

Bloxham Parish Council 2020-21 Chairman's Report

The last 12 months have been dominated by the pandemic for many of us and it is hard to focus on anything else without constantly returning to the pain and anguish people have suffered this year. However Parish Council activities had to continue, albeit with all the Council meetings held on Zoom, so this report reflects on these activities even while acknowledging that they are dwarfed by the Covid crisis.

Having said that, it is natural to start with pandemic related actions. Individual parish councillors have of course acted individually, just as many other Bloxham residents, to be good neighbours and do what they can to help others out. But specifically, the Council has concentrated on trying to secure funding where possible to support the various organizations working to alleviate the suffering. The Council has funded local groups and has also secured a grant to provide extra support for the elderly disabled and vulnerable families. Various village Halls have also benefited directly from District and County Council grants to mitigate the loss of revenues. But beyond this, the focus for all of us remains doing whatever we can to help, whether personally or as a body.

Village walks

The pandemic has resulted in a huge increase in the number of people taking exercise around the village. The various village walks and paths have been especially crowded, with a much wider section of the village using them. While this is great at one level, with the likely benefit to physical and mental health from the increased exercise, it has also caused some problems which are yet to be resolved. While the vast majority of walkers behave responsibly and follow the country code, sadly there has been a small subsection that have showed total disregard either through lack of awareness or deliberate action.

While Bloxham is blessed with a number of Public Rights of Way around the village, our walks also involve Permissive Paths where farmers have given their permission for the public to cross their land. Unfortunately, the behaviour of this minority has had a serious impact. Farmers have had fences knocked down or cut through, gates and stiles broken and people riding through crops on mountain bikes. Even worse, off-lead dogs having been worrying sheep and dog poo has been left lying around, even in fields with livestock in which is a serious risk to them. This has finally become too much for some farmers, forcing them to close the paths over their land with corresponding impact on the village walks. While the Parish Council has been in discussions with the farmers, there is at the moment no obvious solution. The hope is that as traffic returns to normal once the pandemic is under control, the farmers may be prepared to try reopening the paths.

Tadmarton Road Country Park

The year has seen many issues related to the Country Park managed currently by Miller Homes. The Parish Council has been heavily involved with the District in trying to get the issues resolved with Miller Homes. This has had some success, but problems still remain. The two most serious ones outstanding remain the issues surrounding the balancing pond and the appalling surface to the car park opposite the Primary School. While there has been some progress on the balancing pond and drainage issues in general, Miller Homes successfully appealed against the Parish Council and District's efforts to surface the carpark properly. In order to address the issue another way, the Parish Council tried to utilize some Oxfordshire County Council section 106 funds (these are funds provided by the developers of some of the new housing projects in the village) to carry out the necessary work, only to discover that the funds had been redeployed by OCC onto other projects. However the Council is still pursuing the idea of finding other funds to cover the work.

Jubilee Hall improvements

Sadly the Jubilee extension project to add four new changing rooms and provide another meeting room for public use has had a rocky ride through the last year, consuming a huge amount of Parish Council time. Extensive problems with the contractors and the quality of work finally resulted in the contract being terminated, leaving the Parish Council to find other avenues to address the issues. This work is now progressing, with new contractors being engaged, while the Parish Council is working with the District Council to try to ensure the required additional funds can be found.

Cherry Tree Centre

The Cherry tree Centre, attached to Bloxham Primary School, provides a valued service to help families of 0-5 year-olds with a range of different issues. There are many success stories coming out of families who have benefitted from all the work the Cherry Tree Centre does. However with funding being withdrawn, the future for the Centre was in jeopardy. The Parish Council decided to agree to fund it for a minimum period of three years, viewing it as a vital component of support particularly given the impacts of the pandemic. Most health professionals agree the long months of lockdown have had potentially serious implications for parents and their children, particularly for the youngest and most vulnerable. Giving the Cherry Tree Centre security at least for the next years will help some of these issues to be managed more effectively and should make a real difference to those worst affected.

Traffic calming and safety

As the drain of the pandemic on the Council's time recedes, a major focus for the coming year is going to be Traffic Calming. The Parish council is increasingly concerned with the speed of some cars and other vehicles and also the safety of the roads in general, particularly with three and soon to be four Schools operating in the village. While the Parish Council is already implementing some measures, such as restoring the VAS that was destroyed on the A361 by the entrance to the Recreation Ground, but a lot more needs to be done. Other villages in the region have shown that to make serious progress on these issues requires the involvement of a combined team of Councillors and residents; there is too much for councillors to carry out on their own. If any residents are prepared to get involved to help push the various initiatives along, hopefully the coming year will see improvements for the village as a whole.

Finances

The Parish Council finances remain healthy, but it is as yet unclear how much further damage may result from the pandemic. With both District and County Councils bearing a heavy financial burden from the pandemic, the Parish Council needs to be particularly careful with its own finances to ensure any unforeseen circumstances can be handled with minimal risk. For the 2021-2 year the Parish budget kept the precept percentage unchanged in response to the difficult situation facing all residents, which has actually resulted in many residents seeing a slightly smaller contribution being made for the Parish in the rates, typically about -0.2%. This is due to changes to the overall District tax base and their effects.

Summary

While it has been a hard and stressful year for all villagers, we look ahead with some hope that 2021-2022 may see a return to at least some form of normality. The Parish council will endeavour to serve the village to the best of its abilities throughout the year. However there will be a considerable amount of churn for the Council itself, with both myself and Vice-Chairman Nick Rayner stepping down in May. Together with some other planned retirements, this will result in around four

vacancies on the Parish Council which amounts to one third of the normal complement of Councillors. If unfilled, this will almost certainly impact what the Parish Council is able to do for the village, so if there are any residents with some free time who are prepared to help the village and keep it as a place that we can all enjoy and value, please consider applying to join. Anyone interested should contact Parish Clerk Theresa Goss (bloxhamparishcouncil@gmail.com) or visit the Parish Council website.