

# **Newton Poppleford and Harford Parish Council**

## **Chair's Report for the year to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023**

The year 2022/23 was a challenging one in many ways.

At the beginning of 2022 we welcomed Jacqui Baldwin as our new clerk. She has demonstrated a great combination of integrity, work ethic and a genuine willingness to help wherever possible. Jacqui joined us with no previous experience in the role. I was persuaded by her drive and her obvious skills which proved to be fully transferable to the challenging and varied role of a parish clerk. She has been vital to the success of the council in the past year and I would like to formally go on record to thank Jacqui for her exceptional work.

At the beginning of 2022/23, in April, we were still coping with the covid pandemic. Indeed, Covid is still around now and it is simple testament to the effectiveness of the vaccine programme that we are now able live our lives with Covid. Indeed, in April last year I spent my birthday isolated for 7 days with the disease.

In June 2022 we held a very successful and well received Platinum Jubilee event across 3 days which I know took a huge amount of organising and I would like to thank Jacqui and the whole council for their collective efforts in helping to put the event on for the weekend.

One of the biggest challenges we have faced this year is financial. We've had a bit of a "perfect storm", with the budget for 2022/23 being set at the end of December 2021 and almost immediately we were faced with some major changes in costs and expenses, with the news that Coleridge Medical centre would be quitting the parish's surgery building in 2022, removing rental income for most of the year and increasing costs for insurance, maintenance and utilities. We decided to reopen the WCs and found that costs for the trial period were several times higher than pre-pandemic due to the onerous nature of the cleaning regime. We have undertaken significant amounts of maintenance around the parish, not least in the play park and with the rebuilding of the cemetery wall off Greenbank. For almost the first time we had a number of councillors taking their (modest) annual allowances and we appointed a new clerk. Most if not all of these events were unbudgeted and hence we suffered a significant overspend for the year.

These costs and shocks forced us to eat into our reserves and, at budget time, reassess the level of precept we require to maintain the council for the coming year. In fact we raised the precept by around 42%, an enormous percentage increase, but in cash terms very modest per household, with each parish household contributing an average of £70 / year.

In terms of the surgery, it is the stated policy of this council to seek to amend the covenant on the surgery building to permit it to be used for other consultative and / or office uses which will allow it, once again, to be used as a parish asset.

One of the disappointments this year has been the delay in replacing the footbridge on Venn Ottery Green. Progress has been painfully slow and the latest hold up is that one of

the plinths has been built too small or in the wrong place by the contractor. I sincerely hope we can get the bridge in place in the next couple of months.

The Climate Change Group have had a tremendous amount of success with their various tree planting programmes. We were fortunate to be chosen by both the AONB and DCC as a parish in which they undertook a big planting programme.

In January I was delighted to see the opening of the new Multi Use Games Area. This project has been considered for several years, however it took an innovative approach, the employment of a specialist consultant, to get the project off the ground and drive it through to a successful conclusion. Since opening we have seen it being well used – not always for its intended purposes! – and I am delighted that we are now starting to see netball teams booking the facility. The next steps will be a project to install floodlights to make the facility useable all year round.

My sincere thanks to Jacqui our clerk and of course thanks to our councillors for their effort in this past year.

**Chris Burhop**  
**Chair**  
**20<sup>th</sup> April 2023**