**PARISH COUNCIL CHAIR’S ANNUAL REPORT 2024**

**ACTIVITIES DURING THE YEAR**

**Introduction**.

In preparing for this meeting I have encouraged everyone to give brief reports in order to leave more space for discussion and feedback. Notwithstanding that, this has been an eventful year for the Parish Council and there are a number of matters which I must report on. In that spirit I have relegated the explanation as to how the Council functions to a separate Appendix to this report.

In the text below I set out the main events on which I must report.

**Councillors**

We started the year with 3 vacancies. One of these was filled by Jane Gibson who generously agreed to defer her retirement until the end of the year. The remaining vacancies have been filled by Sheila Austin and Andrew Calder both of whom were co-opted on to Council and have already made tremendous contributions.

Jane served on Council for a remarkable 17 years and has made a huge contribution during that period. Although she will be massively missed, she has kindly agreed to carry on as chair of the working group who manage the clubhouse.

As a result of the above we have a vacancy and we would love to hear from anyone who is at all interested in serving on the Council.

**Staff**

We have three staff, Liz Cooper (our Clerk), Evi Holroyd (Hall Administrator) and Iain Wood our new Lengthman who is responsible for the physical upkeep of the village. As many of you will know, David Hollick has been our Lengthman for nearly 10 years during which period he has seemed irreplaceable. However, a number of well qualified candidates applied for the role and we were delighted to appoint Iain who has made an excellent start.

**Insurance**

Last year we were informed by our insurance brokers that our insurance company, Hiscox, proposed to increase our premium from approximately £7000 to £57000, mainly because of the substantial claim arising from the flood damage to the Clubhouse. The position was made worse by the fact that nearly every alternative insurance company we approached declined to tender. Through the efforts of Andrew Calder (who has an insurance background) and our Clerk, Liz, we managed to find ‘cheaper’ cover from Zurich at £30000. It is still a ridiculously high premium but at least we have insurance cover.

**Precept** **and our finances**

The increase in the net cost of our insurance this year was £33000.This has had to be financed by an increase in the Precept.

Parish council finances rely on receiving a Precept to cover their budgeted costs. The precept is in effect a tax borne by Blewbury ratepayers. (The rates for an average house have increased by £3.70 per month, over a 10 month period) We therefore decided to limit the increase in the precept mainly to cover higher insurance costs. Inflationary and other essential cost increases have to be financed through cost savings wherever practicable.

I am pleased to say that due to the savings made, extra income from the clubhouse and the cemetery together with a substantial VAT refund, our finances are now in reasonable order. In the next few weeks we will be reviewing our budget until April 2025 and hopefully we will be able to report a healthy position.

A separate Financial Report for the year has been produced by our Clerk.

**Other activities**

The Parish Council has a wide range of activities, some of the more significant of which are listed in no particular order below. In the interests of brevity, I have provided limited detail in this note but would be happy to discuss and answer questions at The Annual Parish Meeting.

**BlewShed**

We are working with BlewShed to develop a plan which would enable the restoration of the Scout Hut into a more useable space. As a part of this project, we will be seeking to rationalise the storage space in the Scout Hut, the Tractor Shed and the Clubhouse.

**Community Art Project**

We recognise that some people object to the location of the proposed armillary sphere to be made by David Harbour and financed through a grant from the District Council. We have listened to comments received both for and against and our unanimous view remains that it should be located on the Playclose. Notwithstanding that we would be happy to discuss the location again at the Annual Parish Meeting.

**SpeedWatch/Speed reduction measures**

Highways are not within our remit. However, we have worked with SpeedWatch to lobby the County Council to help with traffic management in the village. We have had some success installing speed indicators (known as SIDs). An unforeseen consequence of installing the SIDs has been the need to pay a contractor to install and rotate the SIDs, which we were not expecting. OOC has undertaken to put a new pedestrian crossing on the London Road, near Savages, and have analysed speed data to work out which type of crossing to install. The PC will continue to press for progress on this. At present the PC has no budget for further anti-speeding measures.

**The Clubhouse**

The Clubhouse has emerged from its refurbishment in a better condition than it was in before the flood. Bookings seem to be gradually improving. We are grateful to Jane Gibson for continuing to Chair a working group that looks after the management of the Clubhouse.

**The Pound**

It has been difficult to find a solution to parking on the Pound. At the moment cars are parked dangerously close to the corner of South St and the London Road. We have decided to use solid wooden posts to prevent parking close to the corner but to allow parking for up to 4 cars further down South St.

**Donation**

We have received an anonymous donation of £50000 to be used on a project to be approved by the donor. At the moment we are exploring the possibility of rebuilding the skate ramp and also the bike track on Tickers Folly Field. The plan is to develop facilities which cater for a wider age group than the existing ramp which in any event is frequently in need of repair

**Conclusion**

All in all, this has been a difficult year and I am grateful to our staff and to the members of Council for their hard work. Councillors in particular give up a substantial amount of their time and I think sometimes that should be given more recognition.

Dermot Mathias

May 2024

**APPENDIX**

**OPERATION OF THE PARISH COUNCIL**

**Composition**.

Members of the council are either co-opted or elected at the time of the local elections (which take place every four years).  If at the time of an election we do not have a full quota of 9 people standing, there is no vote and those who have put their names forward become parish councillors. Thereafter additional councillors up to our quota can be co-opted by the other members.  Councillors are supported by the Parish Clerk who implements our decisions, ensures that we conduct our business legally, oversees projects and ensures that our activities are properly documented and reported to the community.

Council meetings take place at 7pm, on the second Wednesday of the month and are open to the public. Indeed, we welcome attendees from the village and, if appropriate, elsewhere.

**Main Responsibilities**

Council has a wide range of responsibilities including looking after:

- the Clubhouse at the Recreation Ground;

- the Recreation Ground itself;

- Tickers Folly Field and its play area, half pipe and fitness trail;

- the Pound (land at the junction of A417 and South St);

- the playground by the Village Hall;

- the Chalk Pits, on Rubble Lane;

- the cemetery;

- some footpaths

- trees on our own land (mainly the locations listed above).

**Planning**

There is a separate report on planning produced by Lydia Inglis which gives an excellent overview of our activities in this area. Essentially we do not make planning decisions but we do review planning applications and bring issues to the attention of the District Council. The Parish Council was responsible for developing our Neighbourhood Plan, monitors the extent to which it is adhered and reviews the need for updates.

**Other Activities**

There is a long list of other activities which councillors choose to take on, very often in conjunction with community groups. We work with Sustainable Blewbury on maintaining footpaths and leaf clearing. We work with the Blewbury Village Garden Association on dealing with matters connected with the allotments. We work with the speed watch team on seeking to control speeds, particularly on the A417 and Bessels Way. We installed 2 defibrillators in the village (at the Village Hall & The Blueberry) last year and a third one at the Clubhouse this year.