

ES&BG PC Chair's Report 5th May 2021

Firstly, I would like to welcome you all to our Annual Parish Assembly. I apologise for this being an online meeting where we can only tempt you with a virtual glass of wine after listening to our speakers. Next year we will do our best to make it up to you!

I am Marian Dain the ES&BG Chair and here is the rest of the team:

Jackie Bayliss, Rachael Coward, Paul Debenham, Elaine Kearney and Mark Stamp. (each to say hello so they come up on main screen)

Sadly, we have one seat at the parish council table empty, as Tim Hall has recently left for personal reasons – a new job covering a huge range of time zones. This would seem a good point to say a public 'Thank you' to Tim for all the hard work he has done for the council over the years and particularly in his time as Chair. I have some big shoes to fill!

The last year has been a challenge on so many levels and we are looking forward to resuming 'normal service' soon. I would like to thank my fellow councillors and our clerk for the positive way they have adapted to the changes required get the work of the council completed in a Covid-secure way. In particular, I would like to mention Rachael who took the plunge to join us via Zoom and has resurrected our Facebook presence – a very powerful way of communicating during the Covid restrictions. We are looking forward to having our first face-to-face PC meeting with her on 9th June.

It is two years since we had our last Parish Assembly so there are several items to tell you about. I apologise if the report this year is a little longer than usual. A trawl through the minutes of our meetings revealed these highlights.

Summer/Autumn 2019 Highlights

1. We undertook an audit of parish land since the historical parish documentation was not as clear as it might be. After some digging in the land registry, we are now clear on what land the PC owns, what it leases and what it just takes care of. We own Ecchinswell Village Hall, the Ecchinswell playing fields, and The War Memorial. We lease the allotments from The Sydmonton Court Estate and now have an updated lease agreement – rather more 21st century wording than the original 1978 document. I was surprised to find that the allotments were so new – I had thought of them as an ancient right. We take care of Digweeds, the area around the War memorial and the area opposite the school.
2. We made some improvements to two of these areas. After a long battle with British Telecom the old phone boxes in Bishops Green and Ecchinswell were removed. The Bishops Green box area was made good by Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council as it was on their land but the Ecchinswell box left a very untidy area alongside the parking opposite the school. Jackie led a team of volunteers to create a gravelled area with raised beds. This improves the area significantly and is enjoyed by parents waiting to pick up their children and others who use that parking area. We also used a grant allocation from Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council to improve the fencing at the allotments and install a back gate into the playing fields.
3. It will come as no surprise that the Newtown Waste Recycling Centre came up regularly in our minutes. The saga continues to this day, with no permanent solution as yet. The current arrangement continues until July 2021 and all the parish councils in this area are lobbying Hampshire County Council to negotiate our continued access with West Berkshire Council. I hope the report from HCC tonight will have some information on this.

2020/1 Highlights

1. The first lockdown of the Covid pandemic took us all by surprise but it was pleasing to see how quickly support networks emerged – both formal and informal. Like most parishes around the country, we set up a Helpline for residents. For the most part we were able to match residents who were shielding and needed help with residents who lived close by. Our telephone service dealt with one-off requests. A big thank you goes to all the volunteers who made this support of our community possible.
2. The other main invasion of 2020 was the Azolla attack on the pond at the end of Hyde Lane. Our Victorian forebears have a great deal to answer for. Avid plant collectors admired this water fern in South America and brought it back to the UK where it wreaks havoc in ponds, displacing native plants and deoxygenating the water. The only solution is to introduce a tiny South American weevil to the pond to gorge on the fern! These must be hatched and raised carefully. We put in an order for 2000 (pinhead sized!) and while we waited for them to mature our only option was to dredge the pond regularly to keep the growth level down. A determined team of volunteers kept this up for four months and removed several tons of Azolla. I am pleased to say that the tiny weevils have done their job and the pond is back to normal – just waiting for the autumn pond clearance event.
3. In November the Parish Council received an email from a land promoter with a proposal to build 400 homes on a farm in Bishops Green. We publicised this information and held an Extraordinary Meeting on 15th December 2020 to gauge the views of the community. This was very well attended. We also conducted an online survey about the development. The response of residents was overwhelmingly against the proposed development and a summary can be seen on our website. Since January all has gone quiet on this proposal but we cannot assume that it has gone away. The Parish Council is still monitoring the situation and is ready to act when needed.
4. The stimulus of a potential large development in Bishops Green has spurred the Parish Council to make a Neighbourhood Plan. A group of volunteers is working to produce a variety of initial consultation opportunities as Covid restrictions are loosened. Paul will tell you more about this in a few minutes.
5. Traffic issues and speeding are perennial problems in the parish. Earlier this year we conducted a survey to gauge strength of feeling of residents. We were pleased with the level of response and a Traffic/Speeding Working Party has grown from this. Mark and Jackie will tell you more.
6. Despite having fibre to the cabinets in Bishops Green and Echchinswell, broadband access is still a big issue in the parish. We are currently undertaking an audit of the provision and have some links with a group looking to improve the situation for outlying homes. Please complete the survey on our website to help with this audit.
7. I am pleased to announce the completion of a countryside access project in the area west of Ratts Cottages. Thanks to a grant from Hampshire County Council and a generous donation from the Echchinswell Panto Group you can now walk a route from Kingsclere to Burghclere without having to go over a single stile.

Finally, thank you all again for attending this online assembly. We really appreciate your time and, if you think you would like to become a Parish Councillor, we do have one vacancy. We would very much welcome anyone who puts themselves forward.

Now I would like to hand over to Sarah Jones, our clerk, for her financial report.