

# Sarratt Parish Council

## Annual Report

### April 2021

## Chair's Report

*Sarah Dobson*

Welcome to the Sarratt Parish Council Annual Report for the year April 2020 – March 2021.

Once again we are publishing our Annual Parish Report on-line. Something many of us felt was inconceivable 12 months ago when we expected both the UK and the rest of the world would be through the coronavirus pandemic by now and life would be back to 'normal'. But with restrictions still in force, Sarratt Parish Council has taken the decision to again publish this only as an online document. We are however pleased to be holding our Annual Parish Meeting that we had to cancel last year, as a Zoom meeting, which Parishioners are invited to attend, and hope that in April 2022 it will once more be a face-to-face event.

The restrictions and impact of the last 12 months have been something most of us have never experienced before. It has brought great sorrow for those who have lost loved ones and financial hardship for those that have lost jobs or seen their businesses struggle or close. But if we also try to find the positives, it has also made us appreciate the simple things in life – our families and our friends, even though this has often been via Zoom! It's also made us appreciate the world we live in, and as residents of Sarratt, many of us have been enormously grateful to live in such a beautiful corner of the UK, where we

have been able to walk freely in the stunning countryside that surrounds us.

Throughout this last year we have continued to come together and strengthen as a community, one which we should all be very proud of, and one which as the Parish Council, we are proud to support. Hopefully with the success of the vaccination programme and the easing of restrictions, there is now 'a light at the end of the tunnel'.

In turning now to this summary of the last year, you will find in the pages that follow reports from our Parish Clerk and the Lead Councillors for Policy & Resources, Planning, the Environment and Highways, but first some key points to note from the past year.

As many of you are aware, our Parish Clerk, Caroline Owen has sadly been ill for much of this year. Caroline made a brilliant start in her new role when she took over from Janice Dawes in September 2019 and I know has found the impact of her illness hugely frustrating in terms of being your Parish Clerk. That said we're delighted that she is now well enough to return to work. She is currently working from home and will hopefully be back in the Parish Office soon.

In August we appointed Joe Brownsell to the role of Parish Warden, a post that had been vacant for some time. Joe has already made a significant impact around the Parish and we are delighted to have him as part of the team.

We sadly said farewell to three of our Councillors – Dave Rees, Ant Soothill and

Coral Bloom, with a total of over 50 years' service to the Parish Council between them.

Whilst we will miss their support hugely and wish them all the best in the future, we also look forward to welcoming new faces to the Council in May.

We will also be saying farewell to Marilyn Butler as our District Councillor in May, and would like to extend our thanks and appreciation for the many years of service and support Marilyn has given to Sarratt Parish Council and the residents of Sarratt.

Financially we completed the year within budget and were able to support a number of important projects for the Parish as well as confirm grants for seven organisations within our community. Councillors also made a unanimous decision to hold our budget flat for the forthcoming 21/22 financial year in recognition of the fact many Parishioners may be facing financial difficulties as a result of the pandemic. We were the only Parish in Three Rivers District to do this.

Unfortunately, the restrictions imposed by COVID has delayed the progress of Three Rivers District Council's (TRDC's) Local Plan and consultation on our own Neighbourhood Plan. However, the Neighbourhood Plan Working Group have still been able to make good progress on its policies and the Design Statement for the Parish which they hope to consult the Parishioners of Sarratt on this Summer.

We have also made good progress on a number of other fronts including the Environment agenda, such as development of a 10-year Woodland Management Plan, and the management of a wide range of

issues that arise on an almost daily basis including fly tipping, management of our Greens, Commonlands, trees and the River Chess.

A good relationship has also been established with the Hertfordshire County Council Highways team on planned roadworks, the reporting of potholes, and importantly action on HGVs and speeding through the Parish.

Finally, I would like to thank the Parish Clerk and the Parish Councillors for all their help this year and whilst Caroline has been off work, my fellow Councillors, as unpaid volunteers, have stepped up to take on more responsibility and more work than they would normally do, including writing the minutes for our monthly Council meetings! I would also like to say thanks to Joe Brownsell, our new Parish Warden and our contractors, particularly Andrew Whitewood and (the other) Joe Brownsell for all their help this year, who often responded at short notice to address incidents in the Parish. We have a strong team and hope that despite the current challenging times, we will continue to serve our Parish well as we get back to 'normal'.

## Parish Clerk's Report

The last year has been an incredibly difficult one having contracted Covid-19 in March 2020, and spending time in hospital, and I am still suffering with the lasting side effects.

