

This has been a momentous time in terms of Local Government, and, as I reported in the Annual Meeting an hour or so ago, we will be seeing many changes at a local level over the next few years. I have read out the annual report from Horsham District Councillors at the previous meeting and have no need to elaborate again.

However, for those of us who have joined for the Annual Parish Meeting, I will briefly recap on Local government re-organisation. In three years, Horsham district will have ceased to exist. Simultaneously, WSCC will also have ceased to exist and there will be no more District or County elections from now on. Next year we will elect a single new mayor for the whole of Sussex, including West, East and Brighton and Hove. The following year we elect the new unitary authority, whose boundaries have yet to be decided, but in this area, we should have a similar local division of the Unitary to that which already exists. So, in May 2027, we go to the polls again to elect new Unitary Authority Councillors for this division. This will inevitably lead to changes in the way that Woodmancote operates, and, as I reported earlier, many parishes in the existing Unitaries in the west country and elsewhere have been forced to work together and amalgamate their resources to financially, at least, survive. There have been rumours that Woodmancote may become part of a larger Parish authority, together with Henfield and Shermanbury and maybe even Albourne, but I can tell you now that this will never happen in the foreseeable future. Woodmancote and Blackstone have the strength and financial backing to survive on their own.

The problem for Parishes is that they will be handed assets from the old District authorities, that could then turn into liabilities, and which could then prove crippling for smaller parishes like ours. However, we have the one asset that nobody else locally has – and we must be so grateful to John Allen, who all those years ago gifted our Parish the Playing fields in which we now sit. Yes, we will have liabilities such as verge cutting, perhaps some street lighting one day, and definitely local signage to look after, as well as other liabilities that will be passed onto us by the present District. We will definitely have the responsibility of looking after our own little environment and the few green spaces that we own, as you will hear from our speakers in a minute. However, we will continue to receive a precept payment of some sort from the new Unitary, but, as I said just now, we have the one thing that nobody else has, and that is a life saving yearly rent from The Sussex Cricket federation which, carefully managed, will keep us surviving without the need for help from surrounding Parishes....so, 'Long Live the independent Parish of Woodmancote and Blackstone!!'

On a more formal reporting note, I want to thank the former Chairman, Craig, for handing me a Parish in pretty good shape just over a year ago. We have a good team with Craig, Mary, David, Kelvin and of course, the organisational abilities of my wife, Cllr. Wendy Noel. Wendy has succeeded in organising a community fete for this August on this playing field, so please talk to her later to see what you can do to help. On our achievements this year, our Council have now effectively finalised the Playing Field lease arrangements for the next thirty years, with a lease

just waiting for signature and approval from residents. The rent has been agreed and has now been paid by Sussex Cricket for the last two years. We have, in the summer of last year, agreed, installed and paid for a brand new Playground Area complete with protective fencing from stray cricket balls. We have kept planning to an absolute minimum in the Parish, and objected logically and with excellent grounds to any new development that doesn't match in with our existing environments. We have now installed three solar powered speed indicator devices, with a fourth planned for the southerly approach on the B2116. We have also replaced both of the crumbling bus shelters on the A281 and would welcome suggestions for any more shelters, now that we are enjoying the regular ½ hourly bus service to Brighton and Horsham.

The one problem we have yet to solve is a community space to come together as a Parish. You all know the history of our old parish hall, which has now being brought back to life as residence, hopefully with all the charm and history of the old building. Our community needs a place to hold Parish Meetings, hold yoga classes, have bump to baby classes, yoga classes, flower arranging clubs, and a community space where we can just get together for a drink to reminisce, or to plan the future for the parish or just have good chat together. Being an independent parish, we need a social space, and we will be able to obtain a licence to serve a moderate amount of alcohol. On the positive side, we have tonight agreed to pay for an architect's sketch for the new community hall, which will stand where the current groundsman's hut is at present, just a couple of hundred feet from where we are sitting. This sketch is to be included in a referendum paper that we will shortly be distributed to every house in the Parish for your views on the costs and to agree that we could apply for a small loan if required. The building will be constructed of wood, and it will have the existing concrete base that's already there. It will contain a small hall, toilets, and a combined kitchen and bar. Much of the costs will be on relocating the groundsman's hut, but we will finally have our own space and be able to create our own community centre.

Now I've rabbitied on for long enough, I need to hand over to not one, but two Horsham District senior officers to talk to us about our precious environment here in our Parish:

In no particular order, Helen Peacock, who is Head of Sustainability and Green Spaces, but being lead tonight by Victoria Wylliedeecheverria, who is principle officer for Sustainability at HDC,

Please welcome them in true independent Woodmancote and Blackstone style.