

Donyatt Parish Council (DPC) Chairman's Report for Financial Year 2023/2024.

I was pleased to take on the role of Chairman in May 2023, a year during which, unbeknown to me at the time, would present us with many challenges.

The first of these was the resignation of our existing Clerk in July and the need to fill the role ready for our next meeting in September. We were faced with a number of good candidates and we were pleased to secure the services of Zannette Bougourd who joined us at our next meeting in September. Zannette has since proved to be an excellent Clerk.

An early success during the year was Donyatt's participation in the Coronation Event for the new King, Charles III, held on May 9th at Knight Electrical, opposite the village hall. The event was very well attended with over 150 people attending, despite the changeable weather.

I would like to thank everyone who was involved in organising the event and all those from Donyatt who attended. My special thanks go to Councillor Kay Light who took the lead role in organising the day.

DPC had some banking issues through the year with statements continuing to be sent, not to our current Clerk, or even her predecessor but the one before that!

NatWest refused to recognise the authority of any of our current Councillors when we asked for changes of signatories and we reached a kind of impasse with them during the year.

This made things extremely difficult for our current Clerk, but with grit and steely determination and able assistance from Councillor Bill Porritt, she managed to sort it all out.

We have now reached the decision that we want to move away from Natwest and find a more "Parish Council friendly" bank as soon as we can.

Our DPC website had also fallen into neglect and needed urgent updating and overhauling, I am pleased to say that Zannette again stepped up to the mark and has now sorted this out, for which we all thank her.

Looking outside of DPC for a moment, we received eleven Planning Applications during the year, slightly up on last years' nine.

We continue to harass Somerset County Highways to tackle the drainage and flooding issues around the parish. Councillor Bill Porritt, Councillor James Attlesey (Jimmy) and I have all waded into this ongoing issue (pardon the pun) for which I thank both of them.

Jimmy has worked tirelessly to unblock drains along Stibbear and has discovered some that S.C. Highways didn't know about. It is only by keeping on to S.C. Highways that we get anything done.

Some success has been achieved with all drains having been jetted twice in the last few months and after parts of Donyatt and Stibbear Lane had been flooded five times at the end of 2023 and the beginning of 2024, the most recent heavy rains don't appear to be causing so much flooding.

However we will not become complacent and will stay on the case to make sure this good work continues.

The flooding issues at Peasmarsh have now been resolved, with the help of Martin Burrough from Barley Mows Farms who helped us locate and clear a large drainage pipe at the bottom of one of his fields, the source of most of the floodwater.

One of our key achievements during the year was the delivery of a 'Residents' Survey' to all households in the Parish (Donyatt, Sea, Peasmarsh and Stibbear Lane) during August and September.

In this survey we asked our residents what their priorities for the village are, rather than us trying to second guess them.

We were very pleased with the response rate, 86 forms returned out of 177 delivered which is 49%, high by any standards.

Residents' two main priorities by far were Flood Prevention/Drainage plus doing something about the speed of traffic through the village.

We posted the full set of results on Donyatt noticeboards, our DPC website and the Donyatt Community Facebook page.

We have taken these views on board and apart from the work on flood prevention we have done, we are also planning to install, one to begin with, then two, Speed Indicator Devices in Donyatt.

This won't stop the hardened speedsters but will make sensible drivers think, plus the devices collect lots of traffic data which we can then take to the Police and S.C. Road Safety and Traffic Management to introduce measures to cut down on traffic offences in the future.

On the form we also gave people the opportunity to volunteer to help with village events and looking after footpaths, I'm pleased to report we had 42 people who have volunteered to help.

Their names have been passed on to the key organisers of events in the village.

Whilst on traffic issues, Councillor Julia McKenzie has campaigned for the best part of two years to do something about dangerous driving and speeding through the community of Sea.

She has worked tirelessly with Ilminster Town Council and S.C. Traffic Management and Road Safety to discuss the introduction of measures to slow traffic through Sea.

I am pleased to announce that she has reached agreement and commitment from Somerset Council to introduce a 40mph speed limit all the way through Sea to the outskirts of Ilminster.

There are several stages to go through before any new signs start appearing but the process has begun and should be completed within 18 months. Not a moment too soon I say.

I would like to thank Julia for her forbearance in negotiating all the hoops and hurdles she has had to cope with to get this excellent result.

Other challenges this year have included playing our part in trying to stop Persimmons from building 'up to 400' houses off Canal Way in Ilminster, which we feel would result in overspill into Donyatt, Herne Hill, Coldharbour and onto the National Cycleway.

Despite our protestations, Somerset County Planning Committee approved this development, so we are now working with local interest groups to try to limit the impact of up to 1,000 new residents from Canal Way wandering into our village, local farmland and nature reserves.

