



Annual Parish Assembly 2023 Chairman's report

The last 12 to 24 months have seen a lot of indifferent activities being undertaken and while it is customary for this report to reflect on the last 12 months, it may be prudent to also include some of the year before, as we now have a better understanding of events. This may have an impact on the coming months and so this context may be helpful for all to understand where we currently are.

There are too many to list them all out and some may also remain confidential under Employment Law, but the following points are a reflection of the actuals of the Parish Council activities.

I have summarised our activities and these aren't listed in any particular order, but will start with the most important.

Finance and Governance

Every Parish Council is required to submit various accounts and documents as well as undertake governance tasks to ensure that due diligence is delivered on behalf of the parish. Something referred to as an AGAR (Annual Governance and Accountability Return) an audit which should be completed annually. This is assessed by an internal audit and if all acceptable, then submitted for a national external audit.

Unfortunately, in 2020/21 we failed the audit and in 21/22 we failed to submit the necessary documents within the allotted time. We have subsequently submitted the necessary and the outcomes of the 2nd audit, completed 1st December 2022, and are available on line, but of note:

Council Minutes	There does not appear to be recorded full set of signed minutes that complies with legislation
Meeting agendas	There was no evidence that agendas were being properly issued three clear days in advance of meetings
VAT claim	VAT has not been claimed for 2020/21 and 2021/22
Precept request Budget	There was no evidence that the precept request was taken to the full council for approval
Payroll Reports	The payroll bureau reports were not held on file as at the year end date.
Bank statements and reconciliation	It is good practice to check the bank statement against the ledger quarterly
AGAR forms	The 2020 AGAR was never approved, a 2021 AGAR was never prepared, the 2022 AGAR was prepared after the legal deadline

I am pleased to confirm that following a considerable amount of time back tracking, searching for documents, obtaining copies and trawling emails, as well as an awful lot of grovelling to the auditors for time extensions; we have now submitted the necessary for the year 21/22 and so we are relatively back on track. Not out of the woods, as we failed the audit - but we have a grasp on the tasks that need to be completed and 22/23 is to be audited next month, in the appropriate time frame.

This work also unfortunately uncovered and highlighted many accounting and management activities where funds were either not suitably obtained from council or refunds requested. This amounts to around £40,000, however this is not all bad news as we have managed to reclaim a fairly large proportion of this, but unfortunately not all.



Obtaining the necessary documents to submit for the AGAR needed focus and diligence and following months of administration back-tracking last summer/autumn, we are thankful to Max, who stepped in during the end of the last calendar year to help with these functions. I have said previously, but I think it is important to underline that around 2 years accounting work was completed in just over 3 months and this was not a small undertaking.

Full accounts will be made public after the internal audit, due to be completed on 4th May and Max, as our temporary RFO will update on some of the finer points next. While I am not looking to steal any of her thunder, many of the individual financial elements, certainly pre-September 2022 may appear as inaccurate or incomplete and considering this, I have proposed to Max and I hope it is acceptable to all here, that I present these and take any questions, mainly as these all happened prior to her time as RFO and as such are not her responsibility.

Starting at the beginning; a precept of £ 30,916 was allocated from Basingstoke District Council for the financial year 2021/22 and the precept for 2022/23 increased to £ 35,725. This was earmarked, among others for the public toilets in SMB, which have still not transferred to Parish Council responsibility and tree works, which as we hope you have seen have just started on the rec and also some emergency works around the lake. I'll come back to trees and the works required.

We know that the rising cost of living is proving difficult for many residents and we have tried, albeit in a very small way, not to add to the burden. The precept for the coming year has increased to £ 40,726 as there are a number of tasks that need to be completed in and around the parish, which will be highlighted later, and the activities over the last 24 months have seen reserve funds depleted, without any benefit to the parish.

We are also increasingly concerned that central funding may start to decrease or certainly flatten-out and as such we as a council need to become more astute in how we operate financially and also many of the local tasks will need to be funded locally.

On a positive we have managed to obtain, albeit way after the closing date, the lengthsmans grant for 21/22. And this is where the actuals in the finance start to become imbalanced, the Parish Council paid out for the clusters services during the year 21/22, but only attracted the funds towards the close of the year, ie in 22/23.

