



BLEDLOW-CUM-SAUNDERTON PARISH COUNCIL

Annual Parish Meeting held via Zoom
Thursday 1st April 2021 at 7pm

**Present: Councillors: N Cox, A Sage, J Butler, S Bird, D Dobson, S Breese,
M Blackwell, S Reading (Chair), A Lord (Vice Chair)**
Clerk: Tracey Martin
Councillors: Carl Etholen and Shade Adoh
Two members of the public present

The meeting was conducted pursuant to the provisions of the Council's Standing Orders as modified by the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020

1. **Apologies for absence:** None
2. **Chair's Annual Report:** Cllr Reading read out his annual report (copied below)
3. **Question Time / Members of the Public Invited to speak:** No questions

Meeting closed at 7.20pm

Signed.....

Date.....

Chairman's Reports:

As the current Chair of Bledlow Ridge Parish Council I am pleased to present my report to the Annual Meeting. This year has been difficult, however despite the challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting restrictions on everyday life, the Council has continued to work hard for the benefit of our residents and communities.

Covid 19

Although we didn't know it at the time, the Parish Council's meeting of 5th March 2020 was the last one to be held in the traditional 'Village Hall' setting.

As the crisis deepened the Parish Council took the decision, in the absence at the time of any local or national government guidelines, to move to on-line virtual meetings, starting in April 2020. All subsequent meetings have been held on-line, using Zoom.

The first wave

Anticipating that even in our relatively small community the impact of Covid 19 could be significant (estimates were that at the peak 300 households/500 individuals – 20% of the Parish - could be self-isolating) the Parish Council stood-up the Village Support Group. Led by Cllr Breese and comprising Cllrs, Community organisations such as the Bledlow Belles and individuals, the aim of the group was to ensure that every member of the community could ask for and get support when needed.

In practical terms this meant being on hand not just for shopping and collection of prescriptions, but also as a listening 'friend'. We would also arrange for your dog to be walked (in a Covid safe way).

A volunteer register was set up (over 100 people came forward) and a freephone telephone service was set up, together with a dedicated email address. Recognising that not all of our residents could be reached via the

Internet, every home in the Parish received a leaflet setting out the help available and how to get in touch. Because we are good neighbours we also leafletted properties in Horsenden.

By good fortune the impact on the Parish was not as severe as anticipated, in the main due to our rural location and relatively scattered centres of population.

Nevertheless, the group helped over 70 residents with 110 requests for help recorded. Many more will have been helped informally using the group's resources and/or by the many local 'good neighbour' groups that were set up in Bledlow, Saunderton Lee and other locations.

In addition Cllr Breese worked with Princes Risborough Town Council to extend the 'Risborough Basket' local on-line shopping service to the Parish.

Laptops for Schools

One of the issues encountered by Schools during the 1st Lockdown was the availability of laptops and other devices sufficient to allow children to fully participate in on-line lessons and activities.

In anticipation of a second lockdown Bledlow Ridge School made a grant request to the Council to fund the purchase of several Chromebook machines, which would be lent out by the school to pupils who would not otherwise have access to a machine at home.

Agreeing to the Grant, Cllr Breese suggested that it might be an idea to also provide local schools with refurbished second hand laptops. This idea was fully supported and as a result the Village Support Group launched the 'Laptops for Kids' initiative. Through this initiative the Council would take in donations of old and redundant machines. Once sanitized the machines were handed over to our team of 'techie' volunteers who securely wiped the hard drives (using software originally developed for the US Department of Defence), installed the Linux Mint operating system, Google Chrome, Zoom and Skype. Where necessary external webcams and microphones were purchased.

After a fairly slow start, a press release was issued which was picked up by BBC 3 Counties Radio. As a result of the radio exposure there was a significant increase in the number of machines donated.

By the end of the programme the team had donated 35 refurbished laptops to 6 local primary schools. Another 5 machines have been rebuilt and are held in reserve should they be necessary.

Helping the Community – Grants

In addition to the Covid-19 support, the Parish Council have made Grants totaling £8327.99 to the benefit of the community and have committed to a further £39607.20, including a significant contribution to the maintenance of Bledlow Village Hall.

The Parish welcomes Grant requests from eligible organisations. We are able to do this while maintaining our precept (the amount collected for the Parish Council through the Council Tax system) thanks to prudent financial management.

During the year the Council implemented a 'Grants Policy' and introduced a standard 'Grant Application' template to support applicants and achieve consistency in the information provided. Thanks are due to Cllr Lord for bringing both to the table.

Parish Maintenance

The Parish Council receives funding from Bucks Council for the grass cutting and verge maintenance, principally around Bledlow Ridge (within the 30mph limits) and also in parts of Saunderton.

We also maintain the Meadow Styles Playground, numerous bus shelters and benches, Bledlow and Saunderton Churchyards and a small wooded area (The Dell) on Chinnor Road. We also have responsibility for a number of the Public Footpaths that run through the Parish and have recently taken on management of the (infamous) 'Hedge at the Crest' – maybe better known locally as Teddy Bear Corner. This Hedge has been neglected in recent years and requires careful and sensitive management to flourish.

We have established an informal roster of local traders and handymen who are able to take on most of the smaller jobs, and we prefer to employ local individuals and firms where appropriate, although for larger, more complex projects we will appoint specialists (e.g. Tree Surgeons) as appropriate.

Parish Maintenance issues can be complex and time consuming to resolve. To that end we have this year set up a Sub Committee to support the Clerk in managing the maintenance agenda and make recommendations to the full Council as appropriate.

Planning and the HRC

As a 'statutory consultee' the Parish Council reviews all planning applications that come through to us from the planning teams at Bucks Council.

The Neighbourhood Plan provides a framework for Cllrs to review and comment on applications. The Council will always try to be helpful and constructive when asked by residents and developers for an opinion, however it must be born in mind that we are not the planning authority, and the professionals at County might not always agree with us – either way.

Following the completion of the West Yard development some while ago it seems unlikely that there will be another 'large development' in the immediate future unless or until a workable proposal is brought forward for the derelict Molin's site. Instead, developers are bringing forward 'infill' schemes and/or looking to re-purpose underused farming properties for housing or business purposes.

At the time of writing the future of the (closed) Wigans Lane Household Recycling Centre remains undecided. An appeal for non-determination has been lodged with the Secretary of State, meaning that the decision is no longer in the hands of Bucks Council.

Increasing the powers of the Council

During the year it was recognized that the Council, thanks to our clerk obtaining the required qualifications, could adopt the 'General Powers of Competence' as defined in the Localism Act of 2012.

Adopting the GPC removes a number of historical legislative constraints on the work of the Parish Council. For example under GPC the Parish Council has more scope to support businesses in the Parish, something that hitherto we were unable to do, even for the most compelling cases.

Conclusion

This past year has been challenging for everyone, both Cllrs and residents alike. However I believe that as a Parish Council we have made progress on a number of fronts, and with the adoption of GPC now have the legal framework to do more for our community as it emerges out of the shadow of Covid – 19.

At times it has been hard, and as individuals we do not always agree with each other, however as we look forward to transitioning to a 'new' council after the May elections I believe that we are in a good place.

I would personally like to take this opportunity to thank our Clerk, Tracey Martin for all she has done for the Council and the Community. It is thanks to Tracey's hard work and commitment we have been able to adopt GPC and even in the more mundane day to day challenges gets the job done.

We are lucky to have her – as are Longwick !

I'd also like to thank Tony Lord for all he has done for us as my Vice Chair and, of course, all the Cllrs for their commitment to the Council and the community it represents.

Stephen Reading
Chair
Bledlow – cum – Saunderton Parish Council