However, over the last month or so I have seen a vast improvement in my health, and I am now back to my normal working hours. I am still working from home and envisage this will be for the foreseeable future. In the meantime, I will be responding to Council emails from home and, Councillors Thorp and Dobson will continue to check the office for answerphone messages and post.

I am excited to be back, and I hope the next year will be a healthy and productive year for the whole community.

I would like to express my sincere thanks and appreciation to all the Parish Councillors who have worked remarkably hard to ensure the smooth running of the office whilst I have been away.

water'. As our Parish Warden, Joe is covering a wide range of duties ranging from reporting litter and fly tipping, to helping maintain the footpaths, hedgerows and signs around the Parish. A great addition to the team!



We said goodbye to Dave Rees and Ant Soothill, two of our longest serving Councillors.

Dave Rees has been a Sarratt Parish Councillor for 34 years - an outstanding commitment, and one for which we will always be grateful. He has been a huge source of expertise on everything to do with planning and has represented SPC on the KGV Committee and the Days Charity. We will very much miss Dave's passion and enthusiasm for the community of Sarratt on the Council.



Ant Soothill has been with SPC for 14 years, and a previous Chair. Most recently Ant has been our Lead Councillor for Planning, and the SPC representative on the Sarratt Village Hall Committee and the Neighbourhood Plan Working Group. His 'wise counsel' on all matters will be greatly missed, but we are delighted that he will

remain a member of the hugely important Neighbourhood Plan Working Group.



We also said farewell to Coral Bloom, who was our Lead on Sustainability, but look forward to staying in touch through her work with the Sustainable Sarratt group.



### OUR NEW WEBSITE

In 2020 Sarratt Parish Council launched its new website. Meeting agendas and minutes can be found here, together with our policies and other useful information.

<https://sarrattparishcouncil.gov.uk>

USUAL Office opening hours:

Monday - Friday 09:30 - 13:30

These are subject to change under the current COVID restrictions, but you can always contact us on 01923 262035 or via email at: [sarratt\\_parish@btconnect.com](mailto:sarratt_parish@btconnect.com)

### WELCOMES & FAREWELLS

We welcomed Joe Brownsell as our new Parish Warden. Joe joined us in August 2020 and has taken to the role like a 'duck to

# Financial Summary

*Peter Thorp*

2020/21 was a good year for SPC financially. A strange thing to say, perhaps, but the pandemic and accompanying lockdowns led to an inevitable reduction in spending and as a result, a strengthening of the Council's financial position.

The Council ended 2020/21 in a positive financial position and was able to carry out a number of extra maintenance jobs towards the end of the year when it became clear finances would allow. This related primarily to footpaths and gates which had all received higher traffic than normal with people travelling to Sarratt, when permitted, to walk in the wonderful countryside.

A notable cost during the year was the removal of the big oak tree on The Green, opposite The Boot, as it was split and dangerous. This cost £1500 and a great job was made of removing it and creating a three-tiered bench from the trunk.

One of the most difficult aspects of the year was the absence of the Parish Clerk, Caroline Owen, on long term sickness leave. It has been a hugely stressful time for her, but we are pleased that following a phased return she is now back to her normal hours but will be working from home for the time being. We are delighted to have her back on both personal and professional bases.

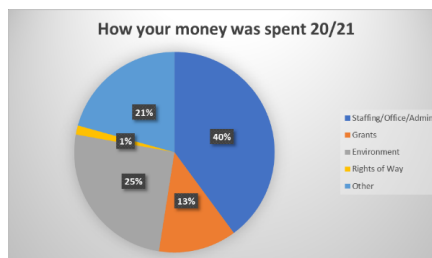
Since September the Clerk's role has been shared between a small number of Councillors who managed the office and taught themselves pretty quickly to carry out all manner of requirements such as year-end calculations and external audits!

Thanks are due to the Councillors who made great efforts to ensure the Council operated efficiently and legally during this period, all on a voluntary basis, meaning we haven't had to spend any funds on temporary cover.

We are well placed in 2021/2 to achieve our objectives and we are pleased to be the only Council in the area to keep our budget (known as the precept) at the same level as last year (other than a very small increase per household due to there being slightly fewer houses in Sarratt to share it between than last year). The Council felt this was the least we could do to recognise what a difficult time financially so many people are having.