So effectively in the year 22/23 (and I am pleased to confirm) that we have the funding for this coming year, but also for last year. So this time in 12 months, we will be talking about a % increase of around 650 – just to make a note now that this is the reason.

We also failed to reclaim somewhere in the region of £ 7,500 in spent VAT from the year 20/21. Again, I am pleased to confirm that we managed to obtain most of the necessary documents for the year 21/22 and managed to recently reclaim around £ 5,500 from HMRC in VAT. The submission for 22/23, of c.£ 13,500 is just waiting for the AGAR and will then be submitted.

During the last few months of 2022, we contracted Max to assist with getting back on track and completing the necessary and we thank her for getting involved. This of course doubled the wage bill, without doubling the administrative process, and this has to be accountable within the annual budget. We also employed an HR company to help with the situation and ensure that every party completed the necessities; this also helped to ensure our HR documentation is now up to date. This whole process cost around £ 15,000 – but we are now through this period and we are looking forward to a new permanent clerk.



In our reserve account, of the approximate £ 81,000 we hold - £ 9,400 is in discussion with the National Lottery about the proposed hide around the lake; £ 3,000 for the play area redevelopment and work continues on this, thanks to Amelda and Laura for their vision and hard work with this – but there is more work required to achieve the goal. And the 22/23 lengthsman scheme funding.

We also hold c.£ 25,000 in CIL (Community Fund) and this is for projects over the next five years; it comes with criteria, but if anyone has a small project, we have some funding available.

Talking of the new clerk, we are in the process of reviewing the job description and will be posting an advert shortly. We will need to review the remuneration of the parish clerk and this is currently being reviewed with Glenda Mew and Patrick Foot. For example, the hourly rate paid is somewhat out of date and the role of the clerk also needs to be redefined to ensure that all parties get value for money, as well as the governance of the council being fulfilled.

We need to hold a trading reserve of around 50% annual spend and we are short of this, but with this in mind we will also look at deposit accounts and making these reserves work harder, than has been occurring.

The budget for the next year has been set and approved as necessary. This will need to be reviewed now that we know the exact grant figures for the year ahead and this will be completed shortly. A copy will be posted on the website.

The Council

The Council Since the last Annual Parish Assembly (APA) held 11 full meetings and 2 extra HR meetings.

Minutes over the last year are now all accountable and available on the website and many of the previous years are also available. These will be archived as part of the AGAR, but we will retain copies on the website as well.

I am pleased to say, and thanks for all the messages of support, that the minutes have started to retain more of the points, actions and discussion which are raised and discussed at council meetings. Depending on your point of view, they may not be the most interesting of reads, but this is all part of managing and delivering the responsibilities of the council.

Unfortunately, we received the resignation from Kevin Noble and we thank him for his time and commitment to the Council. This leaves a space and we look forward to the election on the 4th May – 4 names have been put into the hat and it is now left with the parish residents to chose who will fill this place. It would be good to have them all involved as they all bring different points of view and skills and so we ask that you vote for who you would like and they become part of the council moving forwards.

Councillors Carr (Borough) and Thacker (County) have been present at meetings or provided reports. We appreciate the amount of meetings they need to regularly attend as part of their wider responsibilities and thank them for their time and commitment to this parish.

We have an increase in members of the public regularly attending the full meetings, which I hope is a good thing and means that governance is observed.



Highways

Some improvement to road surfaces in the parish have occurred over the last few years as part of the continuing battle against potholes, but the state of our roads is not good and many of the concerns highlighted in previous years continue.

Road edges are poor and encourage drivers to cling to the centre of the road and the highways contractors still fail to empty gullies properly, leading to flooding during heavy rain. Thanks to Cllrs Patrick and Ed for assisting clearing the drains to the front of the George towards the latter of last year, more work is required, and this is ongoing with Hampshire.

Residents can contribute to the condition of our roads and safety and avoid parking near junctions and those with roadside fronts, managing verges by ensuring hedges do not encroach on the highway.

