

Annual Chair's Report
Otterhampton Parish Council May 2021
Councillor Julie Evans

Welcome to you all and thank you for attending this evening. Our last Annual Assembly did not happen because the first coronavirus lockdown prevented us meeting in person and no legislation was yet in place to allow us to meet virtually; something that we never anticipated would become the norm quite so quickly. Our first meeting by zoom was on 2 July 2020 and this may be one of our last regular public meetings by zoom since we are hoping to meet again in person in the summer. I am very happy to deliver this unique "Annual" Chair's Report, which is both virtual and covers a 2-year period since the last Annual Chair's Report delivered in person was in May 2019!

The Parish Council had the steepest of learning curves in common with the whole world when coronavirus hit our corner of that world last year. We had to continue our business first by communicating by telephone and email and then by regular zoom meetings open to the public on the first Thursday of each month. We have made mistakes along the way but, I hope, learned quickly from them and settled into a new way of working which is likely to continue perhaps in some blended way into the future to take advantage of the best of both worlds.

I have been in the Chair for just over two years now and with the ever-brilliant help and advice of our Clerk Aly I would say that I am just beginning to find my feet. On behalf of the Parish, I would like to record our gratitude to Aly for all her hard work. As I identified in May 2019 this is a small Parish; but with a major construction project on our door step and the ongoing development of the WWT facility at Steart there is an interesting mix of issues to consider in addition to housekeeping issues such as planning applications, tree and grounds maintenance and dog poo bins. The HPC Project has brought with it opportunities as well as inconvenience and as a Parish we are fortunate to have a mitigation fund to spend. Some grants have already been made from this fund and in the past 2 years these have enabled us to provide light at the bus shelter and to update the defibrillator, now housed in the telephone box beautifully refurbished by Bob and Carol Birkenhead, our thanks to them and to Matt at The Anchor who funds the electric for and houses a further defibrillator purchased with the benefit of the mitigation funding. Those potentially lifesaving devices are monitored by a brilliant team of volunteers to ensure they are ready for use when required.

A significant proportion of the mitigation funding for Otterhampton Parish has now been approved to facilitate major refurbishment work on Otterhampton Village Hall. My thanks to the dedicated Committee of Otterhampton Village Hall who have done a fantastic job getting plans together to refurbish the building and executing a rigorous tendering process that now sees work underway so that the building can serve our local community for many years to come. They did all that whilst still keeping the Village Hall open when they could within the rules, quite a feat!

We faced discussion about another potential major development in the village of Combwich in 2020 when a planning consultancy made some tentative gestures toward the Parish Council by way of consultation about a proposal to build houses and a new village hall at the entrance to Combwich. The Parish Council had not indicated support or otherwise for the proposal but were expecting further detail about it when a formal planning application to build 60 houses and a new village hall was submitted in December 2020. The timescale we were given to consult with you and respond to the application was short and over the holiday period. Once more my thanks to Aly who, with help from Bob Birkenhead and Barry Leathwood in particular, organised a survey to gather views and inform the response of the Parish Council to that application. My thanks to all those of you who responded to that survey, a significant percentage of our population did and that level of response was instrumental in giving weight to the Parish Council's opposition to the planning application. The groundswell of opinion was opposed to a development of this scale and nature and the application was refused. The Parish Council retains an open mind about potential development for housing but it must be proportionate and its principal aim must be to satisfy local housing needs. With this in mind we have asked Sedgemoor District Council to carry out a Housing Needs Survey. A good response to such survey is vital to inform our response to any future planning application and even if you have no housing need of your own, I would ask you to return the survey when it arrives on your doorstep.

The past year or so has been tough but it has made me **really** appreciate our little corner of the world for its natural beauty, its open spaces and its sense of community. So many parishioners have helped and supported each other more than ever before and I would like to thank in particular the people behind; our school, our shop, our pub, our village hall and our Church for keeping those institutions going and for keeping us all going, within a context of fast changing rules few of us could ever have imagined.