

Parish Council Chairman's Report 2020 - 2021

This has been a year like none other. All eleven meetings of the full Council have been held by video conferencing - what was that a little more than a year ago? We have had to get used to working differently but, overall and despite a few technical glitches initially, we have coped quite well. There have been no material interruptions to the service that we provide for our community, we have continued to progress our strategic programme and we have taken steps to re-shape the working structure of the Council so that it is more suited to current and future requirements.

Covid-19 has had a profound affect in our own community, throughout the country and around the world. Most of us have experienced sadness or health concerns within our own families or among our friends. Many things have changed and some of the changes will last. But, I think we will all agree that our sense of community is stronger and, with the roll out of the vaccine, there will soon be opportunities for people to meet again and to take up interests and activities old and new.

The strength of our community cannot be better exemplified than by the work of the Clanfield Coronavirus Community Support Group which has provided such valuable comfort and assistance for older and more vulnerable people in our Parish during the pandemic. Just before Christmas, the Council recognised this by presenting Community Awards to Cianni Foulkes and Nick Blake for their outstanding community service in the formation and leadership of the Group. The work continues now through the Clanfield Voluntary Support Group and we are grateful to them also.

Two years ago, we adopted a strategy which was (and is):

".....to put Community, Health and Wellbeing and Sport at the centre of our agenda....."

and much of the Council's work over the last year has been to progress that programme and ensure that the facilities that we have, and the opportunities that we can provide, are ready to respond to the interests which people wish to pick up as we emerge from the restrictions of the pandemic.

It is very pleasing to note that our community and sports centre will be re-opening at the beginning of June (Covid restrictions permitting) with a new name *"The Clanfield Centre"* and under the new and professional management of Community First. The Council is providing financial assistance of £25,000 per annum for up to 5 years to support this major facility and the Council will also be opening a Parish Office at the Centre, the need for which has become increasingly pressing over recent years. This will be on the basis of a short term Licence of one room for the time being at a Licence Fee of £10,000 all in (including occupational costs) for the first year. This flexibility will allow for any remodelling or expansion which Community First may propose for the Centre in the future and it will still enable the Parish Office to move to Down Farm Barn if it should be possible for the renovation of that property to proceed in the future for community uses. On that, planning permission was obtained in July 2020 but its implementation is subject to funding.

During this last year, we have set up a Community Working Group, led by Councillor Laurent Coffre. Its current objectives include establishing a Youth Council to give a voice to our young people, to progress the exciting public art project which we launched just before the first Covid-19 lockdown and, following the Council's declaration of a Climate Emergency on 3rd June 2020, the Working Group is bringing forward a range of important environmental and biodiversity initiatives. Among those which are planned to be implemented this year include a "Green Audit" of the village to provide a baseline for future community "greening" initiatives, establishing two wildflower meadows and bee hives on Parish Council land and the possibility of planting trees, also on Council land, in the Autumn.

At the beginning of December, the Council took ownership of a large area of open space from the developers of the St James Place development. Now known as Down Farm Park, this area of open space includes a children's play area (we now have four in the village) and a second allotment site extending the number of plots owned by the Council from 26 to 51, all of which are let. When the

two junior football pitches at Down Farm Park are provided and transferred to us, the Council will own or manage over 22 hectares (55 acres) of land and property at eleven locations - a very considerable increase over the last 3 years.

All these facilities and initiatives support, and respond to, our strategy. For a Parish of our size in terms of population, we are now quite well placed in relation to the facilities that we have and the opportunities that we are able to offer. Looking forwards, the Council's task is to maintain or even improve what we have within a budget that our resident community can afford and with such additional grant money that we can secure. That is quite a task and, sadly, it is not made any easier by unnecessary costs which have to be incurred.

At the top of that list is vandalism which has been a continuing and almost perpetual problem for the Council during this last year in and around the grounds of the community and sports centre, at Peel Park and, elsewhere, in terms of wilful damage to property and landscaping. It is a fairly constant headache but, working in close liaison with the Police and making CCTV footage available to them, some of the offenders have been caught. I hope this will serve to deter others who might be minded to commit similar offences. The Council will not turn a blind eye to this because every Council Tax payer in the village contributes to the cost of repair or replacement through the Parish precept or, if we decide not to repair or replace a damaged item, it results in the loss or impairment of a feature or facility which belongs to the community and which won't be there for future generations to enjoy.

Another problem is litter and the Council is very grateful to the willing volunteers who have regularly helped to keep our public spaces looking respectable whilst, during the lockdowns, the service that we normally receive from our contractors has been suspended. Finally, in the category of unwelcome costs, we had to deal with another visit from travellers during the year, this time at Peel Park, and, apart from leaving a mess to clear up, they indulged in an act of vandalism - namely, damaging the football pitches by skid-turning a car on them - before leaving.

I have mentioned the good work that volunteers carry out within our community, many as official volunteers of the Parish Council. Two further examples of this are the much improved condition of the village pond and the clearance of the brambles and scrub between the community and sports centre and the adjacent children's playground which has made such a difference to the appearance and safety of that area. We are very grateful for all the work that our volunteers do.

At just over £179,000 our precept for 2021/22 is 3.5% above the previous year and the cost per household has remained in line with most Parishes in the East Hampshire District. That includes the Council's financial support for *The Clanfield Centre* and the Council's financial reserves remain at a satisfactory level, comfortably above the recommended minimum proportion of precept for Parish Councils. This allows fully for the probability that the Council will not be able to recover loans totalling £35,000 which were made to the previous operators of the community and sports centre who are now in liquidation. The fact that we are in this strong position is a tribute to the prudent financial management of the Council over many years.

It is a privilege to lead such a strong and committed team of Councillors and Officers and I would like to thank them all. I think we are very fortunate for a Parish Council in that, over recent years, we have rarely had a Councillor vacancy to fill and, when we did have an unexpected vacancy this year, more than one excellent applicant applied to be co-opted.

The vacancy arose as a result of the resignation of former Chairman, Terry Collins, following news of his wife's serious illness from which, very sadly, she has since died. We are very grateful indeed for Terry's wisdom and strong leadership as Chairman from 2016 to 2019 when he guided the Council through the difficult and challenging initial phase of taking possession of our new community facilities and we have sent our deep condolences to him and his family following their recent loss.

To bring us back up to full strength, we have welcomed Councillor Jane Woodroof at our most recent meeting in March.

There is an item of breaking news which I must mention in this report. Parish Clerk, Diane Duffy, will be retiring at the end of July after almost 34 years of outstanding service in the post. It really will be the end of an era and she will be greatly missed. There have been many Councillors and many residents over that long time who have been grateful for Diane's help and advice.

My fellow Councillors and the Officers of Clanfield Parish Council during 2020/21 have been:

Councillors:

Terry Collins (Vice Chairman until January 2021); Rosemary Clarke; Laurent Coffre; Stephen D'Este Hoare; Brian Foster (Acting Vice-Chairman from January 2021); David Harris; Peter Hurst; Margaret White; Stephen Williams and Jane Woodroof (from March 2021).

Officers:

Diane Duffy (Parish Clerk); Emma Barritt (Assistant Clerk / Open Spaces Officer).

I would also like to thank our District Councillors, Arthur Agate and Ken Moon, and our County Councillor, Robert Mocatta, for the support that they have given to the Council during the year.

John Bannell
Chairman of Clanfield Parish Council
30 March 2021.