

CHAIRMAN'S ANNUAL REPORT 2003/2004

Planning

Planning issues are normally high on the Council's list of priorities. This year the main planning "event" again was the continuing battle to prevent the building of a limekiln in Appledoor Quarry. Working with the Appledoor Action Committee we fought a successful campaign to defeat the appeal by the applicant. It was expensive in terms of money, time and effort but it was an excellent illustration of what can be achieved when a Parish gets its act together and utilises the latent expertise and experience which is in the community.

Sadly, we have had to spend too much time dealing with breaches of planning regulations – but we have also had several examples where, by working with applicants and SSDC, we have been able to find solutions which proved satisfactory to all concerned. It would certainly be wrong to think of the Council as a body determined to resist change and oppose all planning applications. We do not see it as our role to interfere with the residents' natural desire to improve their properties and in any event the Council cannot refuse an application; it can object but if it does then the decision on acceptance or refusal goes to the Area North Committee of SSDC. In practice the Council only objects when it considers that the plan would cause unacceptable aggravation to neighbours or it is clearly in contravention of the guidance contained in the Design Statement part of the Long Sutton at the Millennium pamphlet. In the last twelve months we have objected to only three out of 39 applications but have made constructive suggestions in several other cases. In each case where we have objected SSDC has endorsed our decision by turning down the application.

Appearance of the Parish

The Parish entered a new era when Cyril Pope decided after thirty years to give up looking after the Village Green – we shall no longer see that familiar sight of Cyril on his home made mowing machine slowly but carefully cutting the grass. He was given a suitable retirement present at a small ceremony in his house. Robin Davies has taken on the contract and the Green continues to be well cared for.

It was decided last year that the overgrown hedge opposite the playing field and School should be laid and the scrub area behind, which was becoming a rubbish tip, cleared. This would also expose the trees planted by the Council twenty years ago and provide a fine view of the levels. £900 pounds was earmarked for the purpose. The job is now two thirds complete and will be finished in the Autumn. Redvers Burt has coordinated volunteer labour to clear the scrub (and done much of the work himself) and Rupert Cox has been very successful in finding sources of funding and obtained the services of the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers to do the hedge laying. It now seems that the whole scheme, which has made a real difference to the approach to the village from the A372, will cost the Parish little or nothing.

Mrs Barbara Gasson has volunteered to be the Parish Tree Warden. The post has no legal responsibilities or powers but the holder can make a very worthwhile contribution to the appearance of the Parish. Mrs Gasson has already contacted the SSDC Arborist who has agreed to inspect our trees on the Green and give advice generally. It is surprising what sources of expertise and grants are available to a Parish that carries out the necessary research.

Litter remains a problem. It is only the actions of a few public spirited people who pick it up which keeps it under control. The Council is monitoring the progress of a pilot scheme, sponsored by both the County and District Councils, whereby several Parishes have combined to employ a person to carry out minor road repairs and general tidying up work. The results of the pilot will not be known for eighteen months.

The Environment Working Group list of jobs to be carried out in improving the appearance of the Parish is now completed, as far as possible. A member of the public at our last PC meeting suggested compiling a new "Grot Spot" list. We shall be interested to hear from residents their suggestions for the list, starting at this meeting.

Road signs are another problem dealt with under "Highways"

Facilities

New Playground. The Village Hall Committee has done a wonderful job in obtaining funding for, and organising, the construction of the new playground. By the time of this meeting it should have been formally opened. The Council has supported the campaign and contributed to the funds.

Website. The Council has been considering setting up a Parish website for several years but the time was never right for financial and a variety of other reasons. Eventually we found a very competent person in the IT department of SSDC who volunteered to set up a "skeleton" site for us in his own time and at no charge. The only cost so far has been for the registration of the website. Setting up the skeleton is one thing but putting meat on the bones and keeping it up to date is another. Mr Steve Sensier has come to the rescue and volunteered for the role of "webmaster". "longsutton.org.uk" is now on the air. The aims of the site are first to encourage people from this country and abroad to visit Long Sutton and second to improve internal communications within the Parish. The site will remain under the control of the Council but we will, of course, be very interested to hear from Parishioners whether it is producing the information they want or their suggestions for improvements.

Highways

It was a long struggle to get the pavement outside the Shop repaired the way we wanted it but it now looks much better and safer. The inadequate County Council highways budget means that getting routine maintenance done is never easy but we keep in close contact with the area highways engineer to make sure that we get at least our share of the cake.

The 20 mph limit outside the School was imposed in line with County Council policy. The Council is not entirely happy with the number of signs that accompanied the limit but we were successful in reducing them to what Somerset Highways assure us is the absolute minimum. Our plan to include the hamlets (Knole and Upton) in a 30mph which would cover a large proportion of the Parish will take some years yet to be implemented.

Finance

In my last Annual Report I explained at length where the Parish stood financially and why I thought that it would be wise to increase the Precept significantly for 2004/5. I do not intend to go into the same detail this year but I can report that we will be carrying forward about £2000 and you will be aware that the Council did increase the Precept to £4500 from £3850. The main reasons for the increase were to cover our ever increasing essential routine expenses such as a part time Parish Clerk, keeping the Green in good condition, assisting to maintain the churchyard, legally mandatory inspections of the play areas etc and to still have some money left over for particularly important projects like the children's playground. However I should point out that our Precept remains much lower than average for a Parish of this size. Of the 12 parishes in South Somerset with between 300 and 400 dwellings (Long Sutton has 359) only two have lower precepts than us. The average Precept for the 12 parishes is over £8,000. Put another way, a Band D house owner in Long Sutton pays £12.21 annually. In Queen Camel, a very similar size parish with 350 dwellings, he would pay £30.23. In Somerton, admittedly a much bigger parish, he would pay £113.93. The Council has been able to keep the Precept down by ensuring that whenever possible new projects and maintenance work are carried out by volunteer labour and that a high proportion of funds for projects are obtained from the District Council and/or charitable trusts. One example of this is the hedge laying project referred to above. Another example is our determination to cut the cost of playground inspections currently running at £800 annually. In this case we have arranged a course for four volunteers in the village to become qualified to carry out the weekly inspections which they will do at no cost to the Council.

On-going Events

The PC will continue to strive to improve the physical appearance of the Parish and the quality of life of its residents. Having been Chairman now for four years I believe it is time the Parish had a change and I shall not be offering myself for re-election. I am very grateful to my fellow Councillors and the people of the Parish for the tolerance, good nature and good manners you have shown me during our "official" and social contacts. The new Chairman will I am sure bring a new dynamism to the post. Of course, the membership of the Council remains the same; it is a very strong team. I look forward to serving under the new Chairman and continuing to work towards making Long Sutton an even better place to live.

Keith Harding