**Report from Retiring Chairman on 2019/20 and 2020/21**

The Annual Report is generally produced for the Parish Council Annual General Meeting but as the 2020 AGM did not take place because of the constraints surrounding meetings due to Covid, this report covers the activity of the Parish Council for the two years ending on 18th May 2021 when the new Parish Council take over.

The parish Councillors who served during this period were:

Simon Bruce – Chair, Adam Walton – Vice Chair, George Brown, Mike Crystal, Ashley Juniper, Anthea Kelsall, Andrew Short, Di Webb, Angela Williams

The Parish Council is supported by Glenys Gill as Parish Clerk.

Simon Bruce, Ashley Juniper and Angela Williams did not stand for re-election and are standing down from the Parish Council. The remaining members stood for re-election together with Joe Willis and Jason Baxter and because there were less than the prescribed number of members, they were automatically appointed. The Parish Council should have 9 members and so there is currently one remaining vacancy which can be filled by the new council co-opting another member.

The Parish Council generally meets at 7pm on the second Tuesday of each month, these meetings have been virtual since March 2020 in line with the Covid restrictions, but from now on, assuming there is no tightening, will be in the village hall. Any member of the community is welcome to attend as observers.

The Parish Council is directly responsible for:

* the village greens
* the lavatories
* the Butts (grass area)
* the village pump
* the common at Weavern

In addition, the Parish Council has submitted an application for the registration of the grass and trees at Little Challows as a village green.

The Parish Council has a range of other routine responsibilities, which include arranging for maintenance of footpaths, verges, road surfaces, and gullies. While the Parish Council does not control the budget for these activities it is able to liaise with Wiltshire Council to arrange for maintenance to be carried out, for example via the Parish Steward.

The Parish Council receives funding from Wiltshire Council which is collected from householders as part of their Council Tax known as the precept. This is around £9,000 per annum.

The parish Council runs a balanced budget whereby the cost of providing the services and managing the assets (with the exception of the lavatories) is equal to the precept income.

This approach means that there are no funds available to the Parish Council for projects of a capital nature such as traffic calming. The income required to fund these capital projects has largely come from filming.

**Covid – 19 Vulnerable Resident Support Programme** When Covid – 19 struck in March 2020 the Parish Council, in emergency session agreed that a programme should be established to support the more vulnerable members of the community.

In March last year, it was exceedingly difficult to predict how the pandemic would affect our community and so the plan was developed given the information available at the time and not knowing how long it would be in operation for.

Volunteers were called for and more than 50 residents volunteered to support the 50 plus people who had been identified as potentially vulnerable. A spreadsheet was developed and each volunteer, in partnership with a second volunteer was allocated to support two potentially vulnerable residents. The scheme was registered with Wiltshire Council. The scheme worked really well and brought the community together.

Towards the end of the summer in 2020, there was a fall off in the number of Covid cases and the Parish Council were considering closing the programme, but then the second wave came. I contacted all the volunteers to confirm they were happy to continue, and the scheme is still in place today.

Sadly we lost two vulnerable members of our community to Covid and the programme is still supporting Robert Marsh who although not affected by Covid, as a vulnerable person, was covered by the scheme.

Hopefully there will be no third wave, but its all-in place in case there is.

 **The Village Greens** The greens are mowed and maintained by the Parish Council who contract with David Taylor to cut the grass and to undertake other repairs.

The Willows at the rear of the pond are being pollarded back to their original pollarding points. This is being done over a three-year cycle to reduce the severity of the visual impact.

Last autumn, the margins of the pond were cleared of brambles and excessive weed growth, this really needs to be undertaken annually.

**The Lavatories** With the exception of being opened from April until Nov 2019, the lavatories have been closed due to the Covid pandemic. Following the views expressed by the community in the Parish Survey, the decision was made to re-open the lavatories in the spring of 2020 but this didn’t take place as planned due to Covid cleaning requirements.

The lavatories are currently the subject of a public consultation following which the new Parish Council will need to make a decision as to whether to retain and re-commission the lavatories or sell them to obtain funds which can be used to finance further capital projects.

