

Annual Parish Meeting

Good evening and thank you for coming.

For those of you who do not know me, my name is Clare Morgan and earlier this year I became the Chair of the Parish Council. I have been a councillor for some 14 years, I grew up in Leavenheath, moved away for a few years but came back some twenty odd years ago.

This meeting is a time to reflect on the past year, to recognise the hard work that many volunteers and community groups carry out in our parish, and also to look forward to the plans we have for the future.

As we look to the future, it is important that we recognise the challenges we've faced over the past year and in some areas continue to do so. The political landscape continues to evolve, and with it, changes that impact how we manage our parish's development and resources. Devolution for example, whatever form it may take, will bring major change across our region. Budgets are continually tightening, and prices continue to rise, making it harder to stretch limited funds to meet the growing demands of our community. The reality is, we need to manage everyone's expectations carefully, and while we strive to do as much as possible, we may not always be able to meet every request or need immediately. This is a time for understanding and collaboration as we work together to balance the needs of the community with the resources available.

Volunteers have always played a key role in our parish and we really do need more people to come forward in whatever capacity they feel able. All our village groups have needed more hands-on deck, and we do encourage everyone to consider how they can contribute, whether through time, skills, or ideas. Volunteers are at the heart of our village, and without them, so much of what makes our community thrive would not be possible.

I'd therefore like to take a moment to extend a heartfelt thank you to all the local volunteers who give their time and energy to so many important initiatives. From the hard work running the community pantry, which ensures that no one in our village goes without, to the dedicated defibrillator team, whose efforts help us in times of emergency. Your commitment to our community is invaluable.

I also want to thank the Leavenheath Events Committee for organizing the wonderful activities that bring us together throughout the year. And, of course, a huge thank you to all those who work tirelessly to maintain and improve our village hall. This vital space remains a hub for us all, kept to a high standard for every one of us to use and enjoy. These efforts truly make a difference, and we are deeply grateful.

There are plenty of opportunities for people to get involved, for example we have litter picking and path clearing planned later this month, so please do get in contact if you can spare a few hours to join in and help.

We are also fortunate to have some very supportive local businesses who not only provide high levels of service but regularly assist with supporting local events,

impromptu tree maintenance and general repairs, and many more activities besides. A big thank you to all of you too.

We are seeing changes in planning regulations that will affect how we approach local development. The value of our current neighbourhood plan cannot be overstated, it's provided us with a framework that has helped guide growth in a way that reflects our shared vision for Leavenheath. However, we must acknowledge that increased demand for new development will require us to update and adapt our plan. You may have already read the article in the LSPN this month, but we really need people to step forward and assist with updating our plan, no previous planning experience is required, just the desire to support our village to be the best it can be for now and the future. We'll be working together to ensure that we're prepared for these changes, and I know that with the collective wisdom in this room, and in our village we will find the best path forward.

One of the highlights of the past year has been the re-development of the playground area. After several years of work, which again has relied on the generous support of volunteers within the village, it's wonderful to see this project now physically taking shape and we are all looking forward to children and families making use of the updated space. It's a great example of how we can come together to improve our shared spaces for all. With the vision, can-do effort and positive action we can make valuable things happen, but it takes more than a handful of people to achieve all that we would like to see in our village and surrounding areas.

I would also like to take a moment to express our gratitude to our district and county councillors, Lee Parker and James Finch, for their continued support. Their dedication to our parish, their help in navigating challenges, and their advocacy on our behalf have made a real difference, and we truly appreciate all they do for our community. We are fortunate that they both regularly attend our Parish Meetings and both make themselves readily available to support us. Thank you Lee and James.

We have also faced some significant issues within our own parish council this past year. Again all Parish Councillors are volunteers, and I both acknowledge and thank all our councillors for their continued efforts on behalf of the village.

A strong, active council is essential for our community. Without it, we risk losing the voice and structure that ensure our parish's needs are heard and addressed. That we have a voice.

This is something we must address going forward or we risk not having local representation, the ability to make local decisions, access to funding opportunities and the management of community projects. We do not know what devolution will look like yet, but local decisions may well be made centrally and in reality, further away from our community.

Over the past year, we have struggled to maintain a full complement of members and, at times, have faced challenges in achieving a quorum at our council meetings to be able to hold the meeting and make timely decisions.

In an effort to make council participation more manageable, we are moving to six meetings a year. This decision recognizes that many of our councillors work full-time, which is somewhat unusual for parish councils, and we want to ensure that we make the best use of their valuable time.

It's crucial that we have a full and active council to operate effectively, and I encourage anyone interested in joining to come forward. We still have vacancies on the council so please do come and talk to me and my fellow councillors about how you can get involved. If you are not able to commit to becoming a councillor right now, how about assisting with a community project or initiative with the support of the council ? Let's have that conversation.

Before I conclude, I must take a moment to acknowledge the incredible contributions of our previous chairman. Paul Mortlock. His leadership and hard work have shaped so much of what we've achieved in recent years. His dedication to our community has been unwavering, and he will truly be missed as an active member of the Parish Council. Thankfully Paul is going to remain on the Village Green Committee and his continued support is very much appreciated. On behalf of all of us, thank you for everything you've done (and we have a small token of our appreciation).

In closing my part of tonight's agenda, I look forward to the year ahead. Together, we can continue to build on the strong foundation that has been laid, overcoming challenges and making our village an even better place to live. Leavenheath is a great place to live. Please get involved in whatever you can, it will make such a difference. Thank you for your commitment, your time, and your continued support of our amazing community.