

Chairman's Report 2024 – 2025

I would like to start this review by thanking my fellow councillors for their unstinting support and dedication. I am most grateful for their wise counsel and professionalism in dealing with a broad range of issues that affect the daily lives of our parishioners; they give up their time willingly in the pursuit of making Holcombe a better place to live for everyone and I for one, am very grateful and appreciative of what they deliver. I am pleased to report that during the last year no councillors have stepped down and we remain at full strength. In May Councillor Gait stepped down from the position of vice chair and was replaced by Councillor Davies. I would like to thank Cllr Gait for his consistent support over the years and his willingness to remain on the Council for the foreseeable future. I would also like to thank Cllr Davies for being so proactive in taking on the vice chair responsibility and I am grateful for his support since his appointment. However, after 16 years of sterling service we were sad to see our longstanding clerk, Vickie Watts step down in order to pursue other activities. Her dedicated service to the parish cannot be underestimated and she went well beyond her brief to ensure that issues affecting the parish were dealt with in a timely and fair manner. I would like to take this opportunity to put on record our sincere thanks to her for all that she has done and wish her the very best for the future. In order to find a replacement, we conducted a recruitment process in the winter and were fortunate to have 3 candidates respond to our job advert. After interviewing all the candidates, we were delighted to appoint Mrs Debbie Widdows who joined the council on 1 January. Debbie is very experienced and highly qualified to carry out this role as she worked for Mendip District Council for a number of years prior to migrating to Somerset Council (SC) after unification. She is currently working full time in Taunton as the Senior Democratic Services Officer but has agreed to reduce her hours from April onwards to allow her to devote her time to working for 3 parishes in the local area.

It seems that every year is busy and this last one has been no exception. In addition to carrying out the day to day functions of the council we have had to contend with additional responsibilities devolved from Somerset Council as they have tried to reduce their significant budget deficit. Despite the promise of savings as a result of unification, Somerset Council has found that the ballooning costs of Adult and Childrens' Social Care have resulted in an overspend of tens of millions and have had to declare a financial emergency and seek funds from central government to plug the hole. They have devolved many responsibilities to town and parish councils to reduce their expenditure which in turn has added to our costs. We have been considering the implications of these over the last few months and have factored them into our budget and precept calculations for next year. We scrutinise our expenditure very carefully every quarter and want to stress the importance that we place on getting value for money from every pound we receive.

To give you a flavour of what we have been doing over the course of this report I thought I would highlight a few major issues that we have dealt with on your behalf.

- We have scrutinised and provided comment on all planning applications that relate to the village and the adjoining areas. Whilst most of these are routine and unopposed, there are always a few that cause parishioners concern and we welcome their attendance at the monthly meetings to express their views in person. Although we are under strict time constraints to submit our comments to the planning authority, unfortunately the deadline for decisions at Somerset Council often slip and applicants can wait significant time for a decision to be made. Unfortunately this is the case in 2 of the more contentious applications that we have dealt with in the past; namely the removal of dead ash trees and infilling with inert material on Edford Hill, the retrospective application to install a new entrance to replace a previous small gateway further down the hill. I hope that the new government's drive to improve the planning process manifests itself in quicker decisions in the next year as these delays cause frustration and anxiety.
- We continue to improve how we keep our parishioners up to date on all issues impacting the village and the surrounding area by providing updates in the Community Magazine, the website and the village Facebook page. In addition, we post hard copies of the agenda and the minutes on the noticeboard for those who prefer to see these in print. I encourage all parishioners to attend our monthly meetings to see what we do and to provide us with feedback.
- We continue to address the ongoing problems of speeding and road safety in the village. We remain in frequent dialogue with Somerset Highways regarding speed limits, white line painting and road repairs; whilst progress can be slow, we do our best to keep the pressure on the people responsible to take action. In addition we attend the meetings of the Highways and Traffic sub group as part of our Local Community Network to raise issues of concern in our village. After much effort, the Auto Speed Watch system is fully operational and we are able to analyse the information in a meaningful way and compile data that we pass onto the local police for further action. The PCSO has already been in contact with a number of companies and individuals about their speeding on the hill and we hope that this acts as a deterrent for everyone.
- We were able to disburse £1000 to 5 village organisations through the Community Project. We trust this money is well received and leads to improving the quality of life for their members.
- The highlight of the summer was the commemoration of the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the D Day Landings, the largest seaborne invasion in history. We celebrated this historic occasion with a D Day themed quiz in the village hall followed by live music, refreshments and the lighting of the beacon on the playing field. Over 250

people attended the events which is testament to the community spirit of the village and your willingness to support local events.

So you can see that plenty has been occupying us over the course of the last 12 months but our in trays remain full and there is much more to be done in the forthcoming year. And finally, I would like to thank all those parishioners who give up their time to serve the community in all sorts of different ways. There is a huge amount that goes on behind the scenes to improve the quality of lives of those in our community and we are indebted to you for your support, motivation and compassion. Our parish is a wonderful place to live and it would not be in this position without you!

S M BRAND  
Chairman  
18 Mar 25