

Chair's Report for Westbury-sub-Mendip Annual Parish Meeting Sunday April 10 2022

Last year's report was largely dominated, as were all our lives, by Covid and how the parish council was able to create some community support and communication models. Although the emergency planning group ceased to publish regular public health updates from the end of March 2021 many of the support structures put in place then are still there or are ready to be reactivated. These include Community Shop monthly accounts, an updated list of villagers with specific skills and expertise, e.g. in counselling, and a takeaway menu from the pub. And we have all learned to look out for our neighbours more and build our generosity of spirit.

This year, particularly the latter part, has been more taken up by one of the ongoing major areas of all council's work, comment on planning development. For some time residents of Roughmoor Lane and Stoneleigh have been concerned about the possibility of housing development on the large field to the South of the road owned by the Church Commissioners and how to mitigate its effects. Representatives of the Roughmoor Lane CIC presented the parish council with their thoughts about constructing a green corridor between the possible development and the lane. At that stage we had had no formal approach from either the owners of the land and the district council, so we could do little other than note concerns and careful thinking going on. However, in October the council was contacted by Lichfields, a planning consultancy employed by the Church Commissioners (CC), who signalled the intention to consult the community about submission of an outline planning permission for up to 60 houses. The council met on Zoom with Lichfields and CC representatives at the end of November. We were presented with a very outline plan and made suggestions, but urged a full community consultation. The invitation for this came a few days before Christmas and, thinking there would be a further Covid lockdown, we reluctantly agreed that consultation could be on Zoom or on paper for those without internet access. From January 2022 the community has pulled together a remarkable series of position papers and original research relating to the outline plans, the site and its context within the wider village. All are available on the village website under a new Roughmoor Lane heading.

And responding to community pressure Lichfields agreed to a face to face consultation session in the village hall on March 9th. This was attended by 153 villagers who provided a steady stream of informed opinion and comment on the number of houses and design, entrance and crossing of the A371, rights of way, community use provision, drainage from the site, ecological issues and more. Subsequently Lichfields have come back to the council, saying that they are pausing to reconsider the whole site to include the old barns brownfield area (a point strongly made by a number of respondents) and will return to consult again in several months' time. The council have urged them to include village opinion and expertise throughout their masterplanning process and not just at the end. We await their reply.

A large group of people from across the village have put in vast amounts of work to challenge the Commissioners' position and successfully to extend the consultation period. There have been regular community planning meetings in the village hall, a series of 6 separate working parties to produce discussion papers and hard evidence and an informal steering group which has coordinated the whole effort. I should like to thank everyone who has contributed so far and particularly the steering group, made up of 2 people from the

Roughmoor Lane Group, (Liz Hughes and Rowan Stuart) 2 from the parish council (myself and Sue Reece) and 2 from the wider community (Mick Fletcher and Cathy Wilkins). There is still a way to go so I expect that next year's report will contain more information and we hope progress that all can sign up to.

During the year the council has also been commenting to Mendip District Council on regular planning issues, these include many tree orders, which are usually, but not always uncontentious and individual housing modifications or extensions. Again, many are uncontentious, but one matter is of particular concern. Westbury is a dark skies village and an increasing number of extensions feature roof lights. Unless we see a condition that these will be effectively blinded at night then the council objects. During the year we have also dealt with complaints about business premises which are contributing to light pollution. Here our role is largely advisory.

But enforcement of planning and environmental nuisances has been hampered by lack of enforcement staff at Mendip DC and the backlog of site visits caused by Covid restrictions. However, we continue to keep a watching brief particularly on sites of concern at the edge of the village. We have also been exercised by traffic issues which are currently the responsibility of the County Council. We have argued unsuccessfully so far for a 20mph limit through the village and on the side roads. We have managed to get temporary 20 mph limit on the A371 for school arrival and leaving hours. This was promised over a year ago but the warning lights and signs have just arrived. These poles may provide fixing positions for speed indicator devices (SIDs) Once provided by SCC, now parish councils have to buy their own. As these are expensive (£6000+) we have attempted to see if we can share the expense with another parish council. So far we have not been successful , but there is the intention to persevere.

The council has a small grants fund to support village organisations and this this year we have given grants to the playing fields, the village hall and the community shop. The grant timetable runs through the autumn, but we will respond to urgent special requests at other times. We have also been successful in getting grants in for the work of the Tree Group from the Tree Council , the Mendip Hills AONB and Mendip DC. Over 2000 trees have been planted across the village. The tree nursery at Court House Farm (thank you Guy Timson) is now well established and in February/March, many volunteers fought the muddy conditions to plant hedging slips all along a new permissive path across Furlong Farm land (thanks to Dave Limond) towards Easton. Biggest thanks go to Councillor Buffy Fletcher who has masterminded the whole project.

As mentioned above, the village website has provided a major source of information for the whole village. After the end of the Covid updates the parish council had continued to publish a mainly monthly newsletter with information on the council's work and other matters of public interest, such as the coming of a unitary Somerset Council in 2023. These have been brilliantly edited by Martin West. The Council made the decision to only publish electronically as the majority of people in the village are on line. It is very simple to sign up for all news items on <https://westburysubmendip-pc.gov.uk>. However, we are aware that some villagers are not computer users, so paper copies are still distributed to all those we know of.

During lock down the council held all its meetings on Zoom, but has now reverted to meeting in person. We still maintain a Zoom subscription and this facility is freely available to any village organisation that wants to use it. Just book it in with the clerk, Kate Egan.

Most recently the council has turned its consideration to wider matters than our own local concerns. Central government has put out a call for individuals to assist refugees from the terrible fighting in Ukraine. We hope to work with the parochial church council to collect and share information about what realistically Westbury could offer and what support we as a community would need ourselves to be effective supporters of Ukrainians arriving in the UK traumatised and with very little or nothing. The county council, the Axbridge Deanery and the Wells Community Network are all setting up support systems and collating information. The council will integrate its work with theirs.

This is the final year of the 4 year term of office of your current councillors. 2 councillors, Sue Reece and Jo Tucker are standing down after many years of service. They have contributed massively to the council's work, with Jo being able to explain a farmer's perspective and Sue particularly managing the whole Covid emergency planning. We have also had the invaluable assistance of Mark Smith, our webmaster and Colin Booth, our rights of way officer, who not only reports on the condition of village footpaths but also gets his hands dirty with essential maintenance. I would like to thank all my fellow councillors for turning up so consistently to our meetings and giving all our items serious thought. Ros Wyke, our Deputy Chair, has also been invaluable in giving us the benefit of her great knowledge of planning matters. We have been ably served by a new clerk, Kate Egan. I owe her a real depth of thanks as she battles to ensure we keep to all rules and protocols. The role of the Chair would be impossibly onerous without all their good sense and hard work. And finally, I want to thank all who have put their shoulders to the wheel and the many generous volunteers who have made this village function well. If I tried to name you all I might inadvertently omit someone, so you know who you are. Thank you all.

Sue Isherwood
April 2022