

## **BYFIELD PARISH COUNCIL**

### **Annual Parish Meeting**

**25<sup>th</sup> April 2024**

### **Chairman's report**

#### **Introduction**

This meeting is an opportunity for the village to come together to hear how the community are progressing and receive this report from the Parish Council. It is not a nice to have, it's a legal obligation to hold these every year.

As chairman of the parish council I have the pleasure of giving a report and general overview of the parish council activities with some highlights and comments. The full report will be attached to the minutes of this meeting.

#### **The Coronation of HM King Charles**

To mark this event the Green and High Street were decorated with bunting and lights, an oak tree was donated by the HS2 contractors and this was planted by a representative group of children from the school, it is hoped that this tree will grow and flourish long after the existing cherry trees have reached the end of their natural lives.

#### **Composition of the council and activity of the council**

The Parish council has 9 seats, during the year Cllr Rodger Peach resigned and we were able to appoint by co-option Councillors Neil Thompson and Mike Burdon. It was agreed to seek an increase in councillor numbers to 10 under the West Northants Governance Review – we have yet to hear.

The Parish Council also expressed its opposition to the planned reduction in the number of unitary councillors which will see representation diluted even further than when the county and district councils were abolished in 2021.

The PC seeks to engage with local groups and organisations including the Byfield Good Neighbours Scheme, scouts, village hall, Combined Charities and many others. We support the Air Ambulance and Citizens Advice whose services have been used by Byfield residents. We were saddened to learn of the demise of the local branch of the Royal British Legion which has served the area well for so many years.

The Boddington and District Gardening Association have drawn the majority of their member from Byfield for many years and following the closure of the club the Parish Council were offered a proportion of their remaining funds. We accepted these and transferred them to the BRGA which is a registered charity and will use the money for garden related projects in the next year or two.

We meet monthly on the second Thursday with a date always provisionally set in between for a planning meeting if required.

We have regular engagement with our unitary Councillor and also officials at Daventry West Northants Council, it is a matter of regret that the old Daventry District Council Offices have now closed and are to be sold. It further highlights the sense of isolation and 'second class status' that the rural communities feel, with efforts and attention being focused on the old Northampton Borough area. It is very disappointing to learn that despite everything the new local authority is still financially weak (although there does appear to be cash to spend on the Market Place and other projects based in Northampton)

### **Staff**

The parish council has one employee, the clerk, and several people who undertake work such as litter collecting and playground inspections. We have been fortunate enough to have had a very experienced and professional clerk working with us for the last 12 months but sadly Frances Williams has decided to and so we are in the process of seeking to appoint a replacement.

### **Budget**

Our budget for 2023/24 was just over £80,000, in the end we spent virtually all of this with the small amount left over transferred to reserves.

### **Finance**

The PC remains prudent with villager's money whilst seeking to provide a good environment for all villagers. It was this prudence that enabled us to leave our budget unchanged for 2023/24 and also saw a reduction in our precept demand from the community. The coming year has seen us increase our planned spending and thus the need for a rise in our precept.

We maintain insurance cover on public liability and on our assets which is regularly reviewed and the Internal auditor has given us a clean bill of health – we have to thank Mrs Williams for her efforts in this regard. Mrs Williams has also moved the parish council forward by setting up internet banking which finally means the end of cheque writing and posting and also a new bank account for the BRGA which was a reasonable requirement by our auditors.

The Parish Council does not have any borrowing outstanding at present and must seek approval from parishioners if and when we raise external finance in the future.

### **Communication**

Lack of communication is a common complaint in many walks of life and the parish council is keen to be as open and available as possible. All our formal meetings are held in public with anyone allowed to attend and observe. We publish our agenda on notice boards around the village and put a detailed report in each issue of the Byword. We have a website and Facebook page which the clerk regularly updates.

## **Burial Ground**

The Parish council aims to keep the Burial Ground as a place of quiet and calm, an attractive and approachable place. We have an active but low key management of the area and keep in mind the prospect of levelling graves at some point in the future. There is some concern about the increasing number of plastic flowers and other sundry items which infringe the burial ground rules. Our plans for the coming year include the removal of the old and broken fence to be replaced with a native hedge

## **Pocket Park and New Wood**

Last year I was able to report that a villager (Chris Butlin) had come forward to help plan and organise the maintenance and improvement of the pocket park area and he has worked steadily and successfully building a new team of volunteers and developing plans for general improvements to the whole area. He is always looking for more help and its an easy fun way to spend an hour or two helping maintain this great asset to our village.

Cllr Lindsay Clark has continued to maintain a community garden next to the allotments and we are grateful to him for spreading chippings to help with the winter wear and tear on the area.

## **Allotments**

The allotments are another valuable resource for the village but surprisingly enough we do not always get sufficient interest from Byfielders and so some plots are let to folks from outside the village

We try to keep the area as wild life friendly as possible and Councillor Lindsay Clark organizes maintenance and improvements as necessary as well as a social event for all the plot holders.

## **Environment**

The PC continues to spend considerable amounts of money on tree work which is expensive but essential. On the Brightwell there is a steady stream of activity with a regular need for thinning, coppicing and removal. It is highly important to keep trees healthy and safe and ensuring they are providing the backdrop to our community for years to come. It can be a challenge to know who owns and is responsible for them but it is likely that anything in hedgerows are the responsibility of the adjacent landowner.