Some things we have been entirely successful with are as follows:

Helping Donyatt Village Hall with funding towards new flood defences and a new heating system.

Contributing towards new fencing and play equipment at Donyatt Recreation Field.

Opening up the top half of Crow Lane so that the local network of footpaths can be accessed more easily.

Replacing old rotten stiles and steps with more easily accessed metal self-closing gates on footpaths in the parish.

Replacing the old vandalised bench at Pound Corner so that people can have a rest after climbing Donyatt Hill.

The defibrillator at the village was threatened with removal due to no-one looking after it, but at the eleventh hour Rosie and Steve Payne stepped in and took it over. Many thanks to them for helping us out.

During April, Councillor James Attesley removed graffiti from inside the shelter at Donyatt Halt,

he also plans to remove some from under Coldharbour Bridge, many thanks to Jimmy for sorting this out.

I'm also pleased to say (and we take no credit for this) that Robert Doak kindly offered to put the roof back on Donyatt Halt, this work has now been completed and we send our thanks to him for getting this sorted.

On the Financial front, we had a feeling money was going to be a bit tight due to rumours that started to come out during the year about Somerset Council's financial troubles.

These concerns proved to be true when, in November, all Town and Parish Councils in Somerset received a letter from S.C. explaining their difficulties and asking us if we were able to take on any services previously provided by them.

Some Councils, particularly the Town Councils e.g. Chard, Ilminster, Crewkerne, had sufficient finances and manpower so were keen to take on some responsibilities.

However, most Parish Councils, with their limited finances and manpower will find it more difficult to do so.

S.C. set up something called Local Community Networks (LCNs) to bridge the communication gap left by the closure of District Councils (something which local councils bitterly opposed).

However the LCN we are part of has about 35 Councils on it, stretching from here to the outskirts of Yeovil, there are so many diverse views and interests that nothing ever gets decided, so basically it's not working and we may well withdraw from this scheme.

Donyatt Parish Council has started to build a 'war chest' so that we can at least try to fund some of the things that need doing in the future.

As a result of this, unfortunately we have had to increase our Precept by more than we originally intended to. Added to this was the fact that there was no funding coming from S.C. to pay for our Speed Indicator Devices which we now have to pay for ourselves. We will at all times keep increases in the Precept to a minimum.

So that Donyatt residents could be kept up to date with the reduction of services provided by S.C., I arranged a meeting at the village hall on the 8th February to tell people what was happening.

This was well attended and I was able to take questions from the floor and able to answer at least some of them. We are still not entirely sure what's happening about funding into the future, I don't think S.C. know either.

Other ongoing challenges include the rapidly deteriorating condition of Coldharbour Bridge, which has been hit by vehicles and is very overgrown.

Large blocks of stone are in danger of falling on the Cycleway below, but despite my protestations and a site visit by an S.C. Bridges engineer in September '23 nothing appears to get done. I chase them every month but so far no action has been taken.

Grants awarded by DPC this year are as follows:

Donyatt Village Hall £2,500

Donyatt recreation Area Committee £1,000

Donyatt PCC (St. Mary's Church) £1,000

Events to look forward to in 2024 - Councillor Kay Light is organising an 80th Anniversary of D-Day event with a beacon as part of a national network of beacons, in the recreation Field to include hot food and liquid refreshment. This will take place on 6th June.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all my fellow councillors on DPC and our new Clerk for their commitment and hard work over the year, without their help we would have achieved nowhere near as much as we have:

Our new Clerk Zannette for sorting out the many problems she inherited, including the poor state of our finances and our website.

Bill Porritt for being an excellent Vice-Chair during the year, his continued work with S.C. Highways and with the running and maintenance of the village hall as part of their committee.

Jimmy Attlesey for his part in the 'Drainage & Flood Prevention' initiative, getting to grips with the local drainage system and his many days out there with a shovel.

Kay Light for organising the big events in the village and for coordinating all the various food and drinks vendors, musicians and other entertainers at the events.

Julia McKenzie for getting her teeth into the traffic problems at Sea and getting all parties to agree to a solution, something we have been trying to achieve for several years.

Mike Grabham for his involvement with the Church Committee, the village hall and the social club, also of course for his great wealth of knowledge about Donyatt.

We have taken on one new Councillor this year, Steven Payne, who joined us at our March '24 meeting. Welcome aboard Steve.

Finally, it is with great sadness that Councillor Bill Porritt has announced that he will be leaving us as of the May' 24 Parish Council meeting.

We thank him for his sterling service to the Donyatt community over many years and wish him all the best for the future.

He will be sorely missed.

David Light

Chairman Donyatt Parish Council - April 2024