FINANCIAL SUMMARY 2020/21	
<b>INCOME</b>	
Precept plus other income	£120k
Exceptional Income	£10k
<b>TOTAL INCOME</b>	<b>£130k</b>
<b>EXPENDITURE</b>	
<b>RESERVES</b>	
General (50% of Precept)	£48k
Specific earmarked Reserves	£70k
<b>TOTAL RESERVES</b>	<b>£118k</b>

GRANTS 2021/22	
Sarratt Care	£2,000
Days Almshouse Charity	£1,000
King George V	£4,000
Spotlight	£380
Sarratt School	£500
SCCF Community Garden	£750
Church Graveyard Maintenance	£2,585
<b>Total</b>	<b>£11,215</b>



# Planning

*Anthony Soothill*

Despite Covid-19 lockdowns, we saw no reduction in planning applications last year.

The Parish Council, as a statutory consultee, reviewed on average six applications each month, matching our long-run average. The majority of Council's recommendations on planning applications were subsequently endorsed by Three Rivers District Council (TRDC) as the Local Planning Authority and we were successful with every application we challenged and called into the TRDC Planning Committee.

We did though see an impact on enforcement actions, where TRDC were unable to make site visits due to Covid restrictions.

Coronavirus aside, the work on planning has seen a shift in the last few years. There are now more, simpler, 'Permitted Development' applications to review, and also a small but growing number of more complex applications particularly as pressure to build new houses in the Green Belt rises.

This will inevitably continue as TRDC struggles to find space for the central government target of 9,600 additional houses across the District by 2036. It is clear that to meet their target, Green Belt will need to be lifted somewhere in the District.

In May-July 2021, TRDC is due to publish its consultation on its new Local Plan, now not due to be implemented until mid-2023. We will then know what housing allocation target is planned for the Parish for the next 15 years and what sites are being considered for development.

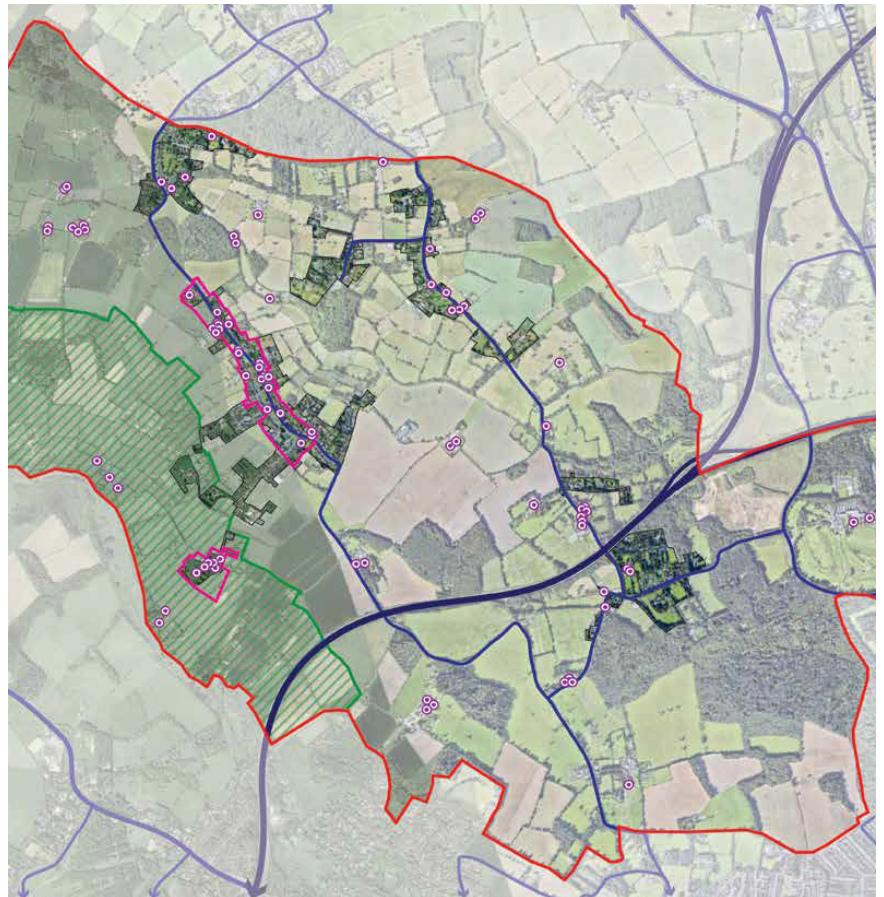
Meanwhile, the Parish Council sponsored independent working group, set up to produce a Neighbourhood Plan is aiming to share its draft planning policies in its first public consultation in early summer 2021, after its plans to do so last year were impacted by the Covid restrictions.

