

## Chairman's report to the Annual Meeting May 2023.

This year two words have dominated the work of the Council – Community and Environment.

**On the community** front we realised a strategy was required to help our residents feel safe after Covid, to come back out to socialise and enjoy the benefits of our lovely village.

Working with a new energetic group of volunteers, we held a memorable celebration of the Queens' Platinum Jubilee in June with over 300 people attending this free event on the Meadows. In early September, volunteers arranged a vintage afternoon tea event, also on the Meadows, to celebrate the installation of new play equipment. The success of these events heralded the re-opening of our community café after a summer break, with more residents attending and enjoying this bi-monthly not for profit initiative. In February we welcomed to the hall, the grant funded Applause Theatre, who performed their hilarious Shakespeare in a Suitcase to a packed audience. Three village quiz evenings have been held throughout the year, raising funds for these events and also for the purchase of wild flower seeds. During the winter months volunteers also worked on the Meadows coppicing trees, sowing seeds, and planting 300 donated hedging whips.

In response to the energy crisis, the Council supported the opening of the village hall for one day a week, once again relying on our sturdy team of volunteers, to deliver the project. Financed by ECC £1000 warm hub grant and £633 from district councillor's grants ( Gabrielle Spray and George Courtauld ) we supplied over 44 people with hot and cold food between the hours of 8.30am and 4.30pm every Monday for 13 weeks. All attendees, and even volunteers, were sad to see the Hub close, remarking that the project had helped their well being, made them feel part of a supportive community, and had saved spending on costly energy. For the coronation weekend our volunteers funded and organised a very successful party for over 100 residents and their families.

As well as the Warm Hub grant we also received £7000 from Awards for All for a spider climbing frame , £3700 from Essex Community Foundation for event equipment and storage on the Meadows, £500 from EALC Community Chest towards the renovation of the old ticket office for its use as a book swap, and £300 from ECCouncillor Chris Siddall's Locality fund towards costs for our new 20's plenty initiative. We also used the remainder of the BDC Covid re start grant to purchase a memorial bench for the blossom avenue (£1800) and have managed to update to a new defibrillator at a cost of £1300. So over £15000 of grant funded monies has helped our community feel valued and involved. At least twenty volunteers have worked diligently and tirelessly to help others. I think we should all feel very proud of these achievements, and I want to give an enormous big thank you to everyone involved for their commitment and time so pleasantly given.

**The environment** . In May the Council agreed to support ECC Climate Emergency Strategy, recognising that White Colne is within their Climate Focus Area. We now look at everything through 'climate' tinted glasses, checking our impact, and working to help our county reach net zero.

We have taken a lead in the Colne Valley Community Energy Project which strives to fit solar panels on roof tops throughout the four Colne villages plus Chappel and Great Tey. The scheme allows for panels to be self funded ( at a much reduced cost due to economy of scale) or installed on a " pay as you use" system. The first public meeting was held in our hall in March with the next one scheduled for June in Earls Colne.

We have also identified areas around the village to seed wild flowers, and agreed to work towards de carbonising the village hall. The hall could benefit from the Community Energy project to fit solar panels, but we will need external funding for a heat pump as and when we replace the gas boiler.

Wearing our new Climate hat we wrote to ECC in May stating that we could no longer support development at the rear of the hall. The land is contaminated, so the removal of tonnes of top soil would release unacceptable levels of carbon. We suggested we could lease and manage the land, accepting the community asset transfer for the freehold of the building. We have still not had the courtesy of a reply nor been invited to meet to discuss this. This piece of land has the potential to bring a huge environmental benefit, locking in carbon and providing a wildflower insect super highway. We are determined to resolve this, if only ECCs right hand would look at what the left hand is doing !

**The village hall** . We increased hiring charges for the year, and at the time it made little impact to our hirers. However we did find as we went into the winter months that a number of childrens' parties were being cancelled due to the cost of living crisis. Regular hirers have remained though with two yoga classes and one Pilates class a week. The weekly bridge club has gone from strength to strength and the monthly village market with its breakfast café has proved popular. The online booking system works well and attracts new hirers from outside of our village. We installed a hive heating control which has enabled us to save costs on our heating, and the smart locking device means we have much better security of access. Both can be

remotely operated saving volunteer time. We have moved away from County Broadband, and now have Gigaclear installed, which is free of charge.

**Planning** . We have commented on 20 different applications over the year and continue to be frustrated when our objections appear to fall on deaf ears. We now look for full ecology reports if the development is in the open countryside, as the planning paperwork still allows for the applicant to decide himself if there are any endangered or important species on or nearby to the site. In a climate focus area, all species are endangered.

**Highways**. We continue to diligently report all highway defects and are pleased to see pot hole repairs being undertaken, although sometimes rather belatedly. We still have the problems with the erosion of the village green and the destruction of the pavement in Colneford Hill, and we will be taking these forward into our new Council year. The busy A1124 brings its own problems and we are all disturbed by the amount of speeding throughout the village. We have just initiated the 20s Plenty programme and we shall be ramping this up over the next few months. It has been delayed due to election time. The SID which logs the number and speed of passing vehicles is coming to the end of its useable life and we need to decide if we should look for a replacement. This will be a decision for our new council.

**Allotments**. All plots are allocated. Our policy now states that new tenants must be residents of White Colne, and our waiting list reflects this change. Increased rental rates came into force in October, but these are still on the low side when compared with other parishes and towns.

**Finances**. In the face of the cost of living crisis, we once again agreed not to increase our precept, accepting that we may go into deficit, but agreeing to use our reserves. Our precept is £12200, which set against our £15,000 of grant funded capital projects for the year, illustrates the unspoken value of volunteers delivering initiatives. We only use Unity Trust Bank now which is much easier with all funds in one place. We use Sum Up and Paypal so the Council can accept card payments for the VH bookings, café income and other events. The accounts for the year are currently being prepared and sent to the Internal Auditor and documents will be available for the public to see under the exercise of public rights – dates will be displayed on the website and noticeboards. Reserves are healthy – with £14000 set aside for the VH roof and £16500 general reserve

**Our election** was uncontested, so we head into the new term with only 4 members. I do hope that we can co opt three new members to help us continue our community work and resolve some of the more difficult issues. We need to work on a new strategy for our social media, although we are very pleased with our new website but it still awaits some finishing touches .

**Finally**, my heartfelt thanks to Petra, our Clerk, who manages to steer us through some of the sticky policies and financial headaches, to our county councillor Chris, and newly re- elected district councillors Gabrielle and George , for their continued support, and to all members of our council for giving their time for the benefit of others, during which, I believe on reflection, to have been an interesting, inspiring but at times exhausting year !

Jane Taylor  
May 9<sup>th</sup> 2023