

Half-year review of West Hill Parish Council Activities for 2023/24

Approved WHPC Meeting 5th December 2023 Agenda Item: 23/370

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.

The first six months of the 2023-24 Council were dominated by the results of the local government elections in May. In West Hill, only three candidates stood for seven seats. This meant that, as per the rules, there was no contested election in West Hill and the three candidates were returned unopposed. Many other Town and Parish Councils experienced similar results, with some Councils even having no elected Councillors. West Hill Parish Council had survived – but was in danger of becoming inquorate at any time. A quorum is the minimum number of Councillors required to conduct the business of the Council – in West Hill's case, it must have three Councillors for a quorum. With only three Councillors there was no spare capacity so should any Councillor be absent from a meeting, that meeting could not take place. Clearly this was unsustainable. When one of the three Councillors resigned in July, the Council became inquorate and Ward Member Cllr Jess Bailey was appointed temporarily to enable the Council to fulfill its legal obligations and keep running. Two new Councillors were co-opted at an Extraordinary Meeting of the Council on 20th July, which enabled Cllr Bailey to step down.

The recruitment campaign continued to seek candidates willing to be co-opted to fill the remaining vacancies. In the meantime, all but the most essential tasks of Council business had stopped. By October, two more vacancies had been filled by co-option. I thank co-opted Cllrs, Trevor Ingram, Stanley Paulo, Andrew Gorton and Francis Pullman for putting themselves forward to join the Parish Council team.

Following the recent resignation of Neil Bromley, there are two vacancies but with five of the seven seats filled, the Parish Council is in a much better position moving forward. This position has been further strengthened by retaining the Clerk, who had been due to leave the Council.

What has WHPC achieved in the 6 months from May 2023?

A large part of the Council's work during this period has focused on recruiting and training the newly co-opted Councillors. They come from a variety of professional backgrounds and none had previous Council experience. Considerable effort has been invested in induction and training in areas like team working, action planning and being a Councillor.

Although WHPC does not own any land or provide services, there are many activities that keep the Council busy on a daily basis:

- duties as an employer
- playpark – maintenance, safety and improving the equipment
- liaising with East Devon District Council and Devon County Council on services they provide eg highways, dog waste bins, streetscene
- monitoring footpaths and public rights of way
- responding to planning applications as a consultee, engaging with residents, speaking at appeals and planning committees
- providing vehicle activated speed signs and data analysis to improve safety
- liaising with stakeholders in the village – school, village hall trustees, RBL, community speedwatch, church
- civic duties for annual Remembrance events and state occasions
- providing grants to village organisations
- liaising with the police
- finance – budget setting, monitoring income and expenses and variances
- being community representatives on external bodies eg Airport Consultative Cttee
- signposting residents to external agencies where appropriate
- communicating with residents via the website
- monitoring developments with the draft East Devon Local Plan and making sure residents are kept informed
- working with the village hall trustees to make further progress on the proposed pedestrian access path

All of the above, and more, have continued during the last six-month period, despite Council resources being severely limited.

As most residents will be aware, West Hill has been the target of three major planning applications:

- 22/2533/MOUT – land north of Oak Road: outline application for the erection of 23 dwellings with all matters reserved save for formation of vehicular and pedestrian access.
- 23/1143/MFUL – land south of Windmill Lane: the erection of 36 dwellings (50% of which will be provided as affordable housing), formation of access, open space and associated infrastructure.
- 23/0727/MOUT – land north of Eastfield: the Erection of up to 30 dwellings with all matters reserved apart from means of access.

The Parish Council has monitored and responded to these, with Councillors speaking at East Devon Planning Committee meetings whenever possible and ensuring residents are notified of updates via WHPC meetings, website and noticeboards. The Oak Road application has gone to appeal and Councillors will be forwarding comments to the Inspector and hope to speak at the Hearing when the timetable is published. The Eastfield application was approved by the East Devon Planning Committee in October.

Future plans

The Parish Council has begun to consider its plans for the Council Term 2023-2027. Councillors are committed to the Council's Vision:

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

and 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

The Council has created a number of Working Groups and Task + Finish Groups to support its activities and also appointed representatives on outside bodies such as the Airport Consultative Committee. Some working groups will focus on "operational" matters such as Finance, HR and Policy development to maintain robust Governance. Whilst others groups such as the Playpark Group and Road Safety Group will develop plans for projects and initiatives to maintain and enhance the village and village life. The Council is keen to involve working with residents and community consultation during the next 6 months will be an important part of that.

Half Year Financial Report

The Council's Half-Year financial position was reviewed at the Council meeting on 7th November. The Council remains in a strong financial position. The headlines are listed below:

- Total receipts for Apr-Sep2023 were £71,132.86. The full year precept £56,875 has been received plus additional income of £14,257.86. This includes £13,368.12 Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) Monies which includes overdue payments for 2022. No further income is expected this financial year.
- Total payments for Apr-Sep 2023 were £26,659.89. Adjusted to exclude VAT payments of £1,038.71 which can be reclaimed, £25,621.18 this represents around 45% of the annual Precept. No major concerns regarding planned expenditure have been identified, however WHPC is expected to incur a sizeable item of unplanned expenditure. This relates to additional charges levied by the External Auditor for their work in processing a resident's objection to the Council's Annual Governance and Accounting Return. The extent of the additional charges are not yet known, however the External Auditor fees are charged at £355/hr+vat. A challenge to the 2021-2022 return incurred an additional fee of £1,597.50+vat. These costs are outside the Parish Council's control. Underspends, contingency and reserves contingency are available to meet this cost if required.
- Total Funds held @ 30th September 2023 were £154,811.44.

Decisions

1. Councillors to note this review
2. Councillors to agree, if appropriate, publication of the review on the WHPC website