

ANNUAL PARISH REPORTS

MAY 2020

1. Chairman's Report – Struan Coupar

Two things have dominated the life of the parish during the course of the past year. We had been beset by the first since August 2018 and it only, belatedly, departed in March – 18 months later than originally planned. Just as that was about to happen the second made its unwelcome appearance in late February of this year, and looks like being with us for some time.

Ultrafast broadband

Gigaclear, the company appointed by Connecting Devon and Somerset to bring ultrafast fibre broadband to communities in the region, announced that it would start work here on 31st July 2018, and would complete its programme by 31st October of that year.

I reported at length a year ago on the trials and tribulations, the disruption, frustration and anger caused by the complete mismanagement of the programme, and all I need say is that there continued unabated – indeed arguably amplified – as work dragged on at snail's pace. Every deadline was missed, communication remained hopelessly poor and information could never be relied upon.

Connecting Devon and Somerset a partnership between the two county councils and supposedly overseeing the project, were notable by their absence and inability to control events, or their contractor. Gigaclear, in turn, were unable to get their sub-contractors to adhere to the timetables for the stages in the programme that were successively agreed and always missed.

The Parish Council, which has no responsibility for the programme, did its best to exert pressure, call Gigaclear to account and persuade Devon Highways to do something to alleviate the worst of the problems caused by road closures. In this we could always count on the support of our county councillor, Julian Brazil, for which I am extremely grateful. Unfortunately, even that pressure could not bring about the desired results.

Perhaps the worst period was when the A379 was closed between Ravensbourne Lane and the Post Office, with depleted gangs of workmen, arriving late and packing up early. Absolutely no effort was made to speed things up by working at weekends or out of hours.

Finally, however, Gigaclear departed. The good news is that they withdrew from the contract they had to extend ultrafast broadband to the rural areas of the parish. The bad news is that so far no efforts are being made to replace them, and given the past ineffectiveness of Connecting Devon I expect the Parish Council will once again have to become involved in something that should be the responsibility of others.

Covid-19

Like the rest of the country our parish has been in lockdown since March 23rd. That is why the Annual Parish Meeting cannot be held and reports from the various community groups and organisations have to be circulated in this form rather than in person at the Village Hall.

The coronavirus is undoubtedly a global problem. Communities everywhere are having to get to grips with it, and as ever community spirit comes to the fore when challenges like these have to be met.

Families have to contend with being furloughed, unable to work, out of a job, having to deal with home schooling at the same time, and living in partial or complete isolation. Those who are most isolated or at risk can to a large extent rely on the kindness and support of neighbours, friends and family, but where there are gaps in the system, or shortfalls in the provision of necessities like PPE, people as ever step up to the plate and help cover the gaps in the system.

Coronavirus Response Stoke Fleming was formed within days and has a dedicated core team, supported by very many others in our community. It is doing an amazing job.

My council colleague Marion Holmes and her team have virtually every sewing machine in the area dedicated to making scrubs for Torbay Hospital. All in all, everyone is pulling together, which is not unexpected but heart-warming nonetheless.

As an immediate response to the crisis the Parish Council, unable to meet in person, delegated powers to the Clerk to enable decisions to be taken in consultation with the Chairman and Vice Chairman. Since then new legislation has been introduced to allow meetings to be held remotely, and the first such meeting will take place on Wednesday, 6th May. We expect to make future meetings open to the public, by means yet to be determined. That looks like to be necessary for the rest of the year.

Where will we be by this time next year, I wonder?

Neighbourhood Plan

The Steering Group that had brought the Neighbourhood Plan to fruition over four years took a well-deserved break following the referendum, and after things had settled down handed over responsibility to the Parish Council.

A Sub-committee comprised of Caroline Martin, Nick Wood, Marion Holmes, Phil Elliott and myself is concentrating its efforts on bringing to fruition two key projects – improvements to the Bird Walk and planning for the proposed new car park at Mill Lane.

Following an initial meeting with the owners of the adjacent properties at Stoke Lodge Hotel and Farwell House, and with the very kind assistance of Adam Benns on BBH Architects a topographical survey of the Bird Walk has been carried out, plans prepared for both resurfacing and re-fencing, and with the assistance of County Councillor Brazil discussions with Devon Highways have begun. Highways have indicated their support in principle but do not see the Bird Walk as a high priority, so the Parish Council expects to lead the project, and will aim to commit Section 106 funding (from the developers of Windward nursing home, Deer Park Inn and the new development on School Road) towards meeting the majority of the funding required.

