

BASCHURCH PARISH COUNCIL

CHAIRMAN'S ANNUAL REPORT 2019

For so many different reasons, we are living through the most uncertain and challenging times in recent history and I would like to take this opportunity to reflect on aspects of this. Whatever your age, gender, religious or political beliefs, the one thing we have in common is that we are all parishioners of Baschurch Parish.

Our Parish is one of the largest Parishes in the County of Shropshire. Being rural and semi-rural in nature, our residents are a diverse bunch and where we all live is equally mixed. Our Parish sprawls across a much larger area than most realise, which presents opportunities and challenges for our Parish Council. I use the word “our” to describe the Parish Council, as we are all part of the community that makes up this Parish and we all have opportunities to play our part in making this wonderful Parish an even better place to live, work and play. When I say “we”, I don’t just mean our Councillors, who give up many hours voluntarily to manage and maintain our Parish, I mean you too – the whole of the wider community – your contribution, however big or small, makes our Parish a better place to be.

The Parish has seen a lot of residential development delivered over the last few years and no doubt there will be more to come over the next few years too. Shropshire Council is currently pulling together its housing policy up to 2036 and Baschurch will be expected to contribute to the housing that is needed. The need to increase housing is directed by central Government and locally we have to make this work to our advantage as best we can.

Development can be considered to be a negative thing by many, but we need to look at the positive side of this too. Without housing growth, our local services and businesses struggle to be viable. Growth brings children to our schools, which only 5 years ago were seeing a rapid decline in numbers and were becoming unsustainable. Growth brings more people to support the many worthwhile groups that operate within our Parish. Growth helps to see facilities, such as village halls, being used more. Growth brings more customers to our businesses, bringing expansion and new local jobs. New houses bring new friends, new colleagues, new children, new jobs and ultimately new life to our Parish.

Our Parish Council continues to lobby for housing and facilities that meet the needs of the whole community. We need housing for the young and elderly; we need dwellings that people can afford to buy. We want to live in a community that is able to support us and our families through every stage of our lives. We want facilities that everyone can enjoy – children, teenagers, adults and the elderly. Our Parish Council is in the advance stage of getting permission to deliver a skate park within the existing playground, which will be accessible for all those over 8 years old. The skate park has been professionally designed to be used by skateboarders, BMX bikes, scooters, roller skaters and even wheelchairs! Whilst this may not appeal to all of our community, it would be great if we saw the advent the ‘silver skater’!

I’m delighted to be able to report that our local Fire Station is also benefiting from the increase in housing and residents. With more dwellings, the sustainability of the Fire Station is assured. We have a full complement of firefighters, with a waiting list of those who wish to join. It is only five years ago that we were fighting plans to close this vital service! Many members of our Parish will be aware of the other voluntary activities the firefighters carry out throughout the Parish and we are extremely grateful for their community involvement.

With the growth in housing numbers comes funding. Your Parish Council is working on many projects that will see enhanced facilities in the local area, including road safety initiatives, school extensions, new recreational facilities, cemetery enhancements, street lighting

upgrades, support for enhancements to our village halls to name just a few. We are also working in partnership with Shropshire Council and our medical practice to progress plans for a new practice, which we hope will be funded by money raised through local development.

Our Parish schools are now flourishing, which has seen the need for a new extension to Baschurch Primary School. We look forward to that being completed and the positive impact that will have on our learning community.

Our Community Speedwatch group have worked tirelessly to raise the profile of speeding and the anti-social (not to mention dangerous) impact it has on our community. The Parish Council used some of its funding raised from housing development to purchase 10 vehicle activated signs (known as VAS), which the Community Speedwatch group maintain, move around and recharge batteries for – all this support is provided for free.

Our cemetery now has three new benches which are designed to accommodate cost effective memorial plaques, providing an affordable way of having a lasting tribute to a loved one.

Many of the local community groups locally report that new residents have swelled their membership numbers, which is incredibly positive! Baschurch Parish has a huge range of community groups to meet most interests and tastes and these groups help to promote our sense of community and belonging.

