

VHT Report for annual parish meeting 2020

As for everyone, life for the VHT has been cut in two by the coronavirus pandemic, dividing it into 'before' and 'after'.

Before the lockdown, village hall activities were thriving. Over 20 regular groups continue to use the halls catering for all sorts of activities and interests. The cafe at the foyer celebrated its 10th anniversary, with song from one of our new groups, Singing Ladies, and beautifully decorated cake. Our new monthly film night has proved hugely popular, helped along with food themed around each showing, and a bar using our newly acquired permanent alcohol licence. Also new is a drop in games afternoon which is appreciated by those who regularly attend. We have had a good year for functions including several weddings and birthdays, the feedback from which has been really positive.

We have fully entered the digital age in that the VHT now has both its own website and brand new Facebook page through which we can advertise ourselves to the wider world, and keep people up to date with all that is going on. Clubs are encouraged to add a section of their own if they wish.

Having put the finishing touches to the revitalised Peace Garden to the rear of the hall including planting more trees, we turned our attention to maintenance of the buildings with a newly formed 'shed group' to tackle minor maintenance issues ourselves. We have also changed our energy suppliers to green energy as part of our ongoing commitment to do our bit for the environment. In the long term, it would be good to have energy generation such as solar panels, but the challenge there is to find the funding.

Following a Fire Brigade audit, we were ordered to install a fully integrated fire alarm system; this was compulsory, not optional. This came at a price, but thanks to heroic fundraising efforts in the past, and continued good financial management, we were able to absorb the cost.

All in all, I genuinely feel that we are going from strength to strength and reaching out to many people in the village and beyond who were not previously involved in village hall life. It remains the case that the halls are mainly used by the young (all 3 scouts groups, karate etc) and those of retirement age. It would be nice to see more of the 'in between' years but that is a challenge experienced by many other organisations.

Life after the lockdown has been radically different. Overnight, all clubs and those who had booked parties took the inevitable decision to cancel. The halls remain closed and we have none of our usual income. We will have to accommodate changes to our way of doing things when we reach the point that the halls can reopen, in particular to preserve social distancing.

Despite the closure, we are not the type of people to sit back and do nothing. The VHT has worked very closely with Catherine Harrison of the Parish Council and others in providing the 'village response' service to residents. Suzanne Barker in particular has worked tirelessly and cheerfully in organising a meal service, in amongst the various other ways in which the village response is helping those who are more vulnerable to the virus. We have also recruited quite a dedicated team of people sewing scrubs and gowns for the NHS and other health workers out of donated bedding.

Just because we can't meet up doesn't mean that we stop being a community. It struck me quite forcibly at the start of the lockdown just how much we all rely on each other, and how fortunate we are to be in a village where many people know each other and can look out for each other. I would like to thank all those who volunteer their efforts in the halls: cafe helpers, gardeners, trustees, club/group organisers, webmasters, fundraisers and of course Suzanne. I would also like to express our sincere gratitude to the Parish Council and Northumberland County Council for supporting us financially in the past year.