

Chairman's Report 2019-2021

Due to Covid and no AGM in 2020, I will have been the first Chairman of Toller' Parish Council to oversee a session of the Council lasting 27 months without the public being present! Going back to 2019's AGM I was elected Chairman and Cllr Neil Farmer was elected Vice Chairman; other elections included: Cllr Neil Farmer as our representative on the Dorset Association of Parish and Town Councils, Cllr Judy as our Village Hall Committee representative, Mr Chris Wardle as our Rights of Way Officer. Cllr Jeremy Stavenhagen agreed to continue the responsibility for overseeing our roads, reporting faults and liaising with our Community Highways Officer; Cllr Neil Farmer agreed to continue overseeing planning applications. You may have thought the Parish Council, due to Covid, would suspend its activities for the duration of the pandemic! But, no, this was not the case – only face to face meetings stopped - suddenly a new word came into being - ZOOM !! Now, I am not saying that your Councillors are in any way technophobes but we were gently encouraged to switch on, use a code and a password and abracadabra, we all appeared on sections of our home screens. Yes, we did have some hick ups with distorted sounds, pictures, Councillors being blacked out, muted etc., but we actually adapted to it very well. Katharine seemed delighted – it saved her travelling over from Crewkerne! And we could all stay in at home wearing – more or less - what we liked and with a refreshment to hand – non alcoholic, of course! We held 4 Zoom meetings during 2020. However, Zoom didn't go well for all Parish Council's – Handforth comes to mind where the Chairman, Brian Tolver, lost control after failing to recognise the legitimacy of a meeting held in December, and Clerk Jackie Weaver almost became a celebrity! Well, nothing as exciting in Toller! For me, chairing an internet meeting while unusual, was really quite straight forward and for that I thank my fellow Councillors, including Tony Alford for their superb support and conduct. It was, for me, like being a teacher again but holding a digital lesson – with Councillors politely holding up their hands before speaking. I don't recall any bad behaviour neither the Mute button being pressed once, in anger!

It is our custom as a Parish Council to award small donations from our income, and over this past session we have awarded: our church £395 and £415 for churchyard maintenance, £800 and £840 to Toller Porcorum Recreational Area Association towards grass cutting and insurance; and £165 followed by £173.25 to the Village Association towards the cost of the insurance for our Post Office.

Cllr Neil has been very busy overseeing planning applications – I think we all know that Covid has brought about a boom time for the construction industry, and over the past 18 months he has read through, made his recommendations, and involved the Council in 13 applications. He also read through Dorset's Local Plan and submitted a summary to our March 2021 meeting for our approval, and this acted as our Council's response to Dorset Council.

In the Spring last year, as Covid raged, our Clerk, Katharine, became aware of a Covid Support Grant – she put together an application and our Parish was granted £600. But what to do with this money became a nice problem to have. Through our local connections we asked a number of recipients who had received practical gestures of aid, who they would like to recommend for expenses remuneration. We gained quite a list but when these 'village angels' were approached, none would accept any money. Like all grants – we had to spend and account for its expense! After much head scratching we donated £300 to our Post Office for the service it had provided and the remainder went to Beaminster Food Bank.

Highways is always a regular agenda item! Cllr Jeremy has worked tirelessly to get the quality of our local roads improved. This is a permanent item on our agendas and pot holes, gulleys and overgrown vegetation he continually reports to Highways and I have to say, he does this with patience and tenacity nearly always resulting in success.

One major Highways issue that has emerged again this year has been a speed limit through the village. I have been a Parish Councillor for 14 years now and can remember that we had been rebuffed in this respect twice before. It was about 8 years ago that I had to have a site meeting with Highways just to get SLOW printed on the road at the corner to the bridge on Lower Road, and in 2019 did we get the go ahead for Slow to be printed on the village side of the bridge!

The speed limit through the village has been an on-going issue for decades – dare I say that even my predecessor, the late Jennifer Rolfe, even failed with this initiative, and since I became Chair in 2007 we were rebuffed by Dorset District Council twice. This 'brick wall' had to be taken down, fortunately some bright spark on the Council suggested we involve

our MP, and on a Summer's Friday evening sometime back in 2019 I met with Sir Oliver Letwin and we looked at the main road through the village and particularly the area at the railway bridge. Sir Oliver was extremely supportive and immediately acted on our behalf by writing to Highways and this led to a speed limit of 30mph being agreed as part of the 2019 Transport Regulation Order programme. This would entail a period of statutory consultation, followed by a public consultation and as it was included in the programme, costs would be met by the County Council. The consultations did actually begin in November 2019. And then Covid struck!! The months went by, our Clerk was tasked with following up this item at every meeting, our County Councillor, Tony Alford was engaged to help find out what was going on, then suddenly we were informed – all systems go and the signs appeared in the Autumn of 2020, but the actual 30mph speed limit would 'go live' on December 18th this meant that the legal orders were enforced.

An on-going Highway issue that still has not been resolved is the maintenance of BOATS! These are Byways Open to All Traffic and we have two in the village. The one causing most concern is the one connecting School Lane to Kingcombe Road which loses its gravelled surface during heavy rain with sediment being washed out onto Kingcombe Road not only leaving a mess on the road but a very pot holed surface behind. This is quite a complicated issue – we have a Highways legal dedication document dated 1996, which suggests Dorset Council does have a legal responsibility for the surfacing of the BOAT but unfortunately the small print does not make clear who has responsibility for the drainage, which, of course, is the cause of the damage and outflow of shingle. Cllr Alford will, no doubt, pick up the baton again soon to arrange site meetings and try to move the issue forward.

