**Chair's Report Abermule with Llandyssil Community Council 2015 - 16**

As I end my two year term as Chair for Abermule with Llandyssil Community Council I give a brief report of community council activity for the year 2015/16. It has been a privilege and pleasure to represent the Council and our community and I wish to record my considerable gratitude to the team of community councillors who give their time, expertise and community knowledge to the benefit of residents. It would be invidious to single out individuals as each make their unique contribution to the community. These are interesting and challenging times in local government and it can feel like uncharted waters but there is an opportunity to try to do things differently and ultimately create greater benefits for the community.

My particular thanks to Deputy Chair, Cllr. Rufus Fairweather, for his unfailing support and ability to step into the breach at a moment's notice in addition to expertly chairing the Governing Body as the Community Council representative at our fantastic community school.

Cllrs Pat Thomas and Eurwyn Pierce Jones represent us on One Voice Wales and ensure we are fully informed of initiatives of interest or changes in protocol. I have attended meetings of the North Montgomeryshire Forum of Councils, a useful space for the sharing of information. We continue to have representatives on both community centre committees and the Community Council are Holding Trustees for Abermule Community Centre and Trustees of the Millfield Trust Amenity Land.

Appreciation also to County Cllr. Wynne Jones who provide s regular and detailed updates on County Council business and responds in a timely and proactive manner to matters we raise. This frequently ensures a far better and more rapid response to local issues than would otherwise be possible.

We are fortunate in our contractors and employees who competently carry out day to day work, frequently 'go the extra mile' and serve the community well.

As ever there has been a wide variety of well run events to enjoy in the community this year ranging from the renowned Dragon Fest to those at the school and community centre. It is always a pleasure to attend as many as possible and the spirit and team work that goes into events typifies our community.

My guiding principles as Chair have been visibility, accountability and responsiveness to the community. How far this has been successful is for others to judge but, although at times frustratingly slow, modest progress has been made. Particularly, I feel in carrying out two community surveys, the first of which gave the Council the necessary mandate to speak at the Conjoined Public Inquiry and the second which formed the basis of a process which could lead to a Community Place Plan. We are currently looking at opportunities to fund an extended consultation exercise t5o this end.

**Communications**

The reach of the Abermule newsletter has been extended to outlying communities and both newsletters are linked to our website. Newsletters now contain a regular Community Council update and information. A huge debt of gratitude is due to the diligent and hard working team of editors, printers and distributors and the Council is pleased to continue to fund printing.

The website is currently undergoing a long overdue reworking to bring it up to date, make it more useful as a community tool, link to community businesses and points of interest as well as providing timely information on Council activities and finances. The Clerk now has additional hours to ensure the website is kept up to date on a monthly basis and we welcome ideas , information and photographs from the community.

At long last refurbishment of the telephone boxes as community information points has begun and racks will be provided for leaflets of local interest to residents and visitors.

**Community Survey**

The Community Surveys were analysed and made available via newsletters and on the website. Your views are proving invaluable in assisting us in setting our budget to ensure that valued assets, such as community centres, are prioritised and receive support as Powys' grant funding is removed. Having a presence at the Dragon Fest was also valuable and some of the ideas for improvement and innovation garnered are being discussed with the Powys European funding team.

**Planning**

Although there are fewer planning applications there remain some that are more contentious. It is never easy to balance the economic needs of an agricultural community with the preservation of rural residential amenity. The Council always welcomes the views on both sides although we must ultimately base our response on the information we have before us in the light of material planning considerations. Where we feel that the balance is in favour of development we will always comment on any potential for mitigation.

Retrospective applications and removal of 106 restrictions (such as local needs housing and agricultural occupancy) have always been difficult matters for Council. We are pleased that Powys CC is more rigorously enforcing the former and that the LDP will give greater guidance and clarity in the latter.

Councillors keep themselves informed of planning matters and legislation through membership of One Voice Wales and attendance at Planning Aid Wales and Welsh Government seminars.

The issue of excessive windfarm development continues to dominate planning in Montgomeryshire with concerns as to impacts on landscape, ecology and our thriving tourism industry. September 2015 saw the Secretary of State refuse all but one windfarm from the Conjoined Public Inquiry but the final outcome is still far from certain. We will continue to represent the views of the vast majority of our community as expressed in the windfarms survey. Regular updates are provided on the website.

