
Minutes of the Annual Parish Meeting 22nd May 2024

Present: Pat Sutlieff (outgoing chair), Rob Jones (incoming chair), Jane Hartley, Stephen Lucas, Matt Walker, Isabelle Bray, Katrin Harding, Richard Bennett, and Lee Cripps. Borough Councillors Sam Akhtar and Wayne Smith also attended.

Apologies: Narinder Ryatt

18 stallholders for the Community Connect event also attended, as did 21 residents

Unlike previous years, where the meeting was had a formal part, there was a Chair's address, transcript below, and then informal chats with Councillors. The event closed at 9pm.

Chair's Address to Annual Public Meeting 2024

Good evening, everyone & welcome to "Community Connect".

Hopefully you will have seen the other Parish Councillors around the hall or on the video display. For the first time in recent years, we have a full, elected council, including two new Cllrs: Katrin Harding (who is also a Borough Councillor) and Richard Bennet, who we hope will bring new ideas with them.

I'd like to introduce you to some of the most important people in Charvil – those who keep the community wheels turning, as it were. The team is headed by Miranda, our Clerk, who is our financial controller and the main point of contact with residents, the Borough Council and many external businesses. She is assisted by Amanda, the Assistant Clerk and Amenities Manager, who handles all bookings and manages the facilities and by Neil, our clerical and media assistant, who is responsible for our social media posts and has produced all the visual aids for tonight's meeting. Chris is our caretaker, who opens and closes and sets up the facilities as required by hirers; Tim, our Village Warden, is our handyman, who can often be seen either litter picking or removing the work of some very persistent graffiti artists. Last but not least, there is James, who combines litter picking with opening the car park gates every morning and who, sadly, is leaving us at the end of the month.

My sincere thanks go to all of them for their commitment and contributions over the past year.

I hope you've had a chance to look around at the tables hosted by some of the groups that hire our facilities, and the displays by some of the council's committees, which cover our Amenities management, Planning, Environment & Highways, Finance, Website & Social Media. There is also a display by the Neighbourhood plan group and one about the Charvil flood plan, which is largely the sterling effort of Charvil's Flood Warden, Duncan McGregor, building on the work of previous flood wardens. I'd like to thank Duncan for this and also for his setting up a WhatsApp group to give warnings during the recent floods. We also welcome the Charvil fete Committee and the Charvil-based group "My Cancer, My Choices" that has been honoured by the King for its outstanding charity work.

If you've been to an Annual Parish Meeting previously, you'll notice that we're doing things a little differently this year so we'd really appreciate your feedback. If you have any comments, we have some post-it notes by the door which you can use and stick on the board to assist us for future meetings.

When I first moved to Charvil, nearly 8 years ago, I had no idea what the Parish Council was all about. In fact, I thought it was some sort of Church management committee - and I know I'm not the only one to think that!

So, to help you understand what the Parish Council's responsibilities actually are and provide a little entertainment, we're going to have a quiz, called "Parish or Borough?" I'm going to show you some pictures and I want you to shout either "Parish" or "Borough", according to who you think is responsible for dealing with the subject in the picture.

***** PICTURE QUIZ *****

Now for some of the things we've done over the past year:

We've overseen and contributed to the development of the Flood and Emergency Plans. I've already thanked Duncan for his part in this and I'd also like to thank Amanda and Neil for their work on the Emergency Plan.

There has been considerable work done on progressing the Neighbourhood Plan, under the leadership of our new Chairman, Rob Jones. This is now close to the stage where it will go out to public consultation, so watch out for it in the next few months.

The refurbishment of the pavilion was an important positive highlight of the year, and was the object of our greatest expenditure but the biggest talking point of the year was, of course, the dreaded SINKHOLE! We had

to arrange investigations to try to identify the cause of this and to make sure that there weren't other sinkholes nearby, before even considering getting the hole repaired. We didn't have the contacts or knowledge of what was required to be able to organise investigations or repair work ourselves, so we had to work in partnership with the Borough Council. This was rather difficult because communications were much slower and less open than we wished. However, the job is done now and the Borough has agreed to do further scans of the carpark and tennis courts in 3 years' time, providing there is no recurrence in the meantime. We will undertake simple visual inspections on at least a weekly basis from now on, and of course we would be grateful to hear from anyone who notices any new, unusual appearances in the car park or surrounding areas.