As part of our roles within the Parish, we are coming across more and more people finding it harder to cope with various aspects of their life or circumstances. As a community, we need to reach out and help those who need just a bit of support, a few words of encouragement. None of us are exempt from hitting the buffers from time to time and those that we often look to or rely upon need our help as much as you need theirs. Be the friend you would want to have.

I've spoken over the last few years about doing more with less money and that isn't going to change anytime soon. It feels like a daily mantra that I read that Shropshire Council are cutting this service or that funding. As a Parish Council, we always fight our corner and make our voices heard when services that we depend upon are put in jeopardy. We also battle on with trying to get more road safety measures and improvements to road surfaces, potholes repaired etc. The bottom line is that there just isn't the money to do everything that everybody wants.

Our Clerk works tirelessly to keep on top of requests for information, repairs etc and our continued thanks go to her. Our Councillors and Clerk have continued to attend many training sessions to ensure we are qualified to meet the challenges that face us.

Over the last 12 months, there have been 12 full meetings of the Council, in addition to numerous other meetings of sub-committees and meetings with other agencies, such as Shropshire Council.

Council meetings are open to the public and provide an opportunity to ask questions on any issue relating to the villages and surrounding areas.

Agendas and minutes are posted on the notice board in Baschurch as well as on our website at www.baschurchpc.org.uk

Planning Applications and Neighbourhood Planning

Baschurch Parish Council has no executive powers in deciding planning applications - this is the prerogative of Shropshire Council, which is the Planning Authority.

However, it is mandatory for the Planning Authority to consult the Parish Council on all applications in its area. The Parish Council can then submit comment on any application, but the Planning Authority can disregard these comments if it considers them to be inappropriate. Any comments made by the Parish Council must be material and relate solely to the application in front of them.

During the last twelve months, the Parish Council have been consulted on 51 applications. The council supported 41 of these, objected to 7 and submitted no comment on 3. This is a slight increase of four applications received on the previous year and the complexity of the applications continues to increase.

Over the last 12 months, we have taken the opportunity to meet with Planning Officers on a number of occasions to discuss issues with planning applications. These meetings have been very beneficial and by working in partnership with officers, we have achieved better outcomes with some of the local developments. It is clear that officers have a lot of respect for our Council and take seriously any matter that we raise with them and this is something we should feel very proud of.

I would like to take this opportunity of thanking my Vice Chairman, Cllr Jonathan Carr, who, as the Chair of Planning has worked tirelessly on our behalf, ensuring that every planning application is carefully looked into. We work together on the more complex applications to ensure that a full and robust response is put forward.

As I have stated over the last couple of years, the Parish Council wishes to work with the community to create a full Neighbourhood Plan. An adopted Neighbourhood Plan carries significant weight when considering local development, but pulling one together takes a lot of resources and needs to be done carefully. The Shropshire Council Local Plan Review, which will take their adopted plan up to 2036, is still ongoing and has been delayed due to a number of factors. Any Neighbourhood Plan that is put forward for scrutiny by the Planning Inspectorate will need to consider and reflect the Core Local Plan.

Our Council has been well represented at the various meetings to discuss the evolution of the Local Plan and we continue to compile reports and submissions as part of the consultation process. We have made certain that our voice has been heard and many of the requests and recommendations we put forward have been included within the draft Local Plan Review. It is still our intention to pull together a Neighbourhood Plan, but with the progression of the Local Plan Review taking longer than hoped, our progress has been stifled.

Delivering Local Priorities

I have already briefly mentioned some of the projects that we are progressing and that development evident throughout the Parish generates income in the form of the Community Infrastructure Levy. The main CIL pot is used for strategic infrastructure projects across our Parish, including the development of a new medical practice.

The Neighbourhood Fund element of the CIL pot comes directly to the Parish Council to be spent on delivering on local priorities, such as the new VAS signs.

Highways

One of the main functions of the Parish Council is to liaise with Shropshire Council Highways Department regarding numerous matters such as the cleaning of gullies, repair of potholes, overgrown hedges, dangerous road surfaces, speed limits and signage.

I am pleased to report that we have a good relationship with the Assistant Divisional Surveyor and he does endeavour to prioritise our requests.

