

ANNUAL CHAIRMAN'S REPORT 2003/2004

By Denise Wesson

· INTRODUCTION

The Parish Council has now been 'up and running' for two years, and this is our second AGM. 2003 has been another busy year for the Parish Council, in which we have been building on our previous achievements.

As our former chairman, Martin Smith, mentioned in last years report, Grange Park Parish Council was formed following an order of the Secretary Of State, by taking lands that had previously been part of both Quinton and Courteenhall parishes to create the Parish of Grange Park. It is very rare for a village to have to start a Parish Council from scratch as they have usually been established for years. But as a new and, need I say, still developing village this is the challenge we have faced and although we have had support from various quarters, I will not pretend that it has been an easy task.

· PARISH COUNCIL

Last October, we were given the authority to expand the Parish Council and were able to co-opt a further 4 Councillors to join us, making a total of 12.

We are all volunteers, do not receive any payment and the majority of us fit our Parish Council duties around full time jobs and families. Most of us had no previous Parish Council experience so we have had to learn for the most part as we go along. We give our time and commitment willingly and as we are all residents of Grange Park, we have of course, a vested interest in helping this community to grow and prosper. We are here to make informed decisions on behalf of the community as a whole, but to help achieve this we need and value your ideas, input and support.

All Parish Council and committee meetings are public meetings and there is an open session at the beginning of each to give you the opportunity to express your views, raise issues of concern or just come along to see what goes on. We would be delighted to see more of you at future meetings. Do please be aware however that as a Parish Council, we are bound by certain regulations and protocol. This means that we can't make decisions ad hoc or on the hoof but need to properly consider issues at the appropriate committee meeting. We do however aim to respond as quickly as we can to any concerns, which you raise.

To help with this process, myself and the other committee chairs now meet weekly with Jas Meadows our Parish Clerk so that we can be made aware of any urgent matters and prepare for the Council meetings. This has proved helpful in not only keeping on top of how issues are progressing but also improving communication links with Jas who can then keep us better informed.

Jas as you may be aware works primarily from home but will be fixing a regular time to be in the Community Centre to meet with any parishioners who would like to speak to her in person or inspect plans received etc. The next newsletter due to be published in May will have the details.

On a more sombre note, it was with great sadness on 1st June that we learnt of the sudden death of George Smith, a friend and mentor to me. George was our District Councillor and Chair of Woodland View Governors, as well as a great font of knowledge for the Parish Council to call upon. He is greatly missed and I know I often think about him and when in a dilemma think, "what would George do". We all have fond memories of George.

· COMMUNITY CENTRE

Since the opening of the Community Centre last year we have welcomed two new employees on board, Peter Hawkrige and Tracy Curtis. One of the highlights of the year was the official opening of the Centre by the Duke of Gloucester last May and we then held our own open day in June set up by our then community development worker Vanda. The open day was a great success with stands from various groups who use the Community Centre. Since then we have said good-bye to Vanda and a warm hello to Sara Kennedy our new community development worker. Sara has jumped straight in at the deep end and is currently working hard on lots of projects including this years Community Centre open day in conjunction with Mark Thomas the head-teacher at Woodland View Primary School. Sara regularly feeds back to our community development committee but I don't want to go into too much detail, as she will be talking to us a bit later!

We have been encouraged by the number and range of bookings so far, which have included before and after school groups, youth clubs, scouts, the W.I. and numerous fitness groups in addition to private parties and functions. The Multi Use Games Area (MUGA) is now also available for hire and we look forward to welcoming new bookings.

We advertise our bookings timetable in the quarterly issue of the Grange Park News and on our website. Sara is also looking into encouraging users in the less busy times such as during the day. Current ideas that we are looking at to stimulate new business for the community centre include a feedback questionnaire for hirers, an on-line booking enquiry form which is now available on our web-site and a Community Centre user forum. The booking desk opening times are Mon, Wed and Friday from 9.00am until 11.45 am will be advertised in the newsletter, as well as on the notice board and web-site. You can call in in person at these times or alternatively leave a message on the answer-phone or use our online bookings enquiry form.

The obtrusive lighting rig in the main hall was removed when the £10,000 soundproofing was installed. This was a major expense for the parish but absolutely essential. The feedback we have had on the acoustics in the main hall since the soundproofing was installed has been very positive. The bar is still under discussion as we initially had a brewery interested but more recently they have been less keen as it would only be an occasional bar and would not generate enough business to make it economic for them. The outlay for us to fully equip the bar ourselves would be considerable so we are currently looking at alternatives, one being a company that will come in and provide a bar as and when we need it. Many of you may have seen Wootton's lovely new centre and bar. At the present time we are unable to have a similar arrangement, as we have no dedicated bar room or lounge. To open a bar regularly would prevent hiring out the main hall at the same time for other users so we would be turning away current bookings. Unfortunately, as the Parish Council wasn't formed at the time, we had no say in the design of the community centre so we work with the facilities we have been given as best we can.