Whilst the Neighbourhood Plan timetable has been put back by both Covid restrictions and delays to TRDC's new Local Plan, the aim is to implement it in early 2022 following a referendum. It is now more important than ever that everyone engages in the Neighbourhood Plan and votes to adopt it to protect our community from inappropriate development.

Meanwhile, some of the work completed by the Neighbourhood Plan Working Group has already been adopted by the Parish Council, specifically the new Sarratt Design Code. Bringing together all aspects of architecture and planning it aims to provide a comprehensive set of design guidelines for both new builds and development of existing properties to preserve the unique character of our rural setting.

The new Sarratt Design Code can be found on the SPC website: <https://sarrattparishcouncil.gov.uk/resources/Sarratt-Design-Codes.pdf>

The next year may be one of the most significant in Sarratt's planning history. Please engage and support the Neighbourhood Plan to help maintain our Parish as we face into that uncertain future.



# Environment

*Nick Mortimer and John Rugg*

The Parish Council allocates approximately 38% of its annual budget to maintaining and improving the Environment, including our local woodlands, commons, footpaths and bridleways. For over 30 years the dedicated team of Wildlife Volunteers have actively supported this work. Thank you to Dawn and Brenda and your team. They are currently seeking additional volunteers to join the group. So please get in touch with them if you can help.

During the year woodland management specialists from Herts Countryside Management team were commissioned to assess our woodlands and produce a draft 10-year Commons and Woodland Management Plan. The plan is required to apply for a new Forestry Commission grant under the terms of the emerging Environment Land Management Scheme (ELMS). The next stage is a series of walks through the woodland, once Covid restrictions allow, with volunteer groups, including the Sustainable Sarratt Group and the Middlesex & Wildlife Trust to ensure proper consideration is given to the protection of flora and fauna and how to incorporate climate change suggestions.

It is encouraging to note that the emerging Three Rivers Tree Strategy Plan for their land includes a recommendation whereby builders and developers are required to plant trees, and that this is followed up to ensure the trees have been planted.

An Oak Tree on The Green sadly had to be removed followed 10 months of work by the Parish Council who commissioned two specialists to report on any identified dangers.



Unfortunately, the District tree officers who authorise tree work in the Conservation Area were precluded from visiting the site due to their Covid workplace restrictions. Eventually a decision to remove the tree was agreed following a third specialist report and the Parish Council were appreciative of the support provided by the

Head of Environment for TRDC who was able to attend the site.

A bench has been made from the largest part of the trunk which is being used by many on a daily basis.



Work undertaken during the year by the Wildlife Volunteers greatly improved the water quality and surrounding habitat of Morton's Pond and a new duck house is on order for the Cricketers Pond thanks to donations and funds raised by local RSPB supporters.

Unfortunately, the plans for a widely supported idea of a Christmas Tree on the Green had to be shelved due to difficulties around power for fairy lights, but work is continuing to see how this can be achieved in future years.

The Parish faces continuing problems with some residents and visitors parking private cars or vans on the Greens, and delivery vehicles, builders vehicles, and occasionally building materials, damaging the edges of the Greens, Commons and verges that is both illegal and often results in Council funds being diverted to make repairs.

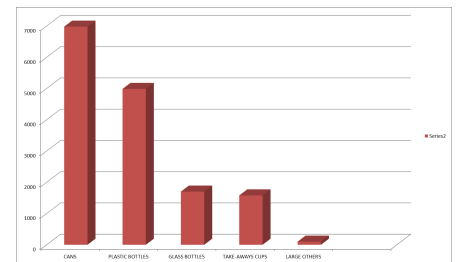
The River Chess has again suffered distressing problems with pollution from sewage outflows from Chesham and a public meeting held in Sarratt was well attended by residents and Councillors that has led to some promising news regarding changes that will be introduced to overcome the problem. Sadly, there is no quick fix and the promised engineering work is being closely monitored to ensure it takes place, including support from the River Chess Association.

Thames Water have recently issued their Chalk Stream Catchment Plan to commit further funding to make significant improvements and implement protection schemes over the next ten years.



