

It's great to see so many faces here today at what is hopefully a more informal occasion than one of our Parish Council Meetings. Everyone on the electoral role in our Parish is allowed to speak this evening, so don't be shy but please be aware I will be trying to keep us from being here all night!

The Parish Council: We are here to represent ALL parishioners but we can only do so if people come to us with their views. You can get in touch with us in several ways: at the monthly Coffee Mornings or via the email or phone numbers that we've got on our website. And for those of you on facebook there is also a new Holford Community group which is becoming fairly well used, so if you haven't looked it up please do. But the best way is to come and have your say at our public meetings which are held every other month. Please bear in mind though that we do need to prioritise our time and be able to focus on issues which we feel are for the benefit of the general community not just a handful of individuals. I must also say that the Parish Council has relatively few powers and that many of your day to day issues (such as bin collections, drain cleaning, and fly tipping) are dealt with officially by Somerset Council. We have put up links to how you can report these on our website as well. That said, we are willing to help escalate an issue to higher powers if you feel you are not being heard.

I have laid out a very short questionnaire about the village for everyone to fill in. It is completely anonymous and is just to help us gauge how villagers are feeling right now and we will post the results in our minutes of this meeting.

It's coming up to a year since I joined and was elected Chair, since then, there has been an extraordinary amount of change both on and off the council. In less than a year we have gone from celebrating the Queen's Jubilee, followed by her death in September, and now we have come full circle with the Coronation of the King next month.

We were very lucky and grateful to have previous councillors and volunteers carry on with their roles of organising of the village Jubilee weekend last June, as we would have struggled to pick this up at such short notice. With around 250 attendees and more than £170 going to each of the RNLI and Dorset Air Ambulance, it was a true success. I think the Coronation event will be a little lower key, but the Village Hall will be hosting a themed coffee morning and showing the event live on the big screen - so please do come along to that if you fancy a more communal way of celebrating.

This January, we agreed our Budget and Precept, which we were keen to keep low. We didn't allocate any council money towards the Coronation but we are trying to obtain a grant to install a new coronation bench on the Bowling Green. As and when this grant is through, we look forward to working with the wider community to sort out the bench design and an inauguration event.

In other news, I am pleased to say that Falcon Housing have finished the work on the old playground at Portway, where the damaged play equipment has been removed, a bench sited and basketball hoops installed. I hope parishioners will be happy to use and look after this improved area.

Hopefully you will all be aware that as of April 1st, the district councils no longer exist and we all belong to a Unitary Somerset Council. For many months, we have had to deal with information and debates about the Local Community Networks (or LCNs) which are supposed to replace the District Councils in representing parishes and local groups and organisations. As yet, there is no concrete information about these LCNs, but perhaps Councillor Rosemary Woods might have further updates. The last we heard is that we would be in a group including Kilve which stretches all the way to Wembdon so a bit of a change from the West Somerset layout where we were looking towards Minehead. I expect we will have to keep working on this to ensure our voice doesn't get lost.

Something I have personally found very interesting is attending the Quantock AONB Joint Advisory Committee, of which Holford Parish Council is an elected member. Apart from the regular JAC meetings, there have been seminars and workshops relating particularly to the future of the AONB landscape and biodiversity. They are currently developing a Nature Recovery Plan to build into their statutory Management Plan, and the idea is to essentially create opportunities for landowners to help make bigger, better and more joined up areas for nature.

Holford parish is so much more than the village and surrounding hamlets we have more than 1,300 hectares of land within our boundaries. More than half of the area is designated protected landscape

(SSSI) and around 3/4 of the parish is within the AONB. We actually have the greatest SSSI area of any Quantock parish. This is why it is important for us to work with the authorities to ensure these areas are kept in excellent condition by preventing illegal driving off road, ensuring mountain bikers stick to the bridleways and encouraging walkers to keep their dogs on a lead during the Spring and Summer months.

Following the last mountain bike event in the hills in September we had a number of complaints from residents about antisocial or dangerous behaviour by some participants. We contacted the event organisers and they have committed to ensuring the riders are more aware and considerate of villagers this year. As there was also a concern about behaviour of mountain bikers generally on the hills, we have also raised this with the AONB whose rangers are keeping an eye out as well.

At the beginning of November we held an informal meeting with the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Quantock Staghounds to express our longstanding concerns. Although I feel it was good to open a line of communication with them and to understand their position, some of the statements they made at the meeting remain to be clarified. There are still many hunt related vehicles driving on the hills illegally, so this is definitely work in progress.

On a different note, in the autumn, we also met with Bill Jenman of QLPS (who is here with us tonight) to assess the War Memorial Trees, where a couple of attempts at planting new saplings has failed. Bill recommended not to plant any new saplings as he found the existing trees are in good health and it would be really difficult to get new trees established on that hill. As an alternative, Bill has offered to help us run a war memorial event in the village this coming November. So, look out for that.

We have also agreed with the AONB that they will organise to fill the potholes at the entrance to the Bowling Green carpark.

Speeding on the A39 continues to be a problem. There was a great show of support for solving this at our meeting last year when the Police and Crime Commissioner came to speak to us. You will hear later from the Community Speedwatch team, and as a council we very much appreciate their tireless work in monitoring the traffic. The parish council has received a cheque from the Police trust for nearly £5000 to help install two speed indicator devices. Due to staffing issues on the council the purchase and installation of these has been delayed but we finally managed to agree a way forward in March. However, this is on hold again while we wait for a response from the Police Trust about changes to our proposal.

On a positive note, the new village signs have been installed by Highways on the A39, as well as a no through sign on Combe Lane.

Finally, I would like to say how grateful I am to Hema Stanley, our previous Clerk, who stayed on long enough to guide us through our first few months as a new council, and to Karen Scott, who took over in November to continue this important role of keeping us on the straight and narrow. It has been a very steep learning curve and only two of us elected onto the council last year remain. It goes to show how much time and dedication this role entails, and I don't think many people appreciate this. Here's hoping we can now move forward with a full complement of councillors who are able to put the effort in to ensure our parish and parishioners are appropriately represented.