

## **ANNUAL PARISH MEETING 2022**

### **Bloxham Parish Council Chairman's Report**

For the second successive year the activities of the Parish Council have been dominated by Covid. During the period January to May Council meetings were held via Zoom in accordance with enabling regulations emanating from central government. Those regulations lapsed and thereafter council business was dealt with for a time by prior delegation. Face to face meetings were resumed as soon as possible thereafter. Once again, however, difficulties have arisen because of a wave of infections attributable to the Omicron variant. In particular, central government, apparently ignoring the pleas of this and many other councils locally and nationally, has failed to provide for Zoom meetings thus exposing councillors, some vulnerable, to risk. That notwithstanding, face to face meetings have continued as required by law.

Parish council activities are both varied and important. As readers of the Broadsheet will be aware some of these activities have had to be curtailed because of a significant drop in the number of serving councillors. At full strength the Council should be composed of twelve councillors. As a result of resignations during the past years only six councillors are currently in post. This has meant that council meetings have been reduced to one per month and it has become necessary temporarily to suspend monthly drop in and chat sessions in which councillors meet the public. Unfortunately, this has limited the possibilities for interaction between villagers and the Council. The Council has hitherto nominated members to take part in the activities of local bodies. Reduced numbers again has made that temporarily unfeasible.

This, therefore, is a plea to villagers to come forth and stand for the elections to be held in May. The forthcoming year will involve the need to take important initiatives which will affect the future of this village. In particular the Bloxham Neighbourhood Plan (BNP) will need to be revised and brought up to date. The BNP has a profound impact on planning decisions, some involving individual applications while others can involve proposed larger developments. Without an up to date BNP the village will be at grave risk of unwanted planning determinations. The BNP apart, a range of matters affecting the village have arisen and will continue to arise in which villagers' voices need to be heard. As noted below a range of consultations on local matters have been launched by local and central government bodies and this is likely to continue. Traffic matters are and

will be actively under consideration. Biodiversity, The Slade, grass cutting and tree management are frequently under consideration. Council's role as a statutory consultee in respect of planning matters is of considerable importance to the village. A glance at Parish Council Agendas reveals a broad range of matters affecting the village in respect of which your voices need to be heard. Good decision making is the product of debate and discussion within Council. That requires the involvement of committed residents having a range of skills and interests and your council would urge you to come forth and play a part in determining the sort of village in which we all want to live.

I pass now to a resume of Council activities during the past year. Among these planning has been prominent. Council has not had to contend with proposed major planning applications but it has had to make representations concerning the government's proposed changes to the planning system. These had they been brought into effect, would virtually have emasculated the role of parish councils and other local bodies in respect of planning. Fortunately as a result of representations by your council and many other councils throughout the country these proposed changes appear to have been abandoned. Individual planning applications continue to be dealt with and representations made by your Council to Cherwell District Council as the decision-making body in accordance with valid planning criteria, some of which are set forth in the BNP.

Special mention should be made of a series of planning applications made by Bloxham School. These have resulted in considerable disquiet among some residents. This, in part, resulted from a failure of communication between the School and residents. I am happy to report that as a result of discussions between the Council and the School, the School has decided to create a discussion panel to be composed of representatives of the School, the Council and the wider village community which will meet periodically so facilitating a dialogue between the School and the village.

Mention should be made of Council's responses to the Oxfordshire 2050, CDC Local Plan and Oxfordshire-Cambridgeshire Arc consultations. Council responded on behalf of Bloxham using the neighbourhood plan as a guide. Council has sought to ensure that Bloxham's clear identity as a community be maintained. Council has resisted any significant further housing growth given our view that the 20% growth since 2015 has stretched Bloxham's infrastructure to its maximum and has been far greater than the 10% growth elsewhere in Cherwell. Council has used Bloxham information to encourage residents to provide their own responses. The consultations

noted above will be going through further rounds and will need to be carefully watched as they develop. Copies of Council's responses to date can be found on our website and/or provided on request.

Facilitating outdoor recreation requires Council involvement in such matters as footpath maintenance. It is hoped that once life returns to normal discussions can take place with landowners to attempt to reach agreement on the creation of new and the reinstatement of previous permissive rights of way. The Council together with the Jubilee Park Maintenance Committee ensures the management of the Jubilee Park and the installation and maintenance of play equipment. Your council also provides a grant for the same purposes to the trustees of the recreation ground. The Jubilee pavilion is important both for outdoor sports and internal activities. As noted last year your council has had to take in hand extensive remedial work caused by botched work in relation to an extension by a previous contractor, now in liquidation. In part due to a shortage of building materials this has taken longer than anticipated but it should certainly be finished this spring.

In respect of other activities your Council makes grants to a number of village organisations and Halls. Grants for example have been made towards the upkeep of local halls, support groups such as the St. Mary's Thursday club and other local groups such as the Biodiversity Group.

The Council is currently drawing up a priority list of initiatives which may be expected to arise during the next year.

I hope that this will give the meeting a sense of the range of activities in which your Council has engaged during the last year. But I repeat - for the Council to fulfil its functions properly, to represent the village as a whole and to make intelligent and informed decisions requires the active participation of residents prepared to serve on the Council. So please stand for election in May!

Leonard H Leigh  
Chairman, Bloxham Parish Council