

Chedworth Parish Council

Chairman's Report to the Annual Parish Meeting

March 28th, 2011

In 2004, my first annual report to the Annual Parish Meeting noted that the Parish Council had responded to 96 Planning Applications. For this year's report (my last) the figure is 40 – and some of these were tree-work notifications. We have also contributed to one Appeal process.

So if we are not spending our precious time looking at plans, what has kept Parish Councillors so busy over the past year?

The short answer is that we have been working on a number of fronts with the overall objective of keeping this community sustainable and resilient in the face of external pressures.

One of the highlights of the year was the adoption and modification of the former telephone box at the bottom of Hemplands Hill. Now known as the eXbox it serves as the village library and lost property depot. It is also probably the smallest Parish Council Office in the land and a home for life-saving resuscitation equipment.

The story of Chedworth's defibrillators has been remarkable. The original suggestion came from Dr Vanessa Sissons in response to the question "what can we do with a redundant telephone box?" Early research soon revealed just how valuable community defibrillators can be – particularly when the local Ambulance Service is effectively out of range - and how well-established are the partnerships and processes involved in achieving this potentially life-saving resource.

The project to install a constantly-accessible, reliable, user-friendly defibrillator in the eXbox caught the community's imagination. Money for two defibrillators was raised in miraculously short order, thanks to the generosity of two anonymous individuals, the Chedworth Oil Club, the NFU Mutual Community Giving Fund and all those who supported Pete Heaps' fund-raising golf day. I would like to thank all donors, local craftsmen who installed the equipment, and our partners from the Community Heartbeat Trust and the Great Western Ambulance Service, all of whom made the project happen. Funding for a third defibrillator has reached £1035 – only £615 left to go.

The Parish Council, and Tom Watt in particular, has overseen the upgrading of Chedworth's football facilities. The purchase of new goal posts and nets, with refurbishment of the linemarking equipment and the shed it lives in, have all been achieved at no cost to the taxpayer thanks to funding from the Football Foundation, Gloucestershire Playing Fields Association and many hours of unpaid labour.

We have also managed to undertake long-overdue maintenance work on the Parish Council-owned boundaries at the Grass Keep Field. Again we have received significant assistance from volunteers; the Cotswold Voluntary Wardens have already given us around 100 hours' free labour on scrub clearance and the Diggers have planted up a new hedge with stock donated by the Woodland Trust and the Tree Council.

Probably the single most worrying obstacle to the sustainability of our community is the lack of a balanced housing stock. The Taylor Review of Rural Economy and Affordable Housing, published in July 2008, sees rural England at a crossroads where it must now create attractive communities in which people want to and can afford to live.

To quote: "This country's rural communities cannot stand still. Change is inevitable whether development takes place or not." Villages such as ours are protected from development by the provisions of the District Council's Local Development Framework but, according to Matthew Taylor, "face becoming increasingly exclusive communities of the retired and of wealthy commuters travelling ever longer distances to work, losing their services like schools and shops, and with local jobs either lost, or serviced by people commuting in from larger towns."

Taylor's overarching recommendation for achieving rural sustainability is to "enable *community-led* affordable rural housing programmes in smaller settlements that will spur employment and enterprise and the development of community capital".

We are fortunate to have the Chedworth Community Land Trust, under the leadership of John Robson and supported by his team of Directors, which has been working hard to provide Affordable Housing for the community and is recognised at Government level as a robust and effective vehicle for achieving Taylor's vision. We must show our appreciation for their efforts.

The change of Government during 2010 and the realisation that Britain is broke has already affected us here. Gloucestershire County Council has to save £108 million over the next four years and huge cuts in services are planned. Fortunately we are not affected by all cuts; our Youth Club is entirely autonomous and self-supporting, as is our Cheery Club, thanks to community capital and volunteer effort, and the eXbox book and c.d. exchange will soften the effects of the demise of the mobile library. However major cuts to the County Highways road maintenance and improvement budgets are inevitable and Parishes have been asked to rise to the challenge of taking more responsibility in these areas. In response the PC agreed to make a hefty hike in its annual precept (the money raised as part of the Council Tax for spending within the Parish) to cover winter road treatments and other highways operations that Gloucestershire Highways will no longer pay for.

In his speech launching the “Big Society” concept in July 2010, David Cameron talked about “a huge culture change, where people don’t always turn to officials, local authorities or central government for answers to the problems they face but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities”. I believe Chedworth is better placed than many communities in responding to the opportunities that the Localism agenda will bring and I hope that a newly-elected Parish Council team will continue to keep us there.

Thank you to the PC team for their time, labour and support and to our Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer, Elizabeth Broad, who has continued to provide a diligent, professional and efficient service to this Council throughout a difficult personal time.