Associated with Highways is the on-going monitoring of our footpaths. And Cllr Chris Wardle with his wife Jenny and essentially their 2 very playful dogs Ted and Betsy have been striding out across our countryside keeping an eagle's eye on the state of our footpaths. Chris liaises with Tara Hansford (Rights of Way Officer) by reporting broken stiles and bridges and checking that they get repaired. Cllr Chris oversaw the installation through match funding with Dorset Council of five 1.2m galvanised framed footpath gates replacing the old styles to improve access for walkers. The gravelling of the gateways was completed by Mr James Billen – for which we are very grateful as pooling of water in the gateways had become a problem for walkers. There are still plans in place to instal a further 3 gates, but Covid has

stalled progress on this – another baton to be taken up! The Parish Council has also been involved with a long-lasting issue concerning the definitive map modification order T582 – to you and me this is the right of way determination at Frogmore Farm/Badger Lane. We have been informed that Dorset Council have received 3 separate applications in respect of this Byway but only one formal consultation would be held. For our part, Cllr Chris managed to get residents to complete a questionnaire that aimed to give a historical use of the pathway and these have been submitted to Dorset Council as part of a wider Consultation with the Definitive Map Team. We are unsure when a decision will be made.

A few more brief summaries of our work:

Firstly, Manor Farm Buildings – concerned had been raised about the state of these in terms of them being unsightly and unsafe. The Clerk consulted with the Land Agent, Dorset AONB, Planning and Building Control as well as the owner, and just as we had exhausted all avenues of support at least the collapsing outbuilding connected to the large barn seen from the rail track as one walks toward Maiden Newton was disassembled and made safe.

Secondly, you may not be aware that the Parish Council has taken on the ownership and maintenance from the W.I. of the Defibrillator, and we have a budget heading for this of up to £90 per year to replace items that are time limited, or replace used items.

Thirdly, much concern has been made over the flooding issue at Powerstock Bridge as well as the state of the construction. Highways England own the bridge and deem it cost-prohibitive to repair, therefore it has been listed for removal. No time scale has been received as yet. The proposed Trailway, at this point, does not require the bridge to be in place, instead slopes onto the Highway will be built. It also raises the possibility that flooding could become a problem no longer as the road level could be raised.

Yes, I've nearly finished, however, very briefly, I want to highlight 4 things:

I would like to thank all the Parish Councillors who make for lively but friendly debate at meetings. They give freely of their time for the good of our community and to our hard-working Clerk, Katharine Sheehan, who keeps scrupulous records and always seems to have any bit of required information to hand!

While Toller Porcorum has not to date been entered into Dorset's prettiest village competition, it is lovely to see the large pot by the telephone box and the rubber tractor tyres at the entrances to the village, these are planted and replenished by Janie Rawlings supported, of course, by husband Micky – our grateful thanks to them both.

I was going to stand down as Chairman at last year's AGM, but that didn't happen! I am delighted that Cllr Neil Farmer was elected Chairman, he has worked in local council for years, and is already Chairman of our Playing Fields charity. As a relative new comer to the village, he has ingratiated the Toller way of life and I can assure you he will be extremely effective, very ably supported by Cllr Peter Crabbe who was elected Vice Chairman.

Looking back 14 years, I tried to recall some of the bigger issues we succeeded in as a Council. Our first breakthrough was getting Lower Road re-surfaced. I remember walking down the road with a set of tall steps to take an aerial view of all the hundreds of pot holes outside the farm entrance and along that stretch of road to press home the point of how unsafe the surface had become – practically impossible for cyclists.

We managed to get the Railway Bridge sandblasted and re-painted; we started the Toller Website; had a naming of the The Brook ceremony with Sir Oliver Letwin, so all Ordnance Survey maps now have Toller Brook labelled on them. We managed to retain the Telephone Box when BT were planning to remove it – you may not know this, but it is now a Grade 2 listed building! We forced Dorset District Council to adopt our street lights, thereby reducing our costs as well as liability; we negotiated with the company who were upgrading The Old Swan to provide land for the bus stop to be built. Albeit within 18 months of this triumph, the buses were stopped! And finally, we kept open the playing field, re-establishing Toller Porcorum Recreation area Association by the Councillors agreeing to become Trustees.

I have always wanted to create a Council that worked as a team, and by and large I think I just about managed that! It has been a very stable Council: through my 14 years as Chairman I have only 'lost' 8 Councillors: Jan Knowles who served for 12 years, Debbie Billen who served under Jennifer's Chairmanship too; her Grandfather, the late Peter Billen – who was a complete legend - probably serving the village in one way or another since before

the Second World War; the late Pat Rutherford – another village legend! She was the one who noticed our Brook had no name and she took on responsibility for the telephone box, if you knew Pat you wouldn't be surprised to know she had BT dancing to her tune getting them to paint it regularly and replace any broken windows; Penny Goodwin; Peter Davies who was instrumental in establishing the Village website and still runs it he was also our Highways supremo; Alex Carstairs who served as Vice Chair for several years and finally another village legend Colin Baker who served this village either as Clerk or Councillor for 30 years. I have worked with 5 Clerks, namely Shelley Collins, Barry Rutherford, Nicholas Appleby, Michelle Harding and our current clerk, Katharine. I thank them all, as well as our present Councillors for all their support and their contributions to making our Parish Council quite a team. I wish Neil, a long stay at the helm, and trust he will enjoy similar support and triumphs along the journey.