

Chairman's report

As I reported in Longstanton Life, the journey we have undertaken has been like a trip on the Titanic but with a different ending. Your newly elected Council arrived on deck to find that we had hit an iceberg, but rather than scrambling for the lifeboats, we got organized, took the courageous and (to some) unpopular decisions to seal the gaping hole, reversed out of the iceberg and turned the ship around.

We are now back on course.

It takes time to do this (voluntary) job properly, which has been seen at times by the public to be very frustrating. It was frustrating to us as well at times; we too would have loved to rush decisions through, but if we have learned anything, it is that if the Standing Orders and Regulations which govern what we do are ignored, bad things happen.

Let me tell you what we have achieved in our year in office.

I said we wanted to do this job 'properly'. Can I first demonstrate what I mean by this "doing things properly"? *Assess the situation, Make a plan, Take action through the system, and Check that it gets done.*

We came into office and were given exactly the same Excel spreadsheets as previous Councils had for the finances; in particular the Pavilion.

We looked at the VAT position. Here was a commercial operation which by the figures in front of us would have been over the VAT threshold by May 2011.

We contacted HMRC who confirmed we needed to be registered, we called a meeting of the Pavilion Committee and then made a report and recommendation to Council at the next meeting where it was resolved to shut the Pavilion forthwith. This was not rocket science, I think you will agree.

There are procedures you have to work by and we work by them and get the job done.

We applied exactly the same processes to the following projects:

The Pavilion, as mentioned, is reopening

- by putting it out to tender through the Pavilion Committee
- reviewing staff contracts through the Employment committee
- setting the budget through the Finance committee

I will talk about the Pavilion later and in the Pavilion report and there will be other Councillors reporting on other active Committees.

So what have we achieved this year?

Council has worked closely with Home Farm Working Group and you will hear later in their report what things they have achieved so far and what things are coming. Here is an example of where working groups can achieve far more than Council can. I personally want to thank them and Colin for sorting out some of the very intransigent problems that were besetting the Home Farm Group.

Finances

The Finance Committee has operated under the guidance of Gail Stoehr, who was our acting interim Parish Clerk for 6 months but would not act as our RFO but only give guidance. We managed to get through the year without having to dip into next year's precept by prudent financial control. We have had to make some very tough decisions. I will talk later of the actual finances but want to talk here about the precept and why it went up so dramatically.

Councils are legally bound to hold money in a reserve account generally this is seen to be 1 to 1.5 times their precept in reserves. This is so if any emergency happens there is money to deal with it. For example if we had needed to legally challenge a decision on Northstowe or if we had needed to take legal advice the funds could be drawn upon. With taking money from the reserves there must always be a plan in place as to how this money would be returned to the reserve account so look upon it as taking out a loan.

I have been asked by letter for this meeting to explain the actual reserve levels LPC has had over the period 2008 to 2012

31.3.08 Deposit Account £56,467.02 Current Account 500.00 Precept £62K

31.3.09 Deposit Account £67,096.90 Current Account £5,754.00 Precept £62K

Chairs: Cllr Tucker, Yarrow,

31.3.10 Deposit Account £62,129.09 Current Account £500.00 Precept £62K

Chairs: Cllr Tucker, Yarrow

31.3.11 Deposit Account £50,577.32 Current Account £580.00 Precept £65K

Chair: Cllr Yarrow

31.3.12 Deposit Account £25,031.75 Current Account £7,135.81 Pavilion Account £4,459.99 Precept £75K

Chairs were: Cllrs Yarrow, Meacher, Robins.

It would appear from this that the reserves account was not kept up from 2010 onwards. This would have been about the time that Council decided to take over the LSSC and run it themselves.

Council decided to take the money from the reserves and there was no plan that we have found to replenish the reserve account. There was no business plan ever put forward to explain or guide as to how this business would work. In November 2011 more money was taken from the reserve account - £5K - together with the money from an auction of paintings by people from the Immigration Centre and £1500 from the feast day budget to refurbish the kitchen. Again there was no business plan and no plan to replenish the reserves.

All Councillors are responsible for the finances they manage and the staff they employ.

As this Council then had to close the Pavilion and make the staff redundant through the employment committee we were forced to spend money to carry out this tragic task.

Throughout this time Council had employed a bookkeeper to build the accounts of the Pavilion and work with HMRC to establish how much VAT was due. The finalised figure is £21767.57, not including the fine which will be imposed. This bill will have to be paid.

The Finance committee proposed to full Council, and this measure was approved, to take steps to rebuild the Reserve Account. To do this we agreed to build it back over 3 years, hence this year we will be putting £25K into the reserves.

This has therefore meant for this year the Precept has risen from £75K to £140K. Next year we will put an agreed amount into the Reserve Account again. However we will not have to pay the VAT bill again so though there will be an increase on previous years before 2013 it will probably not be the same size increase as this year.

Northstowe

We as a Council have attended all meetings except 1 of the various Northstowe representations and as we have Cllr Alex Riley and a speaker from SCDC who is going to be speaking later on Northstowe I do not intend to dwell on this except to say we have represented and will continue to represent the views of people from Longstanton at these meetings and forums.

Standards Committee

This was set up this year we have had 3 meetings of this committee to examine complaints about the Council's administration and procedures.

We still have unresolved issues to deal with, which is a shame as it has held up progress of this Council. Papers remain the property of Council, not Councillors, and when papers are not handed over, yet are asked for, it does delay actions taking place. We hope that the previous Chairman will, as asked for in writing, furnish Council with the information.

When we first came to office and the Clerk went off sick we had to find the correct pay scales as the appraisal of the clerk had been carried and minuted in March 2012. However when we asked for a copy of the appraisal form we were told by the previous Chairman that he would not release it to us. Later this year I approached him about this again and was told because we would not pay his expenses he would not release the papers.

We were taken to court for non-payment of his expenses and as the first hearing was postponed as the claimant had not produced his statement the case was adjourned and dismissed at the second hearing. Council cannot pay expenses to anyone where it is not agreed by council, this is in standing orders and pointed out in the Internal auditors report; he should have been well aware of this.

We are just about to receive the report from the External Auditors of the previous Council year 2011-2012. This will be what is called a Public Interest Report because of what went on in that year. I have been working with the external auditors in trying to answer their questions but have been unable to do so as some information was not available to me.

As we head towards the next external audit and the close of this year I see we as a Council have made gigantic steps forward though sometimes it felt we were sailing through treacle I do feel we are now on course and sailing full steam ahead.

Gill Ashby