

REPORT ON HAWKLEY PARISH COUNCIL "LENGTHMAN".

In April 2000 Hawkley Parish Council, under arrangements of East Hampshire District Council (EHDC), piloted a scheme to return a "lengthman" (a Victorian institution) to the Parish whose duties (initially) would be to deal with litter and fly-tipping in the Parish. The idea was to see if a local person was more cost-effective at dealing with a local problem than a centralised service from the District Council.

Amazingly, several applicants came forward to do this, at first glance, mundane work. (It soon became apparent that the job of lengthman was valued by the community.) The funding available was £500 at £10 an hour to do 50 hours litter picking in the Parish. The scheme went well and the Parish was kept clean, which had not been the case before. It was agreed in April 2001 to extend the scheme to ditch clearing and the funding went up to £750 for litter clearing (paid by EHDC) and £500 for ditch clearing (paid by HCC) on the basis of realistic hours of work needed as a result of the pilot scheme. It was hoped also to include emergency pot-hole filling, but the requirement for training, insurance, road signing and health and safety regulations ruled this out, at least for the time being. The ditch clearing was a success with several areas of the Parish that had previously flooded in heavy rain being kept clear of floods and one area reported for HCC work to prevent flooding in the future.

Lessons were learned. It was important that Parishioners did not think that the litter clearing exercise absolved them of responsibility or allowed them to dump litter to be picked up by the lengthman. Thus notices were put in the Parish Magazine to request that parishioners pick up litter around their own houses and leave only residual litter to the lengthman. Parishioners responded positively. Likewise, although ditches were cleared when required by the lengthman (and it was usually quicker to ask him to do it) it remained the responsibility of the adjacent landowner to keep the ditches in good order and they were reminded of this.

Another interesting lesson was that, although a formal contract could not be written to allow a contractor to trespass to pick up litter (for instance a District Council contract) it was possible to enable the self-employed lengthman to trespass on field boundaries etc. and use his common sense to pick up visible litter. This was achieved by putting a notice in the Parish magazine that the lengthman would, if necessary "trespass" to pick up litter and asking any land owner who objected to let the Parish Council know. None did.

A more general observation was that 90% of litter in the Parish was litter thrown out of the windows of cars or lorries. This was later confirmed to agree with statistics produced by the Keep Britain Tidy Group whose analysis showed that car owners were prouder of their clean cars than of the countryside. It suggested that a legal requirement to fit litter bins in vehicles might greatly reduce this source of litter. If so this is something for decision at DEFRA level.

The funding of the litter and ditch clearing scheme described above was slightly complex coming from both District and County. Should such a scheme be taken on more generally by many parishes then funding would be probably be better coming from the Parish Precept, providing that equal savings were made in the Community Charge and double charging did not result.

The inability of the scheme to take on the obviously beneficial role of local pot-hole filling (remembering that a suddenly appearing pot-hole could injure an unsuspecting cyclist or puncture a car tyre) was a disappointment. It would have been done in the days of the Victorian lengthman. Modern bureaucracy and health and safety legislation have, as in other areas of life today, made common sense action difficult. It might nevertheless be possible to revise legislation in the future to allow all the tasks of the Victorian lengthman to be resumed. If so this would also be a DEFRA action.

The outcome of the pilot scheme (which continues) is that it was undoubtedly a success. The quality of the work done by the lengthman was much greater than the work done before and the need, under the District contract, to visit a litter "complaint" then send a vehicle out to clear it, four journeys as opposed to one short journey - was avoided. A universal scheme covering many parishes would, we believe, be cheaper than the District contract, efficient and environmental.

Attached are copies of annual reports during the pilot scheme by the lengthman and a typical Parish Council notices relating to his work