**DEBENHAM PARISH COUNCIL**

**ANNUAL REPORT**

This annual report covers probably the most unusual and challenging period for Debenham Parish Council. The Covid 19 pandemic affected Debenham as much as anywhere else, and the parish council had to continue operating during that time.

Although face to face meetings were impossible, due to government restrictions, we continued to function via ‘zoom’ meetings which also enabled members of the public to ‘attend’ if they so wished. Zoom enabled us to be kept updated by our local councillors, Kathie Guthrie for MSDC and Matthew Hicks for SCC, as they attended our meetings remotely and presented their reports.

More or less normal business was conducted very effectively through this medium. Our thanks must be passed to the clerk/RFO for the professional way that she has tackled everything that has been thrown her way during the last 12 months or so. The work of the clerk is fairly isolated at the best of times, this situation made that isolation even worse.

The parish council set up the Helping Hands in Debenham scheme which enrolled c. 120 local volunteers to assist those in the community who required some help. An emergency phone number was set up and publicised via various mediums around the community. This primarily provided a shopping and prescription collection service for those forced to shield or simply unable to get out and fend for themselves. Over the year nearly 300 ‘assists’ were organised within the community. Special thanks are required for Stephen Boulton at Websters newsagents and Bernard Rose for constantly being on call to answer the emergency phone line. Their dedication during the year has been outstanding.

This scheme was a glowing example of how Debenham as a community comes together in times of need. Our thanks to those volunteers and the 10 zone leaders who were responsible for the village zones allocated to them. The Co-Op and other local stores were very supportive of these efforts and assisted where they could to allow volunteers to buy more restricted items than the normal limit would allow during the initial lockdown period, when they were shopping for someone requiring assistance.

The Parish Council also provided free hand sanitiser spray dispensers to all local businesses for use on their premises. These were refilled after 3 months.

At Christmas time a food parcel scheme was organised and approximately 40 households were given a hamper for the festive season.

The parish council kept the village toilets open (except for a few weeks at the very beginning of lockdown) as they are so in demand. Grass cutting was briefly suspended but then reinstated to make sure we kept the village looking presentable. Our street warden has again, done a great job in keeping the village ship shape during this time.

Our thanks are due to these contractors for the work they carry out, very much in the background. Their efforts are much appreciated. Their work goes by largely unnoticed until it is not done!

As previously mentioned, normal council work continued during the pandemic and planning applications were considered via zoom, using the plans available on the MSDC website planning portal. Of significance was the application that was approved for the site south of Low Road where 18 properties were approved by MSDC planners.

Some significant grants were awarded during the year to ‘The Men’s Shed’, Debenham Leisure Centre, the Roundabout Playgroup and the First Responders.

There have been some community led initiatives during the pandemic which included the animal stickers on the windows of the telephone kiosk and the ‘Plant for Hope’ scheme at the lakes where local people planted daffodils as a lasting memory for those who succumbed to Covid, but also as a beacon of hope for the future.

The telephone kiosk is having an electricity supply installed so it can be used for village events and to power the Christmas lights for the village tree on the green. This work is currently being scheduled with a local contractor.

As a result of feedback from the Neighbourhood Planning exercise a new Speed Indicator Devise has been installed in the village to alert drivers of their speed when entering the village. The sign is rotated around three sites in the village, Aspal Road, Ipswich Road and Gracechurch Street.

Another Neighbourhood Plan action that was highlighted was the need for a review of the play equipment available in the village. To facilitate that area the parish council has set up a new Play Strategy Working group that is engaging with local residents and involving the two schools and the Mens Shed in the design of the new play area that is being considered.

Some major works were undertaken in the churchyard during the year as the two largest Ash trees on the eastern boundary were found to be unsafe and needed to be removed. The remaining five Ash trees were crowned to ensure their ongoing safety.

Very recently the chair of the parish council, councillor Jane Baldwin, stood down for personal reasons. The Parish Council would like to record its thanks to Jane for leading us through a very difficult and challenging time. Her calmness and clear thinking steered us through admirably and we thank Jane for her dedication and professionalism.

Lastly, my fellow councillors should be thanked for their efforts over the period of the pandemic which has not been easy. Your support of the community is much appreciated. Thank you.

Richard Blackwell,

Vice Chair, Debenham Parish Council

24 May 2021.