

Chairman's report 2017

It has been quite a busy year. At last year's meeting Mr Jim Boot carried out a survey asking for opinions as to what was good and what was bad in the village. He continued this survey at the Village Hall Fair in August and the results gave us a 'hit-list' of residents' wishes. I'm pleased to say that quite a number of items on this list have been addressed.

The Donsmead development has progressed at speed, with several houses already occupied, and it looks likely to be finished by the end of this year. There has been the usual amount of disturbance to existing residents that you would expect from a development of this size, but generally Persimmons seem to have run a tidy and efficient operation.

The first 'payback' from this development was the release of funding to ensure that the school crossing patrol would continue to function for the next five years. These funds were released early thanks to the persuasive efforts of Ray, our clerk.

By the end of this year we anticipate that enough houses will have been occupied at Donsmead to trigger the release of the funds to improve the sport provision on the playing fields. We have started talks with the football club regarding replacing their pavilion and possible upgrades to the pitch. This is coinciding very nicely with their promotion to League One... Well done lads!

Staying with the playing field, we have renovated the 'Trim Trail' to try and get a few more years out of it. Now we just need to see it being used to justify the cost of its upkeep.

In May we opened the new slide in the playground, which was dedicated to the memory of Mary Shipstone. Over the Summer it became obvious that children were climbing up the outside of the tube which meant that when they reached the top they were higher off the ground than the safety regulations allow by quite a considerable distance.

When the annual safety inspection took place in the Autumn it was made clear to us that no matter what safety surface is installed around play equipment, the fall height must be less than 3 metres - higher than that and there is the possibility of internal injuries that can prove fatal to a child. We were advised to shut down the slide until we could find a suitable solution to the problem, which we duly did by fencing it off.

We approached the American suppliers about this apparent design fault but in the interim they had been bought up by another American company who chose to dispute matters. We spent several months in fruitless correspondence with them to no effect.

With Spring on the way and with vandals starting to kick down the protective fencing on a weekly basis we had no alternative but to find a solution that would allow the slide to come back into use. We therefore dismantled it and rebuilt it in its current lower configuration. The high platform now acting as a 'look-out tower'. I would like to thank Gareth Woodgate for his help with these changes.

A lot of the playground equipment is coming to the end of its working life and requires repair and in some cases replacement. We have had the zip-wire fully overhauled which cost over £3,000 and a replacement floor for the mini-roundabout had to be imported from Italy at a cost of £550. The carousel is still out of action but hopefully will be up and running again soon, and some of the timbers of the 'Adventure Trail' need replacement. We have added £5,000 to this year's precept just to cover the additional expense of maintaining the playground.

After putting pressure on East Sussex Highways we finally managed to get 30mph roundels painted on the main road through the village. Whether they have made any difference to the speed of the traffic only time will tell. The footpath along the A28 to Mill Corner has been upgraded and then as a pleasant surprise, Highways announced that they would re-lay the central stretch of the A28 through the village. This has obviously been disruptive to those of us who live along the main road but is a great improvement that has been needed for several years and the village now has the brightest cats' eyes in the area!

Back in June we celebrated the Queen's 90th birthday with a village tea party on the playing field. I was away at the time but I am assured it was a great success and thanks to Sue Masters who organised the grand raffle it was almost cost-neutral too! A big 'thank you' to Penny, Debbie & Jacqui who masterminded the whole event and to Peter Hayman, Ollie, the Bonfire barbecue team and everyone else who mucked in on the day.

We unfortunately have a fair bit of anti-social behaviour going on in the village at the moment. As well as the petty vandalism in the playground that I have already mentioned, we are getting an increased amount of litter dropping, fly tipping and dog fouling. The dog fouling in particular is becoming more noticeable, with the football team now having to do a sweep of their pitch before each game. The litter pickers are usually filling two black bags every time they go through the centre of the village which is not good. To top it all we had the theft of the Christmas tree power supply over the New Year period which is about as anti-social as you can get.

