

Annual Parish Meeting April 29th 2021

Chairman's Report

In March of 2020 when we last met in person and put in place measures to ensure council business would proceed uninterrupted by the declaration of a global pandemic, we could never have imagined that we would still be operating under those measures more than a year later.

The Clerk and Cllrs were challenged by the technology of virtual meetings, learning how to use Zoom but met that challenge well, albeit within the limitations of rural broadband.

The council worked quickly to set up Covid 19 support systems in the village, under the banner of "Rolvenden's Response" The postcode volunteer scheme was established, with over 50 volunteers coming forward, which enabled us to cover every postcode in our community, with the designated volunteer being available for shopping, collecting medication or dog walking for residents who were sick, self-isolating or vulnerable. The volunteers also provided a first point of contact to access information on other services that were available in the wider community.

The feedback from this scheme was very positive, with residents saying they felt reassured in the knowledge that there was someone they could contact for help if they needed it. Rolvenden Parish Council was also hailed by ABC as a shining example of localism at its best, with our Covid support system being held as the benchmark for other communities within the borough.

As a progression of this scheme a regular delivery system for prescriptions from Ivy Court was set up. So successful was this that it prompted the practice manager at Ivy Court to develop their own more permanent delivery scheme.

We organised a telephone befriending service, with volunteers available to ring elderly and shielding members of our community once a week for a friendly chat, helping to alleviate feelings of loneliness and isolation.

The Care Bear food parcels were established to provide weekly grocery packs for families with children who were experiencing financial hardship due to Covid 19 with funding coming from a combination of grants from ABC and KCC and generous donations of both food and money from within the village.

The Rolvenden Rocket was utilised during the first lockdown to make daily deliveries of grocery orders from My Village Store to the sick, elderly and self-isolating, at a time when online shopping delivery slots from the big supermarkets were almost non-existent.

Sadly, last summer, the Rocket became a victim of Covid as ABC withdrew financial support for it, having to re-direct their funds to Covid relief.

I would like to express my gratitude to all the volunteers involved in every aspect of Rolvenden's Response and the part that you all played in its success.

It has been difficult at times during the pandemic to make progress on other projects in the village and some of these have taken far longer than we could ever have envisaged.

Unfortunately, both play areas in the village had to be closed having failed a safety inspection and delays at ABC in releasing the S106 funding generated by the development at Halden Field meant we were unable to remedy this in a timely manner. However, the Streyte play area is now open again

with new equipment installed and the Layne field will have its new equipment installed in the next few weeks.

The legal transfer of land resulting from the generous bequest from the late Miss Pat Thoburn, which includes the allotments, has also moved very slowly due to the legal complexities of the case. The council is fully committed to ensuring that Miss Thoburn's wishes are carried out and that the land continues to be available for the enjoyment of the village. We are aware and fully supportive of the fact that the allotment group have worked very hard to improve the allotment area and are eager to access the earmarked S106 funding to make further improvements but until the transfer is finalised we are unable to move that forward.

Road safety is an ongoing concern for the parish council, as it is for many residents. Our Highways Improvement Plan for Rolvenden, started in 2019, stalled during the Covid crisis. Earlier this year we were able to hold a virtual meeting with KCC Highways to look at which projects we might take forward and the potential costs. Since KCC are unlikely to fund anything other than very minor (and inexpensive) aspects of the plan we will need to think very carefully about which changes are feasible and how they might be funded. The first step is to commission traffic surveys which will happen as soon as Covid restrictions are fully lifted and these surveys will monitor traffic volume and speed through the High Street and outside the school.

Our Community Speedwatch group has been operating as and when restrictions have allowed and their presence certainly has a calming effect on most drivers. We appreciate the time that these volunteers put into the scheme.

The council continues to assess planning applications in the parish throughout the year before they are passed to ABC for a decision. To ensure the opinions of residents are respected we are stringently applying the policies of the adopted Rolvenden Neighbourhood Plan, as well as those of the Ashford Local Plan and the NPPF, in forming our decisions. We have had some notable success in objecting to inappropriate development but sadly there have also been occasions where ABC have not agreed with us and permissions have been granted despite our objections.

