

Dickens Heath Parish Council

Chair's Review of the Year 2020/21

The last year has been life changing for everyone the world over, and Dickens Heath has been no exception. Despite the pandemic we quickly resumed the Parish Council meetings after the first lockdown in March by Zoom. That was a steep learning curve, but we have overcome our initial difficulties - although were unable to hold our Annual Meeting in 2020.

The one constant during 2020 were the beautiful hanging baskets. The number of baskets around the village were increased greatly and were extended to include the new developments. Unfortunately we were unable to take part in the Royal Horticultural Society's In Bloom because like so many things the judging and competition were cancelled. We had hoped to build on the silver gilt award of 2019, but that was not to be. That really is an aspiration for the future. Councillors Doreen Wright and Di Potter managed to maintain a few of the village planters and one of the islands. The Parish Council funded plants for Waterside which were planted by some of the residents of the apartments.

The Parish Council took ownership of the Village Green and play area during Spring 2020 and has worked hard towards the installation of a new playground for our young people. Despite setting up a working group within the community during Summer 2020 to ensure that all those involved could proceed with the procurement of a new playground, this too has been on hold due to covid restrictions. Councillor Nargis Rashid has engaged with Dickens Heath Primary School on this and I know that she will pick up on those discussions with the children as soon as she is able.

During the later part of Summer 2020, the Parish Council began its project for improving the rest of the Village Green. Unfortunately, several of the large horse chestnut trees on the perimeter of the green had succumbed to disease and died. We arranged for them to be removed and SMBC kindly provided new large different species of trees to replace those lost. Councillor Trevor Eames worked with SMBC's tree officer to ensure that suitable replacements were ordered. In recognition of the difficult times residents had experienced during the pandemic, SMBC donated a flowering cherry tree which we have called 'the tree of hope'. The new trees have all been planted now and we are awaiting a plaque for the cherry tree explaining why it was donated. Sapling trees were donated by the Woodland Trust and were planted on the Village Green under the careful supervision of Councillor Mike Small, assisted by helpers from the Scouts group. Unfortunately not all of the saplings survived due to the excessively hot and dry Summer. Negotiations are in hand for a further tree planting programme in partnership with SMBC. The wild flower planting by SMBC at various sites in the village really brightened up many of the verges.

During the later part of the Summer I realised that there were so many ongoing projects that I needed a Vice Chair to help and Trevor was able to take up that position within the Parish Council. His knowledge and willingness to help has been greatly appreciated.

Despite installing a new and safer electrical supply on the Village Green for the Christmas tree, the efforts of the Parish Council and many residents were thwarted by vandals on no less than four occasions. Someone was out to cause disappointment and cut the electric cable for the LED lights. Woods Farm kindly supplied and donated a more robust set of lights and they too were damaged on Christmas Eve. Thanks to Councillors Alan Scholes and Trevor Eames they were repaired and twinkled away to provide a light of hope during the dark days of Winter and covid restrictions. It is hoped that we can arrange for CCTV cameras to be installed next year to act as a deterrent for the determined gremlin who tried to spoil our Christmas!

Our Community Chest fund provided grants during 2019 and 2020, to support DHFC, DHPS PTA, the Festival on the Green, the DH food and craft markets, DH allotments, Ordinary Magic, Irish School of Dance, DH Scouts, and JAMS Publishing. It is hoped that the grants have made a difference and we would love to know that is the case.

We had hoped to become involved with the adoption of Whitlocks End Railway Station but that too has been put on hold. We received a really informative report from supporters of the Stratford Line but unfortunately were unable to proceed at that time.

The Parish Council was instrumental in setting up a Library Review Working Group with residents to discuss the proposed pilot scheme by SMBC to reduce the library opening hours. Unfortunately, this was not taken forward because of the pandemic. Our lovely library has had a very limited programme of being able to lend books. During the first lockdown in March 2020 Helen the PC clerk set up a covid 19 Facebook page to support village residents and a Whatsapp group for volunteers to support Dalton's Pharmacy delivering medication for those shielding or isolating. There was much appreciated involvement on this project from Cathy one of the DH librarians.

The budget for the precept has been set for the coming year and I am very pleased to report that it has been frozen and is still lower than it was six years ago when this Parish Council took up office. We have survived a very difficult year and have very positive projects to look forward to.

The Parish Council responded to Solihull's Local Plan consultations during Summer 2019 and Winter 2020 after very careful consideration on the future wants and needs of the community. Those representations will form part of the independent examination which will take place in public and will be overseen by an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State. Councillor Eames is to be congratulated for formatting the response agreed by the Councillors.

Helen and Hannah have continued to work on the Parish Council website so that it met the recommended accessibility guidelines and they also included photos of the village which were submitted by residents. We organised a prize for what was judged to be the best photograph.

Councillors Trevor Eames and Doreen Wright have attended the local Solihull Area Committee meetings and have been able to report back on the most up to date news items

available from other Parish Councils in the Borough. We have also attended the Community Champions meetings for the latest updates on all aspects of the pandemic and to obtain the facts and figures affecting our community. The advice received on the vaccination programme was invaluable.

And so, I must end now and extend my thanks to all Councillors, Helen and Hannah our 'office team', and Simon our litter picker, each and every one of them has played their part. I must of course thank the residents who have attended our meetings in public, they have contributed greatly in keeping us informed and on our toes! My thanks go to each and every one of you for making a success of Dickens Heath Parish Council.

Maureen Holloway
Chair Dickens Heath Parish Council