## **Brightwell**

The Brightwell is an extensive area of open space provided by the Parish Council for everyone to enjoy. We do not charge any of the clubs for use of the buildings and only require them to pay for the utilities they use.

The work to significantly improve the Brightwell Pavilion, providing changing and toilet facilities for female players and upgrading the male side has been completed and we are now looking at some minor changes to the immediate area to improve it for everyone. In particular the steps from the car park area to the field itself.

We supply and maintain play equipment, benches, picnic tables and bins for rubbish and dog waste. Cllr Mike Burden has recently taken on responsibility for this area and will speak about his ideas later. Our thanks to Cllr Barbara Ridyard for all her efforts over the last five years which has seen a significant change to what is on offer.

The grass is cut by the Parish Council although the Cricket Club carry out additional mowing during their playing season – the Parish Council provides a grant to assist with this activity.

We have safety inspections carried out every week on each piece of equipment and there is a number of volunteer litter pickers who help keep the area clean as well as our own paid for service.

We are grateful to the football and cricket club for their help in managing this area

## **Planning**

The Parish Council are consulted and can make observations on all applications but we are not decision makers. Our aim is to consider each application on its merits, take into account any effect on neighbours and comment back to the planning authorities. Sometimes this achieves improvements to an application and sometimes it does not.

Most applications are straight forward covering extensions and improvements to homes in the parish or trees with conservation orders on them.

We are disappointed that Farols have decided not to build their new showroom and maintenance facility on the northern edge of the village particularly since we actively supported their application for housing on the old site to facilitate the move and retention of the business in Byfield.

The Parish Council are not NIMBYS and we have supported applications that are of a scale and location which enables the village to grow and thrive. We consider all applications on their merits and on the wider impact to our community.

WNC are currently working on a new Local Plan for West Northamptonshire to guide development in the period up to 2041. Byfield was classified as a Secondary Service Village in the last local plan which means which means our village performs an important role in helping to provide some services and facilities for the local communities which they serve. We do not expect that to change in the new plan which means amongst other things that any development will be located within the confines of the village as defined on the Inset Maps held by WNC. Development outside the defined confines will be acceptable only in the following circumstances; 1) Where the housing land supply is less than five years (three years where a neighbourhood development plan that is less than two years old is in place that allocates sites for housing) or where the Housing Delivery Test is not met; or 2) Where the development provided would clearly meet an identified local need, for housing this would be need identified through an up-to-date Housing Needs Survey or Housing Needs Assessment where it is demonstrated that this could not otherwise be met within the defined village confines; or 3) Where it is demonstrated that a scheme is required to support an essential local service that may be under threat, especially a primary school or primary health service; or iv. Economic development that will enhance or maintain the vitality or sustainability of the Secondary Service Village or would contribute towards and improve the local economy.

Grand Union Housing are in the process of conducting a Housing Needs survey in relation to a potential exception site to the North of the Woodford Road and east of The Causeway. Byfield Parish Council has not formed an opinion on this proposal.

### **Lights and utilities**

All of our street lights are now LED and this has seen a significant reduction in our electricity and maintenance costs.

### **Highways and rights of way and HS2**

Although we have continued to engage with the sub-contractor who looks after the roads and regularly discuss problems and solutions however these can take a long time to resolve. The road network in the area has recently become a national joke and many here will have ensured blowouts and related damage costing significant amounts of time and effort. Byfield Parish Council was bemused to hear that WNC have purchased a very modern, efficient machine to repair potholes but does not have enough money left to actually run it properly.

A chicane is due to be installed on the Boddington Road to address the issue of vehicles speeding into and out of the village. The Parish Council has a number of Vehicle Activated Signs and would appreciate some help with their installation, maintenance and monitoring – you don't have to be a parish councillor to do this helpful and appreciated role.

Community Speed Watch sessions were suspended during the pandemic lockdowns and do not appear to have been revived. If any villager was interested in pursuing this with Northamptonshire Police we would be happy to support them.

Similarly the village has been without a Neighbourhood Watch Co-Ordinator for a number of years and any villager interested in this role would be most welcome.

Footpaths are monitored and issues discussed with landowners as appropriate.

### **HS2**

This monumental exercise in futility grinds on, the disruption to commuters, the traffic and scars on the countryside. Although contractors are given specific transport routes to follow we continually hear of HGV drivers ignoring them and using totally inappropriate alternatives such as the Boddington Road and we have in recent months challenged the routing of tunnel segments travelling through Byfield from North to South

### **Closed Churchyard**

The Parish Council has now been responsible for this area for a number of years. We have divided the area into three sections, the area around and closest to the church has the grass cut short and kept as a lawn. The left hand side as you approach the church from the Brightwell is cut and or strimmed every three to four weeks. The right hand side is left in a more natural state allowing wild flowers to flourish, the spring bulbs followed by the cow parsley are lovely to see and are then strimmed back early summer. We maintain mown paths

to several graves that are still visited by family members. We undertook the reinstatement of the footpaths and had work done to several trees to improve access to plots where ashes are interred. A large willow has been removed from the corner nearest the lower car park.

### **200 Bus**

The risk to this service has ebbed and flowed over the years, we will continue to apply whatever pressure we can to preserve it

### **The Future**

We will continue to do our very best to ensure Byfield is an attractive, well-resourced, balanced and happy community.

And finally we will, always, try to assist local groups and societies in an appropriate way and do all we can to find ways to make Byfield an even better place to live.

John Gillic

April 2024