Apart from the unforeseen expense, this has caused enormous inconvenience to the public and to us and has forced us to abandon plans for an outdoor gym and possibly a zipwire installation.

As a semi-rural Parish council, we have always been keen on improving the natural environment of Charvil, so we were pleased to assist the Scouts by providing materials for them to build these bird and bat boxes, which are now up at various locations around the area.

Still on environment, we planted 6 more fruit trees in the Community Orchard last November and we hope to be able to harvest some fruit from the original batch of trees this coming autumn. Then around November time this year, we plan to plant a final batch of 6 more trees. We still need sponsors for these. If an individual or a group of people is interested, you can get details from our Parish clerk, Miranda.

We regularly spend a lot of time looking at local planning applications and we make comments to the Borough to highlight issues or to support any residents who could be adversely affected by these. Although the Borough has a duty to consult us, our opinions have no more weight than yours and are often ignored, but that doesn't mean we will give up trying to influence Borough decisions and it is important for you to state your views especially in the case of contentious plans.

Some of you may have noticed that we have brought this Hall into the digital universe by introducing Wi-Fi, which we hope will be a valuable tool for individuals and some community groups.

I don't think I could get away without mentioning the Parish Precept, which we are responsible for setting. This is our main source of regular income, so it has to reflect the amount of our outgoings. With the increasing expense of maintaining our facilities, costs associated with the pavilion refurbishment, the prospective costs of dealing with the sinkhole, which were unknown at that time, and nationally agreed increases in staff salaries, we had to be very cautious. But I could almost

hear the gasps of horror when the notifications went out, stating that our precept was increasing by just over 30%! On the face of it, this sounds like an enormous burden to put upon residents but percentages alone can give a misleading impression. It is better to think in terms of pounds and pence. To start with, we only had a very tiny increase last year as we recognised that people were struggling after the financial constraints of the Covid epidemic, so this year we had to be more realistic. (Reference to slide showing the precept values for Band D properties across the Borough). You can see that there are areas paying a lot more than Charvil – and they don't have sinkholes to contend with! Worked out in actual money terms, the increase from last year's rate for a Band D property equates to about 40p per week. There's not much you can buy for 40p these days is there?

Now, moving on to pleasanter subjects: Charvil's very own Jim Gillett, a former Chairman of our Parish Council, received a British Empire Medal in the New Year Honours list, which was presented to him by the Lord Lieutenant of Berkshire. Jim was awarded this honour to recognise his nearly 30 years of service as a Charvil Parish Councillor as well as his Charity fundraising with the Rotary Club for many years. Congratulations Jim!

Those were the highlights of last year – so what about next year?

I've already mentioned the plan to add to the community orchard and the continuing development of the Neighbourhood plan. In addition, we are hoping to upgrade the children's playground on East Park Farm. If we can get supporting grants, we would like to make this a playground for children up to age 11, rather than just under 5s, as it is now, with improved accessibility and more inclusive equipment, making it usable by a wider range of children.

The Village Hall needs redecorating and we plan to make a start this year. We shall also be looking into the feasibility of re-surfacing the tennis courts.

We are going to take a lead on starting up a Speedwatch group for Charvil, the purpose of which is not to trap, but to encourage and educate drivers to moderate their speed in our village. This should ultimately be a completely independent and self-organising group. If anyone is interested in becoming part of this group, please contact Miranda or myself and we will keep you informed of developments.

The Council's website redevelopment is continuing and when finished, this should be more user-friendly. We shall also be adopting "gov.uk" email addresses to bring us in line with other Parish councils across the country.

If you have any questions, please feel free to ask me, our new Chairman Rob Jones, or any of the other councillors and we will be happy to chat with you.

Pat Sutlieff
(Chair 2023-4)