The financial difficulties caused by the fraud perpetrated by the former clerk have seriously impacted our ability to fund bigger projects in the village and will continue to do so for some time. After initial increases to the precept to enable the day to day running of the council to continue, the accounts are now looking stable and have allowed us to make a reduction in this year's precept element of your council tax. The accounts will be published in the next few weeks.

Since the discovery of the fraud at the end of 2017 work has been ongoing to try to recoup the stolen funds. The Crown Prosecution Service carried out a Proceeds of Crime investigation to see if the former clerk had any assets that could be used to return funds to the parish council but this proved unsuccessful.

We filed a claim against our fidelity insurance but this was declined as the insurers stated that we could not show that we had complied with all clauses of the policy, with their main issue being our lack of proof of financial governance. We were unable to provide this proof, which would have included items such as the cash book, initialled cheque stubs, bank statements and bank

reconciliations because the former clerk retained or destroyed all council documents. We obtained the transcript of the trial, which took several months to come through, which detailed the complexity of the fraud and the lengths that Willard went to to avoid the fraud being detected. We submitted it to our insurers hoping they would reverse their decision but they did not.

We have complained to our former bank, Lloyds Bank, citing their negligence relating to the fraud. They failed to notify the council of any unusual activity on the three accounts, even when the accounts became overdrawn. More recently we have discovered that Lloyds allowed online banking transfers to take place against a forged online banking mandate. Cllrs were not aware of the mandate and since forged bank statements were submitted by Willard for reconciliation the online transfers went undetected. Lloyds Bank refused to accept any wrongdoing which led us to complain to the Financial Ombudsman, only to be told that parish councils are not eligible for the service being neither an individual nor a trading business. We appealed the decision but the original decision was upheld. We have also contacted the receiving bank Nat West since they also failed to act on the unusual activity on their clients account, which should have been flagged up by their anti money laundering protocol. To date they have failed to respond.

We are now consulting a solicitor on the possibility of civil claims against the banks, the insurers and Willard. Much will depend on the costs involved – we must be mindful of how much money we spend to try to recoup the stolen funds.

In any democratic setting differences of opinion and lively debate are normal and healthy but the spectre of the stolen funds has caused much division in the parish council, culminating in allegations of bullying and harassment of both the current clerk and Cllrs who were members of the previous council. This is totally unacceptable and in recent months has impacted proper conduct at and between meetings. Advice from both Ashford Borough Council and The Kent Association of Local Councils has prompted the council to undertake a full governance review, carried out by an independent specialist consultancy. The review was funded by a grant from our ABC ward member Cllr Kate Walder.

The review established that the council is well run and fully compliant with all relevant legislation, thanks to the experience and efficiency of our current clerk. The review report states that the council has recovered well from the trauma of the fraud and there are no governance concerns.

The report also acknowledges that there is evidence of bullying and harassment and suggests training and policy enhancements to counter this. The actions recommended in the review will be enacted as soon as is practicable. A new national Code of Conduct has recently been issued and should also be adopted by the council shortly.

We are lucky in Rolvenden that all our Cllrs are elected as the result of a contended election process. Many villages fail to field enough candidates at elections and often have to co-opt Cllrs or function with reduced numbers. All our Cllrs bring valuable skills and life experiences to the council and these skills should be utilised and embraced but that cannot happen in an atmosphere of intimidation and bitterness. It is hoped that the measures recommended by the review will improve the function of the parish council, enabling us to move forward, working in a cohesive manner and in the best interests of the village we serve.

We are grateful to our clerk Peter Setterfield for his hard work and dedication to the village over the last year. His work has not been easy – there have been numerous and often conflicting changes in legislation relating to parish councils, particularly due to Covid and the restrictions on in-person

meetings, but he has guided us through it all with skill, calmness and only the tiniest amount of complaint so we thank him for that.

Finally, I would like to express our thanks to all those who work to keep the village looking good. Perhaps because people have been spending more time outdoors there has sadly been a noticeable increase in the amount of litter strewn around the village. Sid and Maureen Brookes have done an excellent job with litter picking again this year and we are grateful to all the volunteer litter pickers who have targeted various areas of the village too. Thank you too to the Tompsett Bros who go beyond their contractual obligations to keep green areas of the village looking well cared for.

Denise Curtain

Chairman – Rolvenden Parish Council