council Tax on each residence, not unlike the Borough Council and County Council Taxes. They are all collected together by the Borough Council but spent in different ways. For example the County tax pays for education, policing, roads and so on although some aspects of roads maintenance are delegated to the Borough. The Borough collects waste and recycling, keeps the green areas cut and tidy, trims roadside trees and shrubs and so on, although again the Parish adds more to this by buying in extra services. The Parish Council actively involves conservationists to advise on and improve the pond and over the last year we have taken advice on when, how and where to work on the central feature of our village. Work is to be carried out in the autumn. We have continued to try to keep our precept down but also have to budget to compensate for the reduction in the Borough's discretionary grant which last year reduced by 11% and this year by a further 12.5%. We continue to perform comparably with our adjacent parishes. The discretionary grant is calculated in two parts. One is a per capita amount, which obviously favours the larger parishes and the other is a lump sum, which favours the smaller. We are a middle-sized parish, that is, one of the least favoured. We must realise that few areas have such grants and we know of only one other in Eastern England, that being Braintree. One of our financial moves was to stop supplying black plastic waste sacks. We were the only parish to continue to do so and felt that the £3,000 could be better spent elsewhere. There were also ecological considerations in that with more and more recycling collections the black sacks were less important and the plastic in the sacks was indeed more indestructible landfill. However some 80 rolls of sacks are left on my garage floor. If there are any of our more needy residents who could use a roll this year, please contact either the Clerk or myself and we will get them to you.

Work has started on the Football Club changing rooms extension with the support of the Council, including financial support. This is to be a ladies changing area to allow women officials at matches as is now required in our non-discriminatory world. I don't know how many women officials there will be but in order to stay at the same level the clubs facilities had to be upgraded.

We have finally produced an agreement between the Parish Council and the Village Hall Charity Trustees to ensure that all parishioners can continue to enjoy the facilities of the Poores' Field throughout the year as our provision for recreational open space. We had an unwritten gentleman's agreement for several decades that the Parish Council paid a contribution for the upkeep and maintenance of the field but when the Charity Commissioners made it clear that the Trustees had to treat all users equally we had to find a proper written agreement and pay a properly negotiated rent. This is now all in place and we can all now go forward in an atmosphere of co-operation.

Our Christmas party for senior parishioners was again a great success and the after dinner entertainment was highly praised. The usual Christmas dinner of turkey and all the trimmings was lubricated with sherry, wine and port, which, I am sure, helped the event to become memorable. Even the Chairman's singing didn't upset too many clients. During the last year Dave Smith passed away and the Council installed a seat at the Swan Pond in his memory. Dave served on the Parish Council for many years and edited the Village news for many of these.

In March of this year the sewer pipe under Swan Lane collapsed and it required many days work to rectify. The Clerk then pursued the contractors to reinstate the bridleway to its former glory and to replace the concrete posts that help ensure the security of Eagle Field. Unfortunately the work had barely been finished when the southern end of the same pipe also collapsed. In the peculiar way of our privatised services the two parts of this pipe come under two different companies and of course they employ different contractors. We wait with bated breath to see if the performance at reinstatement is equally good.

At a meeting organised by the Borough Council the changes in the way planning decisions are to be made and appeals to be processed were explained. It probably won't make a lot of difference to the Parish Council as we don't make the decisions but act in an advisory capacity. All decisions in future will have to be based on sound planning policies and not just "we don't want that in our back yard". We are in the main protected by green belt policies where the presumption is against development. Non green belt land areas are where the presumption is in favour of development. There are small exceptions to this such as affordable housing needs. The Parish Council had a survey conducted on this topic and although there was a general feeling against the project, there still exists a requirement for a few affordable units specifically for younger families of existing residents. We are to seek further clarification before deciding on our next steps.

As I said at the beginning, I didn't want to pinch too much of the Clerks report that appeared in the village news, so I shall draw a close on this report before too many fall asleep.

The Chairman.