Within the past week quotations have been received for carrying out the work and the Council will consider the matter at its next meeting.

In February a survey of need for the potential new car park was carried out, covering properties in the area Dartmouth Road (south of Stoke Lodge) to School Road, taking in Chapel Lane, part of New Road, Church Road, Rectory Lane, Baileys Meadow, School Road, Old Road, Well Park Place and Hockey Fields. The survey also took into account the needs of nearby facilities and businesses, demand caused by parishioners from rural areas accessing those facilities, visitors and holidaymakers.

Planning

The Council is monitoring closely the new development on Townstal Road at Cotton, which lies within the parish boundary and will be visible from the village. Work, recently started, has been suspended because of Covid-19.

A range of other planning issues were addressed during the course of the year. Among those, the Council objected on safety grounds to the lack of precautions at the former Deer Park Inn which enabled access by children to the interior of the building and to the swimming pool, full of stagnant water. It also objected to the creation, without planning permission, of a Stagecoach bus depot at the corner of Venn Lane. That matter remains unresolved. Residents' concerns on a number of other issues were addressed and supported.

2. Financial Statement – Judy Talbot

You will find attached the annual statement of accounts for 2019-20. There was a small surplus of income over expenditure of £823.25. Both income and expenditure figures are greatly reduced from last year with far less activity from grants and project expenditure. The main unforeseen expenditure was for the maintenance works to play park equipment which the PC had assistance with from District Council funds.

General maintenance increased a little throughout the parish with the additional costs of looking after the new Swannaton footpath.

The VAT income is high as a sum of £1,146.71 was paid back into the Devon Air Ambulance Trust monies from costs last year.

The closing balance at the end of the financial year stands at £21,735.01.

3. County Councillor's Report – Cllr Julian Brazil Devon County Council 2019/2020

DCC completed the budget process before the lock-down commenced. The County part of the precept will rise by 5%. This is made up of a 3% general rise and 2% ringfenced for adult social care. Following the years of austerity DCC is still struggling to balance its budget. There is extreme pressure on adult social care services and education, especially the special educational needs budget. The coronavirus has only highlighted the pressure care homes are under but thank goodness our local homes have remained covid-free thus far.

All these financial pressures mean we are unable to spend what we need to maintain our road network. However, we are receiving some extra funding in specific grants and this will be used to repair the worst affected areas.

The Gigaclear works within the village have been a huge disappointment and extremely inconvenient to everyone. I would like to thank Jay and Struan for all their work and liaison with the contractors to try and solve many of the issues. Rather late in the day DCC took a much tougher line with Gigaclear.

A thank you to the Parish Council and clerk for keeping me informed throughout the year and I look forward to seeing you all once this wretched virus is behind us.
Julian Brazil

4. District Councillor's Report – Cllr Helen Reeve

As we continue to cope with the coronavirus and the speed of how the situation changes daily, the support parishioners have given each other is overwhelming. This support does need to continue as we all know this coronavirus must not be rushed so small steps.

All Parish Clerks have received a very straight forward procedure of rules for holding remote meetings. These apply to SHDC and parishes. SHDC continue to hold meetings where the calendar is quite busy. Also attached to the rules of procedure is a page of frequently asked questions which may be found helpful and are sure to answer your queries. These refer to planning applications too.

Cluster meetings are held weekly. Myself, Cllr Brazil, Cllr Foss and two officers are part of the cluster group for this parish. Any problems are brought to the meetings or ways we can help our parishes in any way during Covid-19. So please ask one of us if there is a need.

Out of the 34 million to help businesses in the South Hams 2936 businesses have received a grant. A new Discretionary Fund has been announced by the Government for current grant schemes not covered. South Hams is looking to received approx. 2.4 million and a guidance to who will be entitled to this, is coming out next week.

An Emergency Welfare Fund working with DCC was launched recently to help those facing significant hardship and is to assist People waiting for universal credit, assist self-employed with short term assistance to function and to help some with food and travel expenses. Also, some funding will go to secondary schools where hardship issues are being flagged up.

Lastly the new recycling scheme due to have started on September 28th 2020 is now delayed. The two main reasons being delay on the construction of the Ivybridge Transfer Station and secondly delay in delivering the new recycling fleet from Ireland.

Attached: Stoke Fleming Primary School Full Report
 Dartmouth Academy Report
 Stoke Fleming Parish Council Statement of Accounts