



Your Parish Council

As Parish Clerk I am often asked what the parish council's key responsibilities are. But your council also makes improvements for the village in the form of projects or support. Even though it is regularly reported in our monthly newsletters, I thought it may be useful to give you an idea of what your councillors and clerk have achieved over the last few years. We are allowed to have 11 councillors at any one time on the council; however, people come and go, and since 2013 we have actually had a total of 27 people from all areas in Stoke with different backgrounds and viewpoints standing as councillors helping to make decisions and supporting our wonderful village.

All of our 11 councillors play an active role in the village through volunteering, managing or belonging to many of the village groups. However, under government legislation no councillor is allowed to vote on financial decisions for any group in which they are actively involved in managing. This ensures independent and unbiased decisions are made.

Special Achievements:-

Winning Back "Lost" Grant Money

In 2017 we successfully stopped the developers at Tayberry Close near Stanchester from trying to get out of paying the S.106 contribution of £110,213 they owed to the village, as well as not building six affordable houses. Cllr Barbara Brooks did some legal research to challenge the validity of their request and spoke at the District Planning Committee on behalf of the village – and won. As a result, the village now has 6 affordable houses at Tayberry, and the Sports & Recreation Trust were able to receive their expected funding for the Adventure Playground.

A Facelift For Our Village Hall

The council funded a £15,000 major redecoration for the Memorial Hall in 2015 -2017. The Hall is owned and managed by an independent charity. Cllrs Barbara Brooks and Rebecca Merrick joined the management team back in 2016 to assist with improving the booking, finance and health and safety systems. As a result, our village hall is now in profit, and is a warm, safe, friendly and affordable place to meet for classes and social events and is well used and appreciated by our older residents.

Creating A New Village-Owned Venue

The new Hamdon Youth & Family Centre in West Street was bought by the council for the village from the Methodists in 2018 under the Community Right to Bid law. Cllr Barbara Brooks negotiated with the Methodist Church and the Public Works Loan Board over a two-

year period to ensure the village got the best deal and instructed the council's solicitors. As a new asset for our village, it will continue to increase in value. Cllrs Hugh Donovan, Andy Dawe, Paul Jeffery and Bill Southcombe have all rolled their sleeves up and carried out a lot of useful practical work at the Centre. Following delays caused by the Covid lockdowns contractors are now completely renovating the church with new facilities. It will be a welcoming and dedicated place for our youngsters for their organised social activities. Our young people will become the adults and the future volunteers in our village.

Highways & Road Safety

I regularly report any Highways issues such as potholes, drain clearance and line marking to Somerset County Council. In addition to this, we have recently re-convened the Transport Strategy Group to include both councillors and residents to work together on a practical project to investigate possible traffic calming measures throughout the village which need to be agreed and implemented by Highways. As speeding is an issue in Stoke, councillors purchased a Speed Indicator Device in April 2021. Cllr Hugh Donovan moves the device around the village every two weeks to areas agreed by Highways and downloads the data for reporting to the council. This device has helped to clarify where issues actually are.

Bus Service and New Shelter

In 2014, we successfully petitioned to save our bus service and, in December 2021 the council had a new bus shelter installed in West Street to provide shelter from bad weather. Cllr Alex Schellenberg championed the project and helped select options available and liaised with the manufacturers.

Defibrillators

The council have purchased two defibrillators, one at the Memorial Hall and one at the Prince of Wales. We also organised a couple of free training sessions on CPR for residents. Cllr Lyn Foley checks the defibrillators and cabinets each month.

Cleared Sea Wall

Again, following resident feedback, the council recently organised and funded the cost of pruning overgrown trees and brambles at Sea Wall to restore that wonderful view across our countryside.

Covid-19 Information

At the beginning of the lockdown in 2020, as Government information was somewhat confusing the council drafted up a simple guide on the changing restrictions together with contacts for financial and mental health support. These updates were delivered to every household together with information on how the new village Community Hub could help with deliveries etc. Cllr Barbara Brooks was in constant contact with all the village venues and charities to ensure they were aware of the Government grants available. She was pleased to be able to work closely and quietly in the background with our District Councillor to ensure that the new Community Shop received a £10,000 discretionary grant as it did not quite meet all the criteria at that particular time as a new business.

