

Chairmans Report

May 2024

I would normally briefly report on some of the activities and work of the Parish Council over the last year but one issue has dominated the last six months and I would like to address that in light of some continuing misunderstandings.

The precept is the amount money that the Parish Council receives each year; the PC asks the County Council to collect this from residents as part of the Council Tax. The amount to be collected is decided on by the PC in a public Parish Council meeting.

The County Council issues the Council Tax demand in April and therefore the PC has to set their precept well before this, usually at the December meeting for submission in January.

For some years the PC has kept the level of the precept to only cover necessary running expenses; any other costs, such as the defibrillator, have been met from fundraising activity. This policy is not a given and has been regularly discussed in open meetings where options included creating cash reserves or having a regular inflation proof rise. We welcome the views of residents on this and will continue to discuss the pros and cons in the future.

At the December 2023 meeting a request for funding was made on behalf of the Village Park Cttee; this would have meant a significant percentage rise in the precept and therefore needed careful consideration of, not only the legal implications of using public money to support the request, but also whether it was something councillors alone should decide or the whole village. Accordingly, extra information was requested to be discussed at an extraordinary meeting in January.

A few days before this meeting a councillor resigned meaning the council was inquorate with only two councillors; the council could not legally meet to make any decisions. The precept was not set and no councillors could be co-opted to restore the council. The consequence was that an opportunity had to be given for residents to call an election for the vacant post; the County Council sets a cost of £450 to do this. This is according to the rules and laws governing local government and not something that the PC has any discretion in.

It is important to reiterate that all councillors are unpaid volunteers who give freely of their time and are free to resign at any time.

This situation was not foreseen and we must accept responsibility for not doing so; it was, however, a highly unusual circumstance, outside of any of our experience or indeed of the electoral office at County. It was brought about by the combination of all the factors I have outlined.

A village meeting was called in February to decide the future of the Parish Council; should it continue or be replaced? The meeting was very well attended following written notification to every household. Alternatives were discussed and, on a show of hands, the overwhelming view was to continue the Parish Council.

At the public PC meeting in March new councillors were co-opted and we now have five. There was a discussion as to financing for the coming year 2024/5 and the decision made to initially

request donations and a loan from the County Council to cover any shortfall. The total amount raised will cover only the usual running expenses plus the £450 fee for the election call.

The loan must, of course, be repaid. This year 2024/5 there is no precept included in your Council Tax, next year 2025/6 the precept will be roughly doubled.

I understand that there is some concern at a suggestion that the Park Cttee and/or Village Hall Cttee should provide funds; I am assured that this was made in a personal capacity in a spirit of enquiry as to possibilities. It was made clear that this would not be possible and this has not been proposed to or discussed by councillors.

Where there are alternative suggestions for covering these necessary costs the Parish Council will, of course, consider them; any decisions will be made at the public meetings. We welcome suggestions, publicly or privately, but the decisions will always be made in public, openly and transparently.

With five councillors we now have the resilience to deal with sudden resignations and are, of course, better prepared to maintain that number. To do so also requires the help of the village so that, when vacancies arise, there are those able and willing to take on the role. I am happy to talk informally to anyone who would like to know more about being a Parish Councillor.

I would like to thank our Clerk for her hard work navigating these difficult and complex regulations and also Councillor Mather for stepping in to chair the village meeting in February and helping us to resolve the issues.

Over the course of the coming year we will continue to take up issues and concerns of residents either ourselves or, with the assistance of Councillor Mather, with the County Council. We will also be looking into the options for supporting the Village Park Cttee and expanding Christmas decorations for the village; all options will be discussed and decided on at our public PC meetings, so do please contribute your suggestions and come to the meetings.

Nigel Wood

Chair, Branxton Parish Council