

## Chairman's Report on the West Wrattling Parish Council

It's been a year of change for West Wrattling Parish Council. Three of the five current councillors joined last July, and by the end of this evening we may have two more new councillors.

In January four of us attended the CAPALC new councillor training day, and were more than surprised to hear what is expected of a Parish Council today - even from a small village Parish Council.

What ensued was lots of work revising the various mandatory documents that are needed by every Parish Council to abide by Local Government law - which we absolutely must do. Many of our documents were well out of date, despite the fact that they should have been reviewed annually.

The Standing Orders, Financial Regulations, data protection rules, etc., could be considered unnecessary bureaucracy, but they are as they are because they've evolved over the years to deal with difficult situations experienced elsewhere by other Parish Councils, and to try to bring best-practice to all councils.

I'm usually the sort of person who gets frustrated with stupid rules, and because of my engineering job I'm always looking for better and more efficient ways of working. So it's perhaps surprising that the Parish Council rules haven't caused me too much grief. I think that's because with some thought I can usually see why they might be necessary, and as an inexperienced councillor it would be arrogant to not try doing things the way that's recommended.

So as you'll see in the AGM later this evening, we're trying to "play it by the book". It's not to everyone's taste, but for now I still have faith that it will make us a better Parish Council for the village. As part of learning how good Parish Councils operate I've been visiting neighbouring parishes when they have their meetings. From that I've seen different parish councils tackle their work in different ways, but some do take the rules seriously, and they seem to be good role models to try to follow.

Having said there's been lots of change I've also realised how the same old things keep coming around for the Parish Council. Reading back through minutes from the last 10 years I saw there are familiar recurring topics: the cost of grass cutting, potholes, footpaths for pedestrian safety, and speeding traffic. We do have various initiatives underway to try to help with the traffic, including applications for "20's Plenty" signs, a local highways initiative (LHI) for gates and sharks' teeth, trial use of our speedwatch team's MVAS data by the police, and the Six Mile Bottom Road footpath now being on a council waiting list for funding.

A subject that you might think the Parish Council would have some influence in - planning applications - turns out to be quite the opposite. The Council's opinion on planning matters has no more weight than any single parishioner. So having found this out it seems that the best use of our time is to keep you informed and explain how to make your opinions and comments count. We'll try to achieve this by having informative and useful web pages, and articles in Challenge. The Streetly Hall Farm Anerobic Digester proposal was the first example of this.

This brings us on to the subject of the Solar Farm that's proposed to be built in West Wrattling. It's a huge development - about 2000 acres in size. Not only will there be a sea of glass panels, but several hundred container lorry-sized Lithium storage batteries. It's such a big project that it won't be decided by the usual planning process, but instead the pros and cons need to be presented in reports for the Secretary of State to make a decision.

There's a very similar project near Newmarket that's about 2 years further down the development path than the one for West Wrattling. The government's decision keeps being delayed, but is now scheduled for 20th June 2024. We're waiting on that outcome with interest. Either way, it will probably be worth talking with the people from those parishes to see what we can learn from their experience.

That's actually a good example of how a Parish Council can't possibly *please all the people, all of the time*. We've already received criticism for making information about the Solar Farm project available on our website because it could put people off wanting to buy in the village and so making it hard to sell property. That seems to me like shooting the messenger. I believe it's our duty as a Parish Council to keep you, our parishioners, informed of what's going on. It's a reminder though that being a Parish Councillor is unlikely to make you friends.

Another change this year was saying goodbye to Rachel and Pete at the Chestnuts and welcoming Mark and Joanna as the new publicans. Somehow that change of ownership caused SCDC to mistakenly take away the pub's Asset of Community Value (ACV) status. The Parish Council - with help from a parishioner - were able to challenge this decision and get it corrected.

The Parish Council would like to thank the parishioners who show interest in what we do, and who regularly attend the Parish Council meetings. A big thankyou to those parishioners who aren't on the council but help us so much, particularly Cobby for his attention to the footpaths and litter picking; and to Martin and Tim for their work with the village hall and with speedwatch.

My personal thanks to the other Councillors who've been burdened by the amount of work I've asked them to do; updating documents and restructuring with working groups and a committee to try to become a modern and efficient Parish Council. None of us are experienced parish councillors, so it's been a steep learning curve for us all.

Simon Chandler

13th May 2024