*River Chess at Sarratt Bottom (photo: Peter Smiley)*

The Litter Picking Group now has about 15 members meeting once a month targeting different areas of the Parish. Covid has knocked this back, however individual members are still going out on their own as part of their 'daily walks'. The champion of this must be mentioned by name, Michael Groom, who has now picked up literally thousands of cans, bottles and assorted detritus all of which is recycled through his own bins.



The Rural Watch scheme is still actively reporting fly tipping which has increased during the Covid outbreak.

Our new Parish Warden, Joe Brownsell, has had a fantastic first year completing all the work allocated to him and will now be refurbishing the bus stops, pond railings and other large fixtures over the Summer.

Thanks must also go to our two main contractors, Andrew Whitewood and Joe Brownsell (another one) without whom many parts of our local environment would not look as good and be such a pleasure to be in.

Finally, Hertfordshire has published a Rights of Way improvement plan that will result in upgrading and improving some of our local footpaths. In addition, the Parish Council have submitted suggestions for a series of local cycle routes compiled by Councillor Simon Diggins for incorporation into the District and County Strategic plans to extend and publish more widely, safe riding routes in order to encourage the use of cycles in place of motor cars.

# Highways

*Simon Diggins*

I would like to start by thanking my predecessor, John Gell, for his work on the Highways agenda over many years, and I'm delighted that he has agreed to continue to provide his support as Deputy Councillor for Highways.

In the last year Highways' activity has focused mainly on three areas;

- Supporting residents to get repairs to the roads.
- Working with Herts County Council and our local Councillors, at both District and County level, to address some of the recurrent highways' problems, such as flood spots.
- Beginning to think about how through using our highways differently and better, we can contribute to reducing our carbon impact and support nature.

On the first two, we are beginning to get some successes. Can I please encourage all residents to use the Herts County Council portal to report Highway faults via: <https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/services/highways-roads-and-pavements/report-a-problem/report-a-highway-fault/what-type-of-fault-are-you-reporting.aspx>

It does work and you usually get a response back within 24 hours. The fault may not be repaired quickly, depending on priorities, but cumulative fault reporting is noted and acted upon. As a result, we have seen action on Deadman's Ash Lane, Sarratt Road, Bucks Hill and Church Lane. Not all are 100% yet, but progress has been made.

We have also been working extensively on the issue of access roads over our common land, including Sarratt Green. Legally, it is complex but, in essence, we have clearly established that the Council has no maintenance responsibility for access roads - but must be consulted and involved with the style and nature of repairs - but does have responsibility for maintenance of the Green. Obviously, there is a high degree of shared interest, if, for example, the Green is eroded adjacent to an access road but establishing that distinction has been helpful and is now reflected in the Parish Council's policy documents.

On longer term issues, Sarratt Parish Council, in common with many other rural areas close to our cities, suffers from high traffic volumes, and excessive speeds on roads that are not, frankly, able to cope.

Whether being used as: a cut-through; as a diversion when the motorway is closed; or simply reflecting that many people commute from local villages to work in Watford, Rickmansworth or London, our road and traffic network is not fit for purpose.

This is exacerbated by a poor bus network and, as a result of the inadequate road network which is unsuited and even dangerous to cyclists and walkers, has limited the use of cycling, or walking, to work, even though distances are often relatively small. This, in turn, tends to increase the use of cars. A vicious cycle indeed.

Around the corner, is the challenge of Climate Change and the need to radically decarbonise our economy. That is not simply a matter of swapping-out gas guzzlers for Teslas - though that will help - but by doing things differently: prioritising pedestrians and cyclists over cars; reducing speed limits throughout the Parish; ensuring roads are safe for all users; working with District and County Councils to develop a coherent and cogent plan to deliver a transport strategy that works for all. We've a lot to do.

To that end, we've submitted proposals to TRDC for strategic cycleways to run through our area, linking up with routes in other areas. The aim is that families can go about their normal business: travelling to school, shopping, leisure etc, by bike, and on foot, safely.

An outline of the new proposed cycle routes is shown below.



A detailed table showing more information on the proposed routes is available from the Parish Office, on request. This will require action on road speeds, road layout and design, and most importantly, education. We really have to change, and we should start now.

Plans are also afoot to replace the seven black & white wooden 'fingerpost' signs in the Parish. Four signs are on order already and should be delivered in May. An order for the remaining three fingerposts will be made later in 2021. The Parish Council would like to thank John Gell for his diligent efforts on this project.



# Sarratt Parish Council Annual Report

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