· **PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT**

As far as our planning committee was concerned, the groundbreaking news for the year was that IKEA withdrew their application for a site on Grange Park. I am not sure how well known this is - but we were one of 6 applications in all that IKEA made, however it was Grange Park that was picked up by the press. The planning committee regularly reviews planning applications for Grange Park, however we don't get the final say contrary to popular belief. As SNC is the planning authority GPPC are only able to make observations and recommendations to be taken into consideration, as does any parishioner. Also under our planning committee remit is the district centre which is due to open shortly. However, I believe our district councillor Sally Townsend is going to go into more detail about what's going on in the district centre later, so I won't steal her thunder. However I'm sure you will be pleased to know that amongst numerous future developments in the pipeline, planning approval is being sought to build a village pub. If all goes smoothly we are told that it could be open by Xmas so watch this space!

Did you see the advertisement recently in the Chronicle & Echo by Dr Hillier & Partners for employment at the new surgery to be based at Grange Park? Having spoken briefly to the surgery from what I understand, if you are already registered at the Blisworth surgery you will automatically be transferred, which is good news for us. Look out for an update from the Practice manager in the next issue of the Grange Park News.

As many will be aware we, the Parish Council, do not as yet own all our open spaces and roads. The 'hand-over' process for this does take some time. To begin with the builders or contracted builders build and maintain these areas until they are ready for hand-over. Once they believe they are ready they meet with South Northants Council. Once South Northants Council are happy with the condition of the piece to be handed over both parties sign an agreement whereby the contractor will keep and maintain the piece of land for a year. After this year and once South Northants Council are happy, the land is handed over to the Parish Council. This year of maintenance allows for growing, settling and a time to ascertain any issues that may occur which the contractor has to rectify

We receive lots of correspondence on the conditions of roads and traffic issues; I know that District Councillor Sally Townsend will be covering this.

· **COUNCIL TAX - PARISH PRECEPT**

There has been a few enquires regarding the Parish Council part of the Council tax. When putting forward

our precept for the Parish, which forms part of your Council Tax, we have to look at what the Parish Council needs to run the Parish for the next year. We are governed by the auditors and we are obliged to only ask for what we need for the following year. We are not allowed to add in any extra and we have to justify all expenditure needed and auditors check this - this is major part of our audit. If we have a major plan for example saying buying some land we would have to consult with residents, if this would be a major increase in precept.

SNC reclaim this money by adjusting the precept element of your council tax and work out how many of each band property there are and apportion accordingly. If you would like an explanation of the council tax then you should write to SNC. The parish council has also written to SNC for an explanation and it would be your interest to write individually.

· **FINANCE**

Moving to Finance, we have not received the end of year bank statements but as an overview at the present time, our major costs relate to staffing and upkeep of the Community Centre. The CC and Parish money are in separate bank accounts to allow for ease of accounting if there were to be any future changes to the community centre running, but for precept the money needed for each is requested together. Our precept request for the next year was £72,500. Staffing costs make up the bulk of this as we have our clerk, caretaker, bookings clerk and key-holder as well as our community development worker. The next big expense is the community centre running costs, although now we have been open for nearly a year we have a better understanding of the income and outgoings.

Any significant increases would require us to ask parishioners support of any scheme.

· **COMMUNICATIONS**

Moving on to communications, we now have a regular newsletter, which is distributed on a quarterly basis, 'The Grange Park News'. This includes updates from the all the Parish Council committees, Woodland View Primary along with other local groups as well as local news and information. To help fund this we offer advertising space for local businesses and services which has proved very popular. I must thank our editor, and its here I must confess a declaration of interest. Thank you to Julien for all his hard work on the newsletter (for those of you that don't know Julien is my husband). Also I must give him big thanks for the updating and maintaining of the village web site. We have had lots of really good feedback on the newsletter and web site and Julien regularly updates the web with interesting articles or tit bits of information he has gleaned!

· **THANK YOU**

At this point I would like to thank all the Councillors and Parish Council staff for their support throughout this year especially during some personal difficulties of my own. Many have gone the extra mile and attended extraordinary meetings for the greater good and I believe that if we continue to support each other and our staff we can work well as a team and achieve greater heights in building a community that people are proud to be a part of. I would like extend my thanks particularly to the chairs of the committees and the staff working party for making the extra time recently to keep things moving and handle pressing issues as they arise.

· **THE FUTURE**

As is the case in so many things we do, the future is what is important, as is learning from past experiences. Organisations and their management often get criticised for decisions and are questioned regularly on their logic, and the impact on individuals and surroundings. We must and will continue to work as a team listening to our Parishioners and demanding the highest standards from each other. The old saying is that Rome wasn't built in day, I would agree, but comment that the foundations have been dug and building work is well on the way. I often wonder, "How do other parishes deal with this?" then I remember that if they have new developments it's generally only a few houses, not a whole village!

We have many things to look forward to including the opening of our new District Centre, Arts projects and Foxfield Park to name a few. We have lots to keep us busy including encouraging teams to use Foxfield Park and the Bowling Green and we appreciate any help offered.

I am sure we can all build upon the work that has already been done to make Grange Park a real village, with

a sense of community that we can all be proud to live in.

I look forward to another year and seeing our plans and village mature.

Denise Wesson
Chairman