

West Hill Parish Council Meeting 5th November 2024

Agenda Item:24/334c

Draft Half Year Review of West Hill Parish Council Activities for 2024-25 – for consideration

Purpose

To advise Councillors and residents of the activities carried out by the Parish Council during the first half of the 2024/25 Council year.

Background

The Parish Council's mission is "Working with the community to maintain and enhance West Hill's special character". This places the community firmly at the heart of everything the Council does. Councillors are mindful of their responsibilities to:

- a) spend public money wisely;
- b) act within legal powers enshrined in legislation;
- c) adhere to the Code of Conduct and the seven principles of public life (The Nolan Principles)
- d) involve the community in decision-making.

At the Annual Meeting of the Council in May 2024 the Chairman Cllr Alison Carr stood down as Chairman. Cllr Francis Pullman was elected as Chairman and Cllr Trevor Ingram was elected as Vice Chairman.

Cllr Carr and Cllr Gorton resigned from the Council leaving 4 co-opted councillors. This is a fragile situation leaving a risk of being inquorate at a Council meeting. It also means that the small number of Councillors will not be able to complete all of the planned activities during the year unless further people put themselves forward to join the Council.

The Council meeting in September had to be cancelled as it was inquorate.

What Has WHPC Achieved In The 6 Months From May 2024?

The Council's activities can broadly be divided into two groups;

- Mandatory and Routine activities
- Projects

Amongst the mandatory and routine activities are:

1. The Council's duties as an employer.
2. Managing the playpark – maintenance, safety and improving the equipment.
3. Liaising with East Devon District Council and Devon County Council on services they provide eg highways, dog waste bins, streetscene.
4. Monitoring the Parish footpaths and public rights of way.
5. Responding to planning applications as a consultee, engaging with residents, speaking at appeals and planning committees. The Parish Council responded to 38 planning applications in the first 6 months of the year.
6. Providing vehicle activated speed signs and data analysis to improve safety.
7. Liaising with stakeholders in the village – school, village hall trustees, RBL, community speedwatch.
8. Civic duties for annual Remembrance events and state occasions.
9. Providing grants to village organisations.
10. Liaising with the police.
11. Managing the Council's finance – budget setting, monitoring income and expenses and variances.
12. Representing the community on external bodies eg Airport Consultative Cttee.
13. Signposting residents to external agencies where appropriate.

14. Communicating with residents and keeping them informed via the website..
15. Monitoring developments with the draft East Devon Local Plan and making sure residents are kept informed.

Reports on these activities are presented to the monthly Council meetings and the minutes of the meetings are published on the Council's website.

Key achievements since May on the Projects undertaken are;

1. Play Park.

Two wooden benches that were decaying were replaced with new long life benches. These were funded by CIL monies allocated to West Hill.

2. Emergency Plan.

In order to start work on developing an Emergency Plan for West Hill a Working Group was formed with a number of volunteers from the residents of West Hill. A number of meetings of the Working Group have been held and work is progressing on the Emergency Plan.

The Working Group decided that it would be useful to send to every property in West Hill a leaflet introducing the Emergency Plan and providing some initial suggestions for householders to prepare their own emergency arrangements. An Initial Leaflet has been produced and will be distributed in November.

Two grant applications to help with the costs were successful.

3. Village Hall Footpath.

The project to construct a footpath connecting West Hill Road with the Village Hall and school has moved ahead considerably since May:

- a. Contractors have been selected for the construction of the path, the engineering supervision of the work and the ecological supervision.
- b. A Lease for the land has been signed with the Village Hall Trustees who are the landowners
- c. Negotiations with the Highways Department have finalised the work required on West Hill Road at the entrance/exit of the footpath. A TRO application has been submitted to get permission to carry out the work and the contractors are ready to start work when approval is granted by the Highways Department. Preparations for a s278 legal agreement are in progress. This will require a refundable bond to be established.
- d. Because the planning approval is due to expire on 19th Jan 2025 it is important that work on the footpath is started before this date in order to protect the approval. To avoid any delay whilst waiting for approvals from the Highways Department discussions have been held with EDDC Planning and the Village Hall Trustees to agree what work can safely be started before the expiry date of the planning approval. This package of work has to be carefully chosen to ensure that we do not commit to expenditure that may be wasted in the event that consultations over the TRO require a change to the current plans.

4. 2022-23 External Audit Finalised.

When the annual audit for 2022-23 was submitted an objector submitted a challenge to a number of points. This then required the External auditor to conduct a detailed investigation of the matters raised. In order to provide the required information for the auditor the Parish Clerk had to prepare a formal response to each of the objections which took up a great deal of time.

Because the auditor was faced with a large workload from other councils this work was delayed and was not completed until September 24. Out of ten objections raised by the

objector one was partially upheld. This was a small error in the VAT reclaim which had already been identified by the Council and rectified. All other objections were not upheld and no public interest report was issued. The Auditor issued a completion certificate which was published on our website.

