



Dickens Heath Parish Council

Annual Parish Meeting Tuesday 5th April 2022

Chair's Report by Cllr Trevor Eames

At the last Annual Parish Meeting on 9th March 2021, after a year of Covid restrictions, we were not really expecting the problems to run on for quite so long as they have – but things are now better.

There are two important periods for the Parish Council Calendar – the Civic year that runs from each May Annual Meeting and sets the management arrangements for the next year and is subject to Elections for the 7 Councillors every 4th year (the next are 2023) and the Financial Year that runs to 31st March.

Whatever the other uncertainty I can say that the Parish Finances are currently sound.

A year ago we had good indications that the dreadful impact of Covid was easing and, by adjusting our timing, on 22nd June we were able to hold our first physical Council Meeting back here in the Library. We were also able to operate internal meetings on a more normal basis despite some hiccups along the way.

I would pay special tribute to Helen our Clerk who worked tirelessly both in the office and from home to keep the administrative activities running and in dealing with the many issues raised by residents along the way.

Both Hannah our part time assistant and Simon who deals with litter picking and turns a hand elsewhere when necessary worked throughout.

Each of our Parish Councillors took on responsibilities to help keep the wheels turning as smoothly as possible, plus their feedback from the community proved invaluable and needs to be commended and I am certainly very appreciative of their support.

I have been advised not to bore this meeting with lots of details so I am just going to highlight a few key issues and events that have taken place along the way.

The Village Green, previously the responsibility of the DHMC and the Receivership, had been finally acquired in 2020 by Solihull Council and handed over on a long sub-lease to the Parish Council after years of effort – for the first time we became able to address a better maintenance arrangement, improve facilities and take the long promised new children's play area project forward.

The responsibility for the green comes with conditions and planning constraints as to it being maintained primarily as an open public amenity area.

It has taken a long time and much consultation and thought to finally prepare a tender specification document for a replacement playground that runs to some 21 pages of details and is professionally managed. It is now out to tender, although at a difficult time to get

works done, to the six approved suppliers that meet the high local authority standards required – 2 have already declined to tender and a final contract award is expected to be made later this month or early in May.

Improvements have also been made to facilities on the green, new benches, picnic tables, litter & dog bins installed. Sadly one litter bin and one bench were destroyed by arson which was very disappointing. We were able to fund these improvements by obtaining a grant and using some CIL monies.

I think it appropriate at this point to acknowledge the contribution of former Parish Councillors Maureen Holloway and Alan Scholes, who represented the PC at many meetings with Solihull MBC & the Receivers over the acquisition of the green at a peppercorn cost. Both have now stood down and Alan has been replaced by Cllr Richard Small who was co-opted in February.

Despite Covid Restrictions a superb effort was made to present an entry portfolio (thank you Helen) for the 2021 In-Bloom Entry, gaining a prestigious Silver Gilt Award for the hanging basket displays, plus planters maintained by volunteers and Cllrs and the many front gardens and window boxes that judges had found most impressive. We all benefit and can be very proud of the Village's Annual Summer Floral Displays.

A village Garden Competition was again run and we will encourage more entries for this year.

The other big policy decision this year was the acquisition of the **Tesco Car Park** from Elegant Homes Dickens Heath Ltd who developed The Leasowes, Garden Square East and the new blocks adjacent to the Tesco Car Park. This was finalised after extensive negotiations, at a nominal cost plus the PC's legal costs, and included some remedial works post hand-over. The Parish Council stepped in to acquire the car park in order to protect the public interest as control of the car park was vitally important for all those Main Street Area Residents without dedicated parking and to safeguard parking for our shops and business premises.

The PC is now a major stakeholder in the village centre area and will participate in developing a Parking Management Scheme alongside the DHMC for the central area car parks and private roadways in the coming months.

Parish Council policy decisions are made by the 7 Cllrs. and in the main these are generally by consensus but ultimately by a majority vote – sometimes issues are more difficult around Dickens Heath as they tend to be unduly complex. This is mainly due to the original development arrangements, insolvency of the central area DH Development Company early on, planning policies & a large central area under private management with its shared facilities.

Being a Parish Councillor in Dickens Heath is more challenging than most of the other longer established parish councils and I would commend the time and often thankless effort made by my colleagues in making important decisions in the best interests of the wider community.

Planning – The PC is a statutory consultee on all local planning applications and despite Covid these continued at a high level during the year with each one given careful consideration.

The big planning issue last year was the Solihull Local Plan for housing that went to an Examination in Public (Public Enquiry) by 2 Government Inspectors and that only finished in mid-December. The PC made detailed representations against the loss of sports grounds in Tythe Barn Lane at a hearing on 16th November as objectors.

During 4 years of ongoing consultations directly with Solihull Planners housing numbers in the Parish were reduced by 50% from 1300 to 650. Housing numbers on the sportsgrounds were reduced from 700 to 350, a 600 homes South Shirley site backing onto Millar & Carter was deleted and replaced by a smaller 350 home site at Woods Farm on Bills Lane. This shortfall was relocated to other sites almost entirely in the Green Belt. No other parish obtained such a reduction and had to absorb the uplift from DH. The Inspectors' decision is expected later this Summer.

The year ahead leaves the PC with both challenges and opportunities that will directly affect our local community and I would again commend the dedicated commitment of both my colleagues and our small team of part time staff for all that they do.

Thank you.