The area around the school and parking generally around the villages within the parish is becoming tighter and tighter. We are not looking to shift any responsibility, but as a Parish Council we are not in a position to make adjustments. Resident should make any suggestions to Hampshire Highways as an initial point of contact, on their website. We will be producing a guidance document as to how this all works and the actions needed to make Highways aware of the points. This is something where everyone needs to take action – the PC follows the same process, we don't have a hotline to the decision makers. The greater the number of complaints received, the more likely action is to be taken.

If this fails to bring an appropriate response then notify the parish council, but please do not expect miracles, we follow the same rules as everyone else.

Lengthsman (responsible for tasks around the parish, mainly involving roads)

The budget has not increased for many years, but the charged hourly rate is now £ 30 per man hour and often this is a requirement for two or three people per hour. There are rumours of this budget decreasing, but we are pleased to say that for the next 12 months we have received central funding.

We are the central management for a cluster of 12 other parish councils and while communications with these other councils disintegrated over the last 18 months, we are pleased to say that the cluster remains and Max is in frequent communication will all.

Managing the contractor is an important element of the cluster and obtaining value for money for all parishes top of the list. Max has this in hand and has the contractor submitting the necessary reports and planning works effectively. We wont have a repeat of when the contractor sat in the car-park for an 8 hour period during Summer 22, as they had not received any instructions – and so did no work.

The Rec

This last winter has seen the pavilion have an additional user and one that now means the building can work for more than just a few months of the year. Ninnys occupied the building over winter and it seems to be a good home for them.

The pavilion is in need of maintenance, this was earmarked 5 years ago, but Ninny's have repainted and improved the kitchen and generally the building is cleaner now than it has been for many years, including the control of the rats.



Thanks also to Cllr Glenda (and Dave) Mew for their help in removing the brambles to the rear of the building and Ed Makgill for the strimming works last autumn.

The aim is to see how this space now works over summer, where it will be shared with both the senior and junior cricket teams. This building will need to be shared between all and respect given to the other parties. The aim is for a long-term usage and ideally this will allow a new pavilion to be built.

The residency by Ninnys is an example of where the Parish Council can be smart with utilising assets not just to draw an additional income, but also use these agreements to attract long-term finances. Which in turn can then help to develop and enhance the area; without either raising the precept or to minimise the need for fund-raising (but I am sure that this may also be required!!).

Despite the weather towards the end of the installation, the Cricket Nets are almost complete. The landscaping for the bowling and install of the net dividers will be finalised this week for a grand opening shortly. This project is primarily down to Jonny Orange and the junior cricket and we congratulate him and the teams for their fundraising.

The landscaping around the rec and into the lake will be finalised now that the weather has dried out a bit. There is also going to be a new bench installed in memory of Tony Gunsell and thanks to Chris Randall and Booker for this donation – it will round off the works around the shop, which meant so much to Tony.

Just talking cricket, junior cricket seems to be going from strength to strength and if anyone hasn't been to the rec on a Friday night, it is well worth bring a bottle of wine (or buying from the shop/pop-up bar) and joining the parents to watch the activity – it very much looks like the future of cricket is in good hands.

Senior cricket has a new team and we wish Giles as Chair, Mark as grounds and Phil as Treasurer and the rest of their committee all the best for the season ahead – we will aim to publish dates of all matches to try and increase awareness and hopefully attendance for home games.

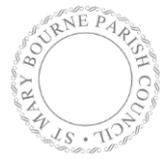
All of this activity, including the shop, bowls, cricket, Ninnys and the users of the village hall mean that from time to time parking is an issue and one that we are fully aware of. The long-term plan is to reorganise the space between the shop and the pavilion – including the play area, MUGA / Tennis court, the open activity trails etc

This would not be a small undertaking, but combined with a new pavilion, would be one that could make this whole space more effective for the current needs, but also looking at the years ahead. But it will take a proactive group and ideally where new blood would get involved and take the project to completion.

It has been proposed to set up a new Community Hub, not just for this project, but supporters could come and go for various projects around the parish. The aim being to have a centralised admin and fund raising team and for projects to then utilise the resources. There are many benefits to this and if anyone would like more information please don't hesitate to get in touch.

The Lake

We are going to restart the process of producing the next 3-5 year Management Plan which will help to shape the whole space ongoing.



