

Melbury Osmond Parish Council - Chairmans Report 2023

One year on from taking on the role it is fair to say it has not been the easiest of starts, picking up after our former clerk stepped down. However, thanks in large part to Councillor Robert Ward, who agreed to take on the role of clerk and responsible financial officer on a temporary basis, I believe we have made considerable progress towards “getting the ship back on an even keel”, although a few snagging issues remain. I would like to thank Robert publicly and formally now, as this is an unpaid role.

The Parish council currently consists of Peter Coverdale, Katrina Holtham, Martin Smith, Robert Ward and myself. We do still have two vacant positions for councillors and are very much still hoping to recruit to the clerk and financial officer role. Anyone interested in these positions, or with suggestions for suitable candidates to be tactfully approached, please contact Robert, me, or any member of the council.

I would also like to express our sincere thanks to Mary Penfold, our county councillor, who regularly attends our meetings, provides updates and opportunities at the county level and where possible seeks to help address any issues with the local services, including the roads and the outreach Post Office service. The loss of the post office service is of particular concern. The council are communicating with other local councils also affected, PO Ltd. and our MP, to impress the importance of returning a working outreach service to the village.

Meeting agendas and minutes are published on the village website, the maintenance for which we are very grateful to Lindsay Reeve, and for her continued management of the defibrillator unit at the Village Hall entrance. Thanks also go to Anna Roxburgh for helping keep residents aware and safe via the Neighbourhood Watch scheme.

The council maintains the village playground. David Woolacott has now been employed to continue Wendy Wheeler’s good work on weeding and maintenance. I also want to express our gratitude to David Wheeler who continues to mow grass around the Hall and playground, in his own time, unpaid. We are working towards replacing the equipment on the playground as it ages over time. The slide and tower being the next large item requiring replacement imminently.

A replacement bench seat is in hand for the Boules pitch.

The council continues to support the Village Hall and I would like to express our thanks to all the residents and committee members who have made this cornerstone amenity in the village function over the years. Several of various committee members are rightly stepping down this year after, in most cases, many decades of service. We are very grateful to those residents who have taken up some of these positions already, and working out how to engage residents both new and established in filling the remaining roles has become a priority. The council resolved to purchase replacement picnic table(s) for the Village Hall.

The council also resolved to continue using the Village Hall rather than the Reading Room for meetings, leaving the latter somewhat unused. Given that the electricity bills for the Reading Room increased dramatically over the past 18 months, this has raised the question of whether to retain its use or not. Robert Ward has made sterling efforts addressing the issue with our electricity supplier, had a smart meter installed leading to accurate readings, achieved a rebate and is addressing high standing order charges. Once we have sound estimates for the annual bills going forward, we can decide on our future use. We solicit suggestions from the village for potential alternative uses.

Plans for creating a more permanent celebration for the Queen's Platinum Jubilee, and the King's Coronation by planting a copse at the western end of the rec remain but the community planting event is delayed until autumn 2023. Ilchester Estates have been asked regarding support for the restoration of the "pond" at the north-western corner of the rec as part of this project.

There were four planning applications in the period. Councillors reported several footpath and highways issues sometimes repeatedly to the relevant authorities. Despite refusing a formal site visit, Dorset Council Highways typically respond to reports relatively quickly, so residents are encouraged to report issues using the relevant DC online system.

The council seeks to liaise and maintain a good working relationship with Ilchester Estates and Velcourt, addressing issues, where possible, as they arise.

Parish Council finances are currently sound. Income for 22/23 was £6,784 solely from the precept; expenditure over the period was £4,484, and the balance to year end March 2023 was £6754. This is an underspend on the budget estimate and on typical previous years and was largely due to reduced expenditure on clerk's salary. This means we have been able to place a reasonable amount in reserve to support village hall and playground projects and to retain the precept at the same level for next year. This latter represents a significant real term cut in the current inflationary circumstances, going some small way to help those feeling the impact of the cost-of-living crisis. I would like to thank John Senior for undertaking the internal audit of the PC accounts. Audited accounts will be published next week with the Annual Governance and Accountability Return and will be available on the website – on time this year!

Richard Paley, June 2023