**Vale of Montgomery Rural Cluster**

Abermule with Llandyssil Community Council were instigating members of this cluster of 4 community councils and Montgomery Town Council last year as a response to the County Council's proposed devolution of services. It now appears this was a proposal that had neither been fully thought through or properly costed and after much wasted time and energy no services have been devolved to date. The VMRC is the only remaining Cluster in Powys but we have resolved to keep a watching brief as service delivery is reduced in line with budgets and are prepared to take on services that may disappear or cease to be satisfactory. The Cluster is also looking at other ways of funding and working together to benefit our communities.

Myself along with Cllrs. Rees and Brewin represent the Council on the VMRC group.

**Playgrounds**

With a pot of money available for new playground equipment in Abermule and Llandyssil we are working on plans with local young people and parents over the next few months. Some equipment had to be taken out of commission over the summer for serious safety reasons and requisition of parts and, regrettably, subsequent repairs took an excessive time. As a result we are looking to change both the external inspection regime and the play equipment providers.

**Montgomery Health Practice**

Cllrs Ann Brewin and Gwyneth Jones continue to ably represent the community at Patients' Forum meetings. There have been significant changes in Practice personnel and direction in the last year along with the challenges faced by so many Powys surgeries of recruitment.

We still, of course, await decisions on Shrewsbury and Telford hospitals but the Council continues to request that an Urgent Care Centre at Newtown to serve our area is kept firmly on the agenda.

**Consultations**

The Council scrutinises relevant consultations providing an opportunity to present an Abermule and Llandyssil perspective and, perhaps, help influence strategic direction.

The Powys Local Development Plan has been a major consideration over the last couple of years and recently we have responded fully to all iterations. The final Draft Deposit will now undergo inspection by the Welsh Government and should become the guiding framework for Powys planning by the end of 2016 and stand until 2026. The Council has particularly sought to represent concerns regarding proposed over-development in the Cefn y Coed road area of Abermule which could compromise public safety and amenity; the need for sheltered / adapted accommodation in the heart of the village, and supported the policy of retaining village amenities such as shops and pubs and reducing the pressure on smaller villages and hamlets with regards to new housing.

We responded to a number of consultations from the Welsh Government regarding changes to Local Government, Planning Act Wales and the National Development Framework. Unfortunately much of the drive from Cardiff is for ever greater centralisation and the removal of local democratic determination. We will continue to reiterate the rural point of view to an urban focussed government.

Local consultations on Library Services, Bus Services and Services for Older People have also received our considered responses

**Emergency Planning**

Both communities now have de-fibrillators thanks to fantastic fundraising efforts. There are now a number of trained first responders in the communities.

The recent disastrous floods experienced elsewhere reminded us of the importance of planning and the Resilience Officer gave us a presentation on Powys plans. The Community Council will now ensure the County Cllr. and communities have access to an up to date list of community contacts so halls can be rapidly opened and staffed with volunteers in the event of an emergency. We will also focus on danger points in our communities and any action we need to take following the timely lead of the Llandyssil Old School Hall Committee.

**Small Grants Programme**

There was a good response to the first small grants programme and five organisations were assisted with equipment purchase. The 16/17 programme has now been launched with an increased budget and some minor changes to reflect the pilot review.

**Community Burial Ground** . Again progress seems slow but the area is now looking more cared for and the hedge pletching has given lovely open hill views. The ground will shortly be mapped and then ready for use. A small committee meets to discuss issues pertaining to the Burial Ground and a contract has been let for regular maintenance.

**Highways and By ways**

Our rural roads continue to deteriorate with a reduced maintenance budget and this wet winter /spring has ensured potholes do not remain filled for more than a few weeks. The Community Council continues to draw these to the attention of Powys and through our County Councillor action is commendably prompt. We value the assistance given by residents in alerting us to problems. In response to the community survey we have managed to get signage implemented or moved at Pont Bechan, Llanmerewig and Cefn y Coed road to attempt to address some of the issues with speeding

The importance of local footpaths was evident from the community survey although progress on opening up footpaths, especially short circular routes, has been slower than we would like. Resources will always be a limiting factor for Countryside Services in such a vast county but we continue to exercise our duty as a community council to draw problems to their attention and work collaboratively wherever possible. Community Footpaths and Team Leaders volunteer initiatives may prove very effective and we are working through the Vale of Montgomery Cluster to access funding for a pilot project specifically in our area.

No annual report would be complete without mention of the tireless band of volunteers who ensure our community centres run smoothly and events, organisations and other activities run smoothly. Llandyssil has entered the relaunched Best Kept Village in Montgomeryshire competition this year with the new focus on 'community involvement' - good on you Llandyssil and may the best village win !

*Jill Kibble April 2016*