

# Annual Parish Meeting 2009

## *Chairman's report*

I should first make it clear that this report is my view of the work over the past year and does not necessarily reflect the views of all of the other councillors

Once again this has been a very difficult year. However the recruitment of Carol Williamson as our Locum Clerk was a real help to the work of the council and I must pay tribute to Carol for all the hard work she has carried out on behalf of the council and our community. I would also like to thank Dina Bedwell who has again been managing our finances. I would also like to thank our District Councillor Kathie Guthrie for her help and support over the past year and the Vice Chair Frankie for covering for me and keeping me on the straight and narrow. I now know how hard the Chairman's role is and would pay tribute to all the past chairs of the council for the great job they did in managing our affairs during their time in office.

We have had a very full year and the council has carried out a lot of business on your behalf. It was pleasing to see that Mid Suffolk was identified as one of the best places to live in England. This resulted in the village having a visit from BBC Look East and the Local papers. This gave us the chance to show to others what a wonderful place Debenham is to live and how lucky we are; it also gave us the chance to give some further recognition to Grace Webster who has served the village for over 50 years. I am sure Grace and her family enjoyed their ten minutes of fame.

The decision of the council to site a Christmas tree on the village green and to still have one in the church grounds was well received by the community and it did set a nice stage for the annual late shopping event that looks to becoming a great annual fixture.

We had, due to a mistake by the original contractors, to re-site the new light in Little Back Lane and I would like to thank our former councillor Alan Baxter for his efforts, along with Carol in finally getting the light working in time for the winter.

We have been having some problems in keeping the toilets working we will try better. We expect shortly to finally take over ownership from MSDC.

We are lucky to have a clean village and thanks must go to Mark Sillett who makes a sterling job of keeping us spick and span. Geoff Ridge and Mark make supreme efforts in trying to keep the rabbits at the Recreation Ground and Woodlands under control.

The parish council has dealt with 14 planning applications this year and while we do not have the final say at least we can make recommendations to Mid Suffolk District Council that does allow us to have some input into the process. We have been maintaining a watching brief on the proposed ten year development structure for MID Suffolk and this will have to be a priority for future years to try and ensure that any identified development proposals can be absorbed by the village and do not swamp it.

All councillors have shared the work of the council over the year; I would like to thank them all for their support. Lynne Cockerton has done a great job in looking after matters relating to the cemetery and allotments, Frankie Giffin has been invaluable as deputy chair, without Kevin Voller and Gerry Baxter the woodland would not exist. We have had a continuing turn over of councillors over the year this is a reflection on how difficult the role can be and I thanks all those who have been on the council over the last year for volunteering to help. The council can only be as good as the people who serve on it. The work of the council being as it is fully under public scrutiny is difficult and challenging and trying to look at each matter from the community's point of view and put aside ones own prejudices can be very hard.

You will be aware that one of the items the council has had to consider is the review by the Boundary Commission of local government in Suffolk. Whatever happens as a result of this review will bring changes in Local Government and may increase the role and responsibly of the Parish Council. Therefore can I ask anyone who is willing to help provide services and support to the community to consider taken on the role of councillor. Please speak to any councillor or our Clerk about our work.

The Council has over the years tried very hard to maintain a good financial base for the village and this has enabled us to keep our precept rise to just under 5% while still being able to use a small part of our reserves to aid community groups.

We have tried to make more use of our powers under a rule known as section 137 to make donations to worthy causes in the community we have this year made donations to such organisations as Debenham Cubs £350, The Friends of Sir R H School £1000, Debenham Street Fayre £100, DLC Fireworks £125 as well as the usual ones such as Mid Suffolk CAB etc and we hope to be able to do more this year.

The Debenham website continues to be very useful for council to get public opinion as well as let all the parish know what's going on thanks to Barry Wood for keeping it up-to-date and making a useful tool for the community.

One of the main issues for the council was the formal request by the Management of the Debenham Leisure Centre/DVH&PFT (DLC) for operational support funding. While over the years previous councils have provided finance to assist in developments at the DLC and in leading such organisations as the Debenham Market Towns committee help them in improvements to the facilities, the council has not been formally asked for a grant to help running costs. It was clear from the original request that it was hoped that any support would be a regular yearly payment. It was made clear to the Management of the DLC that all such requests must be public as the Council can only make such payments in full public manner.

The original letter requesting assistance made it clear the MSDC was expecting the Parish to contribute, the sum originally requested by the DLC was £25000. This is approximately 50% of our precept. The council agreed to meet with the Management of the DLC and representatives of MSDC to investigate the reasons behind the request and what we could do to help. While this meeting was being arranged we also checked via the Suffolk Association of Local Councils (SALC) with the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) what powers we had to offer financial assistance and under what section of the local government rules it could be offered. We were at first informed that we had the power to make a payment as DLC is a charity and offers sports and recreational facilities. We therefore proceeded to have the meeting with the DLC. At that meeting it was proposed that the Council and the DLC hold a public meeting so that the whole community had a chance to give us their views and any ideas they had that would enable us all to keep a valuable village asset. The meeting was held on the 13<sup>th</sup> January; unfortunately the DLC Management decided that they could not attend the meeting.

It was clear from the meeting that the village supported the DLC but wanted more input into how it operated and wanted some more community involvement in its management. As a result of this the council set a working group to consider what conditions needed to be attached to any offer of support. We were then informed by NALC that they didn't consider DLC to be a voluntary organisation although it is a charity. This is due in part to the company side of DLC which is intended to be profit-making, with all funds being ploughed back into the charity itself. The council looked at this again and found a way it could offer some support, at a lower level and proceeded to put the conditions to the DLC. However DLC then stated that they could not meet some of the conditions, so the council was unable to offer funding in the last financial year. The council is again looking at the laws under which it has to operate and is still trying very hard to find a way of providing financial aid. I hope that this will happen soon.

Over the years the relationship between the Management of the DLC and the Council has often been very strained. The council in those years has had continuing changes in Councillors and Chairman, I think the problems in part demonstrate a lack of understanding of what the council can legally do and the rules under which it operates. I feel confident that a way forward will be found and that the council will be able to provide aid to the DLC and I am also sure that more community involvement in the operation of the centre is vital if the mistrust between sections of the community and the DLC is to be overcome.

Finally can I again thank all the councillors for their support and giving up their time to help the community.

Ron Walters, Chairman Debenham Parish Council