

PORLOCK PARISH COUNCIL

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT MARCH 2017

This has been a year of two halves. The first six months were taken up with the usual mix of parish council business, with discussions with the organisers of the proposed new summer Samphire Festival, which was to take place on the side of Porlock Hill on Porlock Manor Estate land. There were also discussions regarding the implications of the proposed merger of West Somerset and Taunton Deane Councils. Then in September came the shock announcement that our treasured No 10 bus service to Minehead was going to be withdrawn at the end of the month because it was not financially viable. This led to a lot of meetings to find a way to keep the service going. Whilst we were getting to grips with the bus, West Somerset announced that they were going to close all public toilets by the end of March, as they needed to save money, and there was no legal obligation to provide public toilets anyway. This again caused a lot of work for our Clerk, but, thanks to some imaginative thinking and planning, we believe we have found an economically-viable solution to keeping some toilets within the village. As the new financial year approaches, we are keeping our fingers crossed that we will not be expected to take on any more services previously provided by West Somerset or County Councils.

Councillors

Alan Wright, our Chairman for the past nine years, resigned in October, as he was moving out of the area to be nearer his family. We thanked Alan for all his energy and imaginative ideas, such as setting up the Porlock Bay Oyster project and Porlock Futures Group and, as a member of Exmoor National Park Committee, helping to oversee the Porlock Marsh Vision project. At the January meeting, we welcomed Mrs Carolyn Cape, a long-standing resident of Porlock Weir, onto the Council.

Library

The library is still the only community library in Somerset run by volunteers. A new 2-year collaboration agreement has been signed with the County Library Service. As a result, there is a 62% saving in annual running costs. The use of the library has increased considerably, with well-attended coffee mornings, jigsaws, poetry sessions, talks by authors, and Lego workshops and summer and winter reading challenges for

children. Thanks for all their hard work are due to Cllr John Ware and the amazing 24 volunteers who organise themselves into a rota to keep the library going.

Samphire Festival

The Council was involved in licensing discussions for this new local music festival to be held on Porlock Manor Estate land on the side of Porlock Hill, with majestic views over Porlock Bay. The festival proved to be popular with its patrons, who tried to use many of the local facilities and food providers. There was positive feedback from the village shops, who had a busy weekend. The Samphire Festival went on to win the award for Best New Music Festival, and we wish the organisers well for the future.

Flooding in Hawkcombe

This occurs regularly at the bridge at the top of the Horseshoe. Hopefully, work to improve the drainage will be carried out by the Highways Department in the 2017/18 financial year.

Pond in Meadowhayes

The Parish Council has identified this as a safety hazard, and has suggested to Highways that it should be filled in with stone and soil to create a giant soakaway. The cost involved is quite considerable, and the matter is still under discussion.

Defibrillator

In June 2016 Denise Sage approached the Parish Council with plans to raise money for a life-saving defibrillator for the village. With Porlock's aged population and being situated 30 miles away from Taunton's Musgrove Park A & E Department, this was considered essential. The Parish Council willingly gave a grant towards the costs of buying and installing a defibrillator. As always with any good idea, Porlock rallied round and, before she knew it, Denise and her Super Soup team had raised enough money to provide 2 defibrillators. One is now on the wall of Abbeyfield in High Street, the second to be installed at Porlock Weir. Besides the fund-raising, Denise also persuaded Dr Ed Ford to train over 100 villagers in the use of the appliances, which again shows what a caring community we have in Porlock.

Exmoor Young Voices

In July the Parish Council welcomed a talk by representatives of Exmoor Young Voices (sponsored by Exmoor National Park), which was set up to discuss issues such as housing and employment, as it was felt that for far too long the concerns of young people living and working with the Park had not been fully appreciated. This new body is enthusiastic and speaks its mind at various meetings I have attended on Parish Council business. The Council gave them a grant of £100 towards establishing their organisation.

Porlock Weir - Minehead No 10 Bus

In September came the shock announcement that the bus service to Minehead, which had been running for over 80 years, would cease at the end of September because it was making a loss. We were told that Buses of Somerset were losing £50 per day. Porlock Parish Council collaborated with Minehead Town Council and Selworthy and Minehead Without Parish Councils, and found the money to keep the service running until the end of 2016 while we investigated alternative ways to provide this vital link. This has now been achieved by means of Porlock, Minehead, Selworthy and Luccombe Councils splitting the yearly cost and including it in their 2017/18 rates precepts. Porlock's share is £6000. For this we have retained a dedicated vehicle for a Monday to Friday service with a good 2-hourly timetable and direct access to Minehead town centre before the bus takes the Town Route around the estates and via the hospital. The considerable cost is because of the high use of free Concessionary Bus Passes and the fact that there is no government-approved method to allow bus users to pay a voluntary £1 or so contribution towards their fare.

We are currently working on how to provide a summer Saturday service, possibly by raising money from advertising and donations. The National Trust is helping to support the service by paying to have a large advert on the back of the dedicated bus.

This community-sponsored bus service is the first in Somerset. Its long-term future will be reviewed in December, so the message is: **USE THE BUS OR LOSE IT.**

Thanks are due to our County Councillor Karen Mills and District Councillor Frances Nicholson for the considerable time and effort they have put in to take this forward and get us to where we are today.

Village Ground Maintenance and Street Scene

I would like to say a special thank you to our village ground maintenance contractor, Alan Binding, and his team for all their work in keeping the churchyard, Hawkcombe Cemetery and all the grass verges and hedges around the village neat and tidy. Also to Eric Nichols for keeping our streets and pavements clean and litter-free. As Councillors we are regularly being complimented on the character and charm of Porlock, and the work of these people is an important part of it.

Public Toilet Provision

Toilets do not have to be provided by Councils as a statutory right, which is why they are being closed to save money. In order to keep toilets open in Porlock, we are going to make modifications to the Doverhay Car Park block and also reconfigure the toilets at the Old School Centre, so that there is provision for public users of the Visitor Centre and Library. The lease on the Central Car Park toilet block has been discontinued to save money. Councillor David Hancock has spent many hours drawing up plans and working with builders to bring these plans to fruition, and he deserves a special thank you for his imaginative idea and all his hard work.

I would like to sincerely thank all Councillors for their help and support since I took over as Chairman six months ago. I never imagined that the bus and toilets would take up so much time, but thankfully we have achieved the right result for our village. Thank you all.

Councillors Frances and Karen have been especially supportive and managed to open various doors to solve the problems which drop into our laps as Parish Councillors.

On behalf of the Council, I would also like to thank all the many clubs and organisations in Porlock, who in their own ways, contribute to our vibrant community, which is quite amazing when we are considered to be the village with the most elderly population in the country. Also, Chris and Roger Miles for running the Lovelace Centre and who, for many years, have produced artwork and posters for various village organisations, as well as the excellent Porlock Vale Newsletter.

Finally, special thanks to Chris Fitzgerald, our Parish Clerk for many years, for her unflinching support and advice. She has spent many unpaid

hours outside her normal working time helping the “Save our Bus” campaign. When she retires in December, her dedicated support, working knowledge of the Parish Council and Councillors, and the good humour with which she undertakes her job will be sorely missed.