

Annual Parish Meeting 2008

Chairman's report

I should firstly explain that this is my personal perspective of the past year and does not necessarily reflect the views of all of my council colleagues.

This has been a very difficult year. In October it was confirmed that our Clerk Nikki Rush was suffering from post-viral fatigue syndrome and was put on sick leave for one month. Other complications have resulted in the sick leave being progressively extended to a full six months and it is still continuing. We very much miss Nikki's enthusiasm and energetic support and we wish her a speedy and complete recovery.

At the beginning of the period of sick leave we decided that the council would attempt to cover the Clerk's duties and maintain the operation of the council in order to minimise complexities of handover of responsibilities to and from temporary or locum Clerks. I believe that a huge vote of thanks is due to the following 'gang of four' who voluntarily took on considerable extra duties, additional to their normal council responsibilities in order to make this possible. In particular Alan Moreton collected and logged all the mail and produced and distributed the information packs for each meeting, Helen Huish took on all financial responsibilities during the busiest periods of the year, Peter Lorenzo took over the duties related to the cemetery and allotment management and I have tried to do everything else. Thanks are also due to Lynne Cockerton who volunteered to produce the minutes for two recent meetings. Although not the primary consideration, it should be noted that this 6 months of voluntary extra support has resulted in a saving to the Debenham community of about £5,000, which would otherwise have had to be paid to locum Clerks.

Despite these problems, much has been achieved during the year. Notable successes have included the completion of difficult negotiations with the developers of The Meadow enabling the path to be laid between the development and Gardeners Road and the long awaited installation of new play equipment in the Upper Gardeners Road play area.

The Policy Group have reviewed and introduced changes to the Core Strategy of Mid- Suffolk at three review points throughout the year. This vital document will shape the future of the district and Debenham for the next 25 years and the input from this Parish Council has resulted in major changes to our community's advantage.

A long-term problem has been resolved with the hard work and support of district councillor Kathie Guthrie. The roadway adjacent to Cross Green has been a major embarrassment and difficulty to the residents plus users of the library and car park. Extremely sensitive negotiations completed with colleagues at Mid- Suffolk and Suffolk County, enabled by Cllrs Guthrie and Alcock, have resulted in a solution being found and a very welcome improvement.

In the autumn the need for the bed and banks of the river to be cleared to minimise the risk of flooding was raised with Anglian Water and the Environment Agency. Despite large cutbacks in allocated budgets for this clearance work, Anglian Water agreed to double Debenham's allocation and large areas of the water course have now been cleared.

The development of 11 affordable houses adjacent to Henry Street has at last been completed and the first tenants are now looking forward to moving into their new homes. I am convinced that Orchid Close will help many local families remain in the village over the coming years. These would have been more promptly occupied following completion if it had been able to be completed 12 months ago as was planned, with the local objections that had to be overcome unfortunately taking us into a difficult and unpredictable financial period.

The new web site editor Barry Woods has brought about major improvements to the web site in terms of content and attractiveness, which has resulted in a continuing increase in visitor numbers and time for each visit. In addition the target set for advertising revenues has been exceeded resulting in a lower cost to the community of maintaining the web site.

The exciting project of developing a memorial garden and quiet area in the centre of the village at the old United Reform Church burial ground has made good progress under the direction of Ann Evans. The overall layout and access points have been agreed and we are working with the High School students and staff to draft alternative designs.

The review of traffic flows through Debenham High Street by County Highways gave some surprising results but we are hopeful that the agreed follow up investigations will result in some heavy traffic being diverted away from this sensitive route.

During the year 25 planning applications have been considered, discussed and recommendations made, helping to protect the interests of the community and maintain the integrity of the village.

Our sincere thanks should be forwarded to those ex-members of the council who have left office during the last year and we are very grateful for the contribution made by Felicity Lamb and more recently Alan Moreton, Helen Huish and Ann Evans. I am delighted that some new people have shown an interest in joining the council and I hope that they will be able to bring fresh ideas and new energies.

Other people who quietly provide much-needed support and work for the Council and the village include our street cleaner Mark Sillet, Geoff Ridge who battles against the uncontrollable rabbits at the cemetery, Shirley Dallison who makes us most welcome in Dove Cottage and Peter Huish who has quietly given huge support to all of our working parties around the village. I would also like to extend a special thank you to all the long-suffering partners of our council members, in particular (if I may) my wife Mary who is convinced that she missed her vocation as a call centre manager and PA.

Regrettably there are several outstanding issues and projects that we have not been able to resolve or complete. Following long delays caused by the authorities, we were at last in a position to operate Speed Watch in the village soon after Christmas. It has not been possible however to actually carry out a survey as yet due to operational restrictions in the early months of the year and inadequate time to organise sessions in recent months.

The need to remove the streetlight attached to a private house in Little Back Lane has been partly addressed, following extensive consultation, by the installation of a new lamp standard adjacent to the toilet block. Unfortunately the initial survey carried out by the electricity company on which this installation was based has been found to be unworkable and a different way of connecting the lamp has still to be found. The public toilets have been broken into and damaged on three separate occasions resulting in the loss of use of all or part of the facility for several months. This has now been resolved through the installation of security bars and the toilets are again now in full operation. I would like to extend our thanks to Peter Huish who repaired all the damage to the doors and frames, at no cost to the community.

The legal requirement to test and notify the owners of unsafe head stones in the cemetery resulted in distress for some families. Many communities are facing the same challenge and ours has not yet been fully resolved.

Other initiatives that were planned for the year included the introduction of a Youth Forum in the village to inform council of the views and needs of young people in our community. This has only just been started and much work is still to be done. No further progress has been made on the 25 year vision for Debenham and the associated updating of the Village Plan. We also wanted to build closer working relationships with one or two other communities of similar size to share experiences and ideas. A Parish Council newsletter planned to be published in December and then every six to eight weeks thereafter has had to be postponed.

I have referred earlier to inter personal difficulties within Council that I have been unable to resolve. Further frustrations were caused by an attempted referral to the Standards Board and a vexatious demand for excessive information under the Freedom of Information Act. These absorbed a great deal of time and caused an unwelcome distraction during an already very difficult period.

Hopefully Nikki will soon be able to return and until then, now that we have recruited a temporary Responsible Financial Officer and we are past the busy end-of-year period, it should be possible to identify additional clerical support that will relieve the council members of the Clerk's duties.

I had high hopes for my second year as Chairman, following three years as Vice Chairman, but it didn't quite work out the way I had planned. My "annus horribilis" may not have been on quite on the same scale as Her Majesty's but it has nevertheless been very demanding. I am pleased with what we have achieved for Debenham over the past year and I thank each of the members for the time and effort they have willingly given to our community, which unfortunately is seldom recognised. Thank you all.

Mick Morley
Chairman