

Bickenhill & Marston Green Parish Council

Chairman's Report

I feel this might be an opportunity to look at the role the Parish Council within the community.

What is a Parish Council?

A Parish Council is a local authority that makes decisions on behalf of the people in the parish. It is the level government closest to the community, with the district authority (Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council) above it in the hierarchy.

As it is the authority closest to the people, parish councils are invariably the first place people will go with concerns or ideas. The council is funded through a sum of money called a 'precept' this is a separate charge which is added to, and collected along with, existing council tax. The amount of charge is something that the parish council has to decide for itself and depends on what services and facilities it wants to provide.

Bickenhill and Marston Parish Council

The council consists of 12 Councillors who are elected or co-opted each councillor represents a ward within the parish boundaries. Councillors are all volunteers and the position is unpaid. In addition to representing the various wards, many councillors sit on external committees relating to issues which affect our parish. For example, we have representatives on airport, conservation and planning committees. We constantly monitor planning applications and robustly fight any inappropriate developments.

The Parish Clerk is an employee of the council. The Clerk is also the Proper Officer to the council who is responsible for implementing the council's decisions and to ensure all legal requirements are met. The position is key to the day to day running of the council's business.

The council also employs two ground staff who report to the clerk.

The Parish Council is well aware of the current financial strains on our residents. For the past five years the Parish Council, with careful planning and good housekeeping, has been able to maintain and in some cases improve the work done on behalf of the residents within the parish. It is important to note this has been achieved with no more than cost of living increases in the precept.

For example, in 2015/16, the Millennium Wood adjacent to Coleshill Heath Road and Bickenhill Road was unlawfully occupied by a group of travellers. When they left the site there was a major clean-up operation needed. Some of the costs involved in cleansing and repairing the damage to the site were met by SMBC (they removed rubbish and supported the Parish Council by working with the police to remove the travellers). This left the Parish Council with unbudgeted expenditure to repair and secure the site. The council covered these initial costs from reserves.

The parish council, as a priority, decided to secure the wood and other vulnerable targets within the Parish. Lockable height restriction gates were installed. The council budgeted to cover the costs over a two-year period. This was achieved with a minimum increase the precept contribution made by each household.

Three years ago the Parish Council agreed to start a project to install and maintain festive decorations during the Christmas period on the main roads through Marston Green. Had the Parish Council decided to complete and pay for this project in year one, it would have been necessary to seek a substantial increase in the precept. Instead the parish council achieved this by purchasing the decorations over a three-year period. In year two, to keep costs down, we asked local businesses if they would support us in the project. I am delighted to report that with their contribution we were able to fund phase two of the project. Finally, we will be in a position to complete the task for Christmas 2017. We were able to do this without having to increase the precept to cover cost.

In 2016, the Parish Council have continued to keep their expenditure within their means and have kept the precept as low as possible, whilst continuing to maintain and improve facilities within the parish.

The Council continues to support and sponsor important events, some examples being'

1. Remembrance Day Service in Garden of Memory
2. Hanging Baskets, a joint promotion with Gardening Club
3. Christmas Lights
4. Christmas Trees in Bickenhill and Marston Green
5. Memory Tree, Marston Green
6. Bickenhill Village, Maintaining Church Grounds

Our Ground staff Nikki and Robert are responsible for the planters and formal gardens in Marston Green, as well as maintaining our burial ground to a high standard. Their duties also include work in the Recreation Ground. I am pleased to report we have received many compliments for the work that they do. I would also like to thank our Clerk, Carole for the great job she does for Bickenhill and Marston Green Parish Council. Finally, it would be remiss of me not to thank each and every Parish Councilor. They give their time freely to contribute to the affairs of our parish and it is a credit to all of them that we have such a good team.