Nevertheless, with so many funding cuts and constraints, we have to be realistic that the state of the highways is never going to be as perfect as we would all like.

Keir took over as the Highway contractor on 1 April 2018. They inherited a significant backlog of works and as we can witness for ourselves, the transition hasn't been without issue.

The Parish Council, in conjunction with our Local Member, Councillor Nick Bardsley, have lobbied hard for various improvements, including the resurfacing of Shrewsbury Road. This has finally been completed, but the section by the crossroads is yet to be carried out. It is our understanding that this phase will be carried out across the summer holidays in 2019, I hope we can deliver positive news on that in the near future!

Speed and other anti-social driving habits continue to be a problem throughout the Parish. The VAS signs have been a great help in reducing a good chunk of the speeding – those of us whose speed creeps up a little but correct ourselves when challenged by the flashing display. We have received numerous positive comments about the impact of these signs. Sadly, there is a hardcore of drivers who continue to behave antisocially with their driving habits. The VAS signs we have collect fascinating data, which shows what time of day we have the worst problems and in which area. We provide this data to the police and they are actively following up on this and are patrolling the worst areas at the times we know are a problem – if you are part of the problem, you have been warned!

One area that we can all help with is to lead by example. If we all cut our speed and adhered to the speed limit, if none of us used mobile phones while we are driving, if none of us ate and drank while driving, if we all observed the road markings and the Highway Code, then the roads would be a much safer place for all of us. These things aren't just gripes to moan about, non-compliance is breaking the law. Please ask yourself honestly, what example are you setting to others around you, including your own children? Also ask yourself if you saw others behaving as you do, would you think it is acceptable behaviour? We should all take responsibility for highway safety and challenge the behaviour of those who think bad driving is ok for them to do.

Finance

Our Clerk has finalised the accounts for the year ended 31 March 2019 and these will be sent to our auditor shortly. Details of the accounts will be added to the website once the audit has been finalised.

As we still have projects planned for previous years that are yet to be finalised and some of the expected workload has yet to be devolved to our Parish Council from Shropshire Council, money earmarked for these areas has been rolled forward to 2019/20. We are pleased that this means we are again in the position of not increasing our precept and therefore you will see no increase in the amount charged to you through your council tax this year.

Baschurch Parish Council boundary is quite extensive, with Baschurch itself being only a small proportion of the area that Baschurch Parish Council is responsible for. Baschurch Parish Council only has one employee, our Clerk, who is responsible for many aspects of keeping the Parish running smoothly. I would like to take this opportunity to remind you that Parish Councillors do not receive any payment, allowance or any expenses whatsoever for their work or meetings they must attend; their contribution to the Parish is 100% voluntary.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Parish Councillors who have served their local community over the last 12 months and for the positive impact their efforts have had on our community. I would also like to thank our local member, Cllr Nick Bardsley, for all his support. The roles of both Parish Councillor and local member are thankless tasks and those that put themselves forward for public office should be commended for volunteering to give up so much of their valuable time to serve their local community. One thing that we have all learned is that you can't please all the people all of the time, sometimes pleasing anyone any of the time is an achievement!

I would like to say a big thank you to Anne Howls, our Clerk. Anne goes above and beyond to ensure the smooth and effective running of the Parish and we cannot thank her enough for all the hard work she puts in over the year. Since I joined the Parish Council, Anne is the only one of us who has attended every single meeting and I am truly grateful for all the support she has given me over the last four years while I have been Chairman.

My thanks also go to all the local residents who provide much of the information about matters requiring the Councils attention.

Finally, I wish to touch on the point I made earlier; we are all part of this community and need to work together positively. Next time you think "why haven't you...", please stop and ask yourself "how could I help to...". If we all worked to be part of the solution, not the problem, our Parish would be an even better place to live, work and enjoy. A smile and "thank you" are always appreciated and go a very long way!

Should you wish to find out any further information about the Parish Council, please visit our website – www.baschurchpc.org.uk where you will find all sorts of information, including previous minutes, annual accounts, details of the current parish councillors, together with details of the attendance record of each councillor.