The basis of this is looking at the projects we have already completed and developing those, bearing in mind the environmental issues which guide us such as managing the trees and the development of various habitats for wildlife and wild flowers on the surround. If we are smart, this will also attract grants which will help with the overall management of the space and trees – which will reduce the financial burden of this parish space. Tree works alone will be close to £ 25,000.

The repairs to the rivulet have now been completed and Watercress and Winterbourne continue to monitor its benefits. We have some £5000 to repay over the next few years and this has been accounted for in the next years budget.

The project for the hide didn't reach completion and we are entering discussions with the National Lottery as to how some of the funding could be reallocated for signage and educational boards. This doesn't mean the end of the project to utilise this wonderful asset of the lake for education and wellbeing; but we must learn from the process and need to ensure that detailed planning and discussions are part of the ongoing plans.

A new fishing syndicate agreement has been signed for the year ahead. No agreement was signed for 2022 and invoices have been intermittent over the last few years. However this is back in hand and with the lake recently having been restocked, we hope all involved enjoy this space. There maybe a need to review who has access and how, minimising any barriers for more to access and enjoy this space. More discussions are required around this whole space.

Flood Group

Possibly the most important of functions, the group has met frequently over the last few months to keep an eye on things and make sure communications are shared with all. There are several parts to this whole process, not just the water that comes through the valley, but also the waste and its removal.

It when the two meet that issues are caused. We have communications with the water companies and they are sending representation to subsequent meetings. However the drainage is an expensive project and we cant see replacement as an option, but measures are in place for early detection and then enhanced removal.

These can often be last minute and do cause disruption, but for safety's sake need to be implemented. We will do our best to share any notice of works on the Parish Council Facebook page.

Thanks to Sarah Cooney, Clem Jones and Dave Burlinson and Cllrs Dave and Ed for their work on this project.

Around the Parish

The drive to install a defibrillator in Stoke is ongoing as well, as a replacement one at The Boundary continues.

Dog fouling continues to be a source of annoyance to residents. The council provided additional bins and signage and we encourage people to use these and ensure that no mess is left for others to have to deal with.

We want to encourage greater interaction with the various hamlets and villages around the parish and hope that ongoing we will be able to set up working parties for any local projects. Please get in contact if anyone would like to get involved with this.



Planning

The majority of applications within the parish were uncontroversial.

The Parish Council has responded to the Conservation Area Appraisal last autumn and to the Model Design code more recently. Both raised some issues of concern mainly around parking and access through lanes with continued development.

The parish council will generally not meet developers privately at the pre application stage to preserve impartiality, however during October, we did meet with the propose solar farm company and they presented to all during November. This is an unusual situation and one that will require more diligence and discussion ongoing.

In terms of other general planning, I will remind all that the Parish Council has very limited options on this point and do not have a magic wand to make everything right for all. We have a list of criteria, the same as everyone else, on which applications are discussed. Very often if an application has been added to the portal, it means that BDBC have been satisfied and as such often there is little the PC can object to.

As a statutory consultee in all planning applications, we do try to provide the local insight on development proposals including the positive as well as negative views but if you would like to know more about applications, please look at the planning portal on the Parish Councils website, where you can also search for applications by date or even look up a site on a map. Comments can also be made.

The final point on this is that we all live in the same wonderful space and we need to respect the points of view of others. We have to be collectively aware that development will occur but it's how this is managed and communicated and doesn't negatively impact the environment and the space in which we live.

Finally I'd like to thank:

Max for stepping in over the difficult few months and helping to get the boat stable and back on course. Max continues to hold the position of clerk (and is doing a wonderful job) until a fulltime clerk will be employed over the next few months.

The parish councillors for their time and comments as well as pulling up their sleeves and undertaking some of the tasks around the place. A considerable amount of time is given up to this task and the parish I am sure is grateful for your commitment.

Last but by no means least, the parishioners of St Mary Bourne and all the surrounding hamlets and villages. I believe it is really important for the Parish Council to undertake the works that enhance the space in which we live and so all positive comments and suggestions are welcomed as to where the council should be focusing efforts. We would like to thank all those members of the public who have raised issues over the past year and hope that we have gone some way to help resolve them.

Please continue to get involved, come to the meetings and raise awareness.

Oliver Madge, Chair, St Mary Bourne Parish Council 11th April 2023