There has been concern about the unnecessary felling of trees in the village, particularly the mature oaks. We have managed to get tree preservation orders on the mature oaks at Pretious Fields, as Rother's current planning review has identified it as a possible place for future development. The Conservation Society are currently working with the residents at Mill Corner to identify suitable trees there for protection. May I point out that anyone can apply to Rother for a Tree Protection Order; this does not have to be done through the Parish Council though obviously we will be happy to advise.

Over the past year we have teamed up with Beckley & Peasmarsh to share the cost of the 9am bus to Rye - This will be reviewed in May to see if the usage justifies the cost.

Over a year ago East Sussex County Council decided to hand control of the Sports Hall from the Pretious Sports Hall Management Group to the school. This has now taken place and we understand that the outstanding lottery funds are to be spent on additional equipment. The school are planning on putting together a working committee for the adult users of the hall.

And last, but by no means least we come to the future of the Blue Cross site. There has been a lot of rumour and mis-information doing the rounds over the last few months and so I think it would be useful if I attempt to clarify the situation.

Last September the CEO of Blue Cross asked if she could meet me at the Parish Office. When she arrived she announced that they had just given all their Northiam staff notice and would be closing the site in four weeks and then selling it in the Spring of 2017.

Once this became public the Parish Council were approached by a very large number of residents who were concerned that the site would be bought by developers and that in due course would become another housing estate, as happened at Donsmead. It was suggested that the village might attempt to bid for the site if suitable funding could be found and the more we thought about this the more

obvious it became that the Village should attempt to purchase the freehold to be able to control what happens on the land in the future.

In November we distributed a flyer to most of the houses in the village asking if residents supported the proposal and asking for suggested uses for the site. From the 900 leaflets sent out we received 150 replies, of which the majority were supportive and only three objected. This was followed up by a public meeting in this hall which was well attended and where Mr Trevor Leggo clearly explained the financial options available to us. The mood of this meeting was also very supportive.

Resulting from this we were approached by Mr Rob Pollard, a new resident in the village who is an architect and was involved with the Rye Kino project. He offered his services for free to look at options for redeveloping the existing buildings, an offer that we happily accepted. We looked at all the suggestions that had been forthcoming and then had an informal meeting with David Marlow, Rother's strategic planning officer to get guidance as to what might be possible. We also asked his opinion as to the potential value of the site.

Meanwhile we had checked out all the deeds and documentation available from the land registry to ensure that there were no covenants or conditions that would preclude future usage. I can confirm that the Blue Cross own the site and are quite within their rights to sell it.

Mervyn Hayes, Chairman of the Conservation Society offered to approach some of our wealthier residents to see if they could be persuaded to offer financial help with the purchase, and to this end we produced a brochure to aid his efforts.

The finance committee then investigated the possibility of a Government backed loan. They found that we could borrow £2m on a fixed rate over 50 years for an annual repayment of about £100,000 which equates to just over £100 per year for a band D household. This was proposed to full Council in January and supported unanimously subject to further consultation.

We therefore delivered a second survey in February, attempting to ensure that we delivered to every household. In this we clearly stated our proposal to increase the precept to allow us to apply for the loan and asked whether residents supported this. We had a response rate of 42% with a narrow margin in favour and so we asked Rother to increase our precept for this year, which they have done. We have subsequently sent our application for funding to the Secretary of State and are awaiting an answer.

Let me make it clear that if our loan application is refused or if our bid for the site is unsuccessful then the funding for the loan will be reimbursed. On this you have my word.

The object of this is to try and acquire the freehold of the site, which would give the village complete control over its future use. This is a large block of countryside in the heart of the village and a large number of residents feel it should be preserved and used as such.

Should we be successful with this, then we would have to set up a 'Community Interest Company', run by volunteer residents which would run the site and look for potential investment from outside bodies to improve it. Profits from the site would be ploughed back into the village thus reducing the precept in future years.

If the village own the freehold, then should it be decided at any point to sell off all or part of the site, then conditions could be imposed that would guarantee the land's future use.

A quick word about the pub. To the best of our knowledge the owner is still alive and the pub is not for sale. However, if you know differently then please let us know!

Pete Sargent - Chairman Northiam Parish Council - 11th April 2017