5. Grant Awards.

The Parish Council budgets an amount each year to award grants to local organisations for worthy causes. For the first half of the year grants were awarded to:

- a. West Hill Wasps junior football team to purchase footballs, a respect board and field boundary markers.
- b. The RBL to pay towards a band to play at a barbeque held in the RBL garden as a part of the D-Day 80 commemoration.
- c. The PTFA to pay for a band to entertain at the annual PTFA Fete.

6. Stall At PTFA Fete.

The Parish Council agreed to support the annual PTFA Fete by having a stall with details of the Council's activities.

A "Treasure Hunt" competition was run which raised £68.00 for the PTFA.

7. EDDC Emerging Local Plan.

The development of the EDDC Emerging Local Plan is a significant matter for the Village as it includes proposals for new housing development. This has been brought into stronger focus with recent demands from the new government for a significant increase in targets for new housing. For East Devon the increase is 28%.

To keep residents informed a "drop in" display was organised to explain the process and the potential impact on the village. Verbal and written submissions have been made to the Strategic Planning Committee to support the villages position. At the time of writing this report it appears that two sites in the village will be allocated for development under the plan. The two sites are land to the North of Eastfield and land South of Windmill Lane.

The Parish Council has submitted objections to both these sites on a number of grounds including over development, non-sustainability, pressure on the limited village infrastructure, pressure on education, medical and dental facilities and concern about surface flood control and sewage treatment.

The Council has responded to further consultations and has spoken at EDDC Strategic Planning Committee meetings with regards to West Hill sites proposed sites for residential development (15 out of 17 were not allocated to the Emerging Local Plan). Also, to advocate the current Green Wedge between Ottery St Mary and West Hill is maintained.

Challenges

The biggest challenge faced by the Parish Council is the shortage of Councillors. Currently there are 4 Councillors out of a required strength of 7. All of the Councillors are relatively recent co-opted appointments with little knowledge and experience of Local Council work.

The volume of regular mandatory and routine activities, particularly planning applications, has been quite large and time consuming. An ambitious plan for project work has meant that councillors are having to work very hard and are not able to complete all the project work that we would like.

The current level of membership of the Council is fragile and critical and it is important to attract some new members to avoid the risk of being unable to conduct Council business due to being inquorate.

Future Plans

The Parish Council is continuing to develop its plans for the Council Term 2024-2027. Councillors are committed to the Council's Vision:

“Working with the community to maintain and enhance West Hill's special character.”

In order to plan the Council's future activities we aim to achieve five broad objectives:

1. Maintain and enhance the built environment for present and future generations
2. Maintain and enhance the natural environment for present and future generations
3. Improve safety, including road safety, by working with residents and relevant agencies
4. Maintain and develop infrastructure and key facilities and other services that enhance the quality of life in the village
5. Support and engage with all sectors of the community

For each of these objectives some projects have been planned.

1. Maintain and enhance the built environment for present and future generations

Future Projects:

- Start the Development of a Neighbourhood Plan for West Hill

2. Maintain and enhance the natural environment for present and future generations

Future Projects:

- Recruit additional Footpath Wardens and Tree Wardens.
- 3. Improve safety, including road safety, by working with residents and relevant agencies*

Future Projects:

- Complete the development and implementation of an Emergency Plan for West Hill.
- 4. Maintain and develop infrastructure and key facilities and other services that enhance the quality of life in the village*

Future Projects:

- Develop a Short, Medium and Long Term strategy for the Play Park.
- Complete the construction and commissioning of the Village hall Pedestrian Path.
- Undertake a Village Survey to determine the residents' priorities for future work for the Parish Council.

5. Support and engage with all sectors of the community

Future Projects:

- Implement a programme to attract more membership for the Parish Council.

Half Year Financial Summary

A summary of the Income, Expenditure and Earmarked Reserves is shown below. Further details are available in the Half Year Financial Report of the Finance Working Group presented to Councillors (and available on the Council website).

1. Income:

WHPC has received income of £57,735.85. This includes the 2024/25 Precept £56,875, grant awards and interest receipts.

2. Expenditure:

2024/25 expenditure for the six months to 30th September was £33,223.87. This includes circa £10,000 from Reserves.

The Finance Working Group have prepared a detailed forecast for the full year and despite incurring several items of expenditure outside the control of the Council, such as additional external audit fees, these will be offset by savings. Some of these savings arise from the limited Councillor resources available to the Council.

The full year operational expenditure is forecast to be circa £5,000 below budget.

3. Earmarked Reserves:

The Council began the Council year with reserves of £133,605. The reserves allocated for costs associated with previous years (additional audit fees and legal fees) have been spent as expected. The Council has also used CIL monies to replace two playpark benches.

Work on the Village Hall Path project has progressed significantly during the Council year and as resolved by Council, allocated reserves have funded the work to date. Further significant expenditure is expected in the coming months as legal work (DCC Highways) is finalised and construction is completed.

Reserves at 31st March 2025 are forecast to be £81,321 assuming the construction work is completed during 2024/25. £10,000 of the forecast project costs relates to a bond required by the DCC Highways department 85% of which should be refunded when the works are complete and 15% 12 months after completion.

For Consideration and Decision

The Council is invited to:

- a. accept this report.
- b. Publish this report on the Council's website.

Cllr F S Pullman
Chairman WHPC