Supporting our local organisations

Aside from our statutory responsibilities and projects, the council supports the community where it can by giving grants to local groups, some of them on an annual basis. These groups are the Sports & Recreation Trust, Stoke Community Shop, the May Fayre, Stoke Performing Arts Group, Hamdon Community Arts Project (URC), the Lunch Club (now Afternoon Tea Club), Hamdon Playgroup, Stoke Band, Healthy Hearts Exercise Class, Friends of Ham Hill, Stoke Baby & Toddler Group, Tiny Turrets, Hamdon Youth Group, the Memorial Hall, Hamdon Youth Centre, Age UK Somerset, Friends of Castle School, Stoke Litter Pick Team, the Pop-In at Oak Tree House, the Royal British Legion, St Mary's PCC (churchyard maintenance), and other charities such as Shopmobility, St Margaret's Hospice and the Citizens Advice Bureau.

Some Of Our Key responsibilities:-

Finance

As the Responsible Finance Officer for the council, I look after the Parish Council's accounts. Each year, I create the budget for the council's income and expenditure. A dedicated team of councillors view this budget and make recommendations for the coming year for approval by full council. The council has a responsibility to set aside Reserve Funds which are ring-fenced for specific purposes such as the management of our Assets and the Pavilion and any major projects.

Planning

Although the Parish Council are only consultees and all planning decisions are made by the District Council, councillors have been able to influence and improve the look of some of the recent developments, notably at West Street and at Tayberry Close. Cllr Hugh Donovan conducted a survey into the materials used for walls and roofs for every house in Stoke and this Built Environment Survey data has been used successfully by the parish council to persuade the District Planning decision makers to keep the character of our hamstone village rather than to allow urban brick colours and styles to be introduced.

Ground maintenance

The council is responsible for maintaining parish outdoor spaces and uses a local contractor to do this. The grass on the Memorial Hall grounds and the Youth Centre is also cut to support the two charities. We were able to improve the content of our ground maintenance contract with the help of ex-Cllr Malcolm Uhlhorn who brought his previous professional experience and knowledge to the benefit of the village. I also work closely with the Duchy of Cornwall and the National Trust to report on areas under their responsibility such as the redevelopment of the Jubilee Woods and the wooded copse at the bottom of Matts Lane.

Due to budget cuts at District and County level some of the routine work they did is no longer carried out, so the council now contract a Parish Ranger (Lengthsman) from the District

Council for £4,000 a year to clear weeds, drains and carry out small repair jobs etc. The Ranger has recently been clearing some overgrown vacant allotments at Stonehill that had been subject to fly-tipping. The council maintains an Asset Reserve Fund for unexpected repairs and damage.

Play Areas

Councils are required to provide and manage recreational space including play areas. Over the past 6 years the council have completely refurbished the play area at Stonehill and installed a new multiplay unit at the Memorial Grounds play area at a total cost of £60k to provide more facilities for the little ones. The council pays for annual health and safety checks, and regularly repairs and renews equipment when required. Cllrs Suzanne Nelms and Alex Schellenberg inspect the areas each month to ensure there are no maintenance issues.

Recreation Ground

The council leases the Recreation ground from the Duchy of Cornwall and is responsible, under the lease, for replacing the Pavilion at the end of the lease in 2031 (or later if extended). To cover this liability the council has built up a dedicated Reserve Fund of over £27,530 and adds £2,400 each year to this fund. The Pavilion and all of the play and sporting equipment is insured under the parish council's insurance. The Sports and Recreation Trust were originally set up in 1996 to manage the grounds on behalf of the parish council. We now have a Service Management Agreement with the Trust and give them a £4,000 grant each year. The council has also provided the Trust with matched funding for SSDC Community Grants and letters of support for their fundraising.

Allotments

The council leases land from the Duchy of Cornwall to provide allotment sites for residents. These are located in North Street, Furlands and Stonehill. A full plot comprises of approximately 300 square yards and costs £17 per year to rent. Half and quarter plots may also be available with the cost at a pro-rata rate. There is also a one-off deposit of £25 which is refundable on vacating the plot, subject to it having been left in a tidy state. Tenants are required to sign a Tenancy Agreement.

Mrs Sarah Moore
Clerk to Stoke sub Hamdon Parish Council

21 February 2022