It has been agreed with Wiltshire Council that should the lavatories be sold, they will release all of the restrictive covenants that affect the sale value and that the Parish Council will be permitted to retain 40% of the net value to fund future capital projects.

**The Defibrillator** The Parish Council have a contract with South Western Ambulance Service for the defibrillator, its maintenance and annual training. No training has taken place recently due to covid restrictions.

**The Butts** In the Parish Survey, the consensus indicated that more attention should be paid to the management of the Butts. As a consequence, a working group has been established who have developed a plan for ongoing management which was agreed by the Parish Council. The Butts working group have been managing the Butts for the last 2 years and have purchased equipment to help in this.

**Little Challows** Following tree work undertaken by Wiltshire Council to bring the trees into good order, the Parish Council have adopted the maintenance of the grass and trees in this area. Historically, this had been maintained by Wiltshire Council, but because they are under pressure financially, they are ceasing to cut grass where they are not legally required to do so. David Taylor has been asked to add the grass areas of Little Challows to the grass cutting that he carries out for the Parish Council. The Parish Council have made an application to Wiltshire Council that the area is adopted as a village green which will protect it going forward.

**Support for Local Organisations** The Parish Council agreed to support the Biddestone Broadsheet, providing an annual grant of £600 (to be reviewed each year).

**Parish Council Events/Seasonal Activities** The Council organised litter picks, these were discouraged by Wiltshire Council due to social distancing, but one took place last weekend.

**Parish Steward** The Parish Steward continues to offer an exceptionally good level of support undertaking many maintenance issues.

**Best Kept Village** We have entered the best kept village competition. We have high standards to maintain as we won this three years ago. Inspections will take place in the early summer.

**Publicity/Information** The Parish Council has an obligation to maintain a website and due to a certain amount of duplication, it was agreed that the various village websites should be merged into one. This work is ongoing.

**Finance** At the time of writing, the Council’s reserves are £45k, of that £39.5k is earmarked for traffic calming and £2k in respect of the lavatories. This leaves an unallocated total of just under £3.5k.

We are hoping to benefit from filming income over the coming year which will further allow us to undertake capital projects.

Our budgets are set so that our regular spending, before exceptional items such as traffic calming schemes, balances with our precept income.

For 2021/22, the Parish Council increased the precept above RPI as it is anticipated that we will be required to provide more local services in the future as funding from Wiltshire Council becomes more difficult.

**Planning** The Council has considered a number of planning applications during the last two years and where appropriate has passed comment to the County Council.

It’s important to bear in mind that the County Council which makes the decisions on planning applications, in line with the policies as defined in the Wiltshire Core Strategy. However the Parish Council submits comments and recommendations, having taken on board the views of members of the public who are entitled to attend its meetings.

Due to its sensitivity and impact on the village, the Parish Council have however been closely involved with the proposed redevelopment of the former Biddestone Arms site. A number of consultation meetings have been encouraged and facilitated to allow the developer to take the views of the community into account when developing their scheme.

I am very pleased that in the latest scheme, the developer has scaled right back from his initial nine house, subsequently reduced to a six house scheme to much more appropriate scheme for four units.

I feel that the latest scheme really takes the views of the community on board. The scheme entails the demolition of the Victorian bar that juts out into the road and the modern restaurant, refurbishment of the old part of the pub and conversion into a residential unit, together with three additional residential units arranged as a ‘farmyard’ development rather than detached houses in a modern cul-de -sac. Hopefully, despite the reduced scale of the development, the developer will be able to maintain his Section 278 contribution to the tune of £30k to fund the carriageway improvements between the entrance to the development and the Green.

The Parish Council were also closely involved in submitting feedback from Slaughterford residents to the Colerne Neighbourhood Planning group who had identified the Slaughterford Mill site as offering potential to be nominated as a development site within their Neighbourhood Plan.

**The Parish Survey/Neighbourhood Plan** Three years ago, supported by a number of volunteers, the Parish Council undertook a Parish Survey. The survey was intended to establish the views of the parishioners in respect of issues over which the Parish Council had control or influence and to determine whether the community had the appetite to move forward with a Neighbourhood Plan. Following a series of consultation meetings, the survey was circulated to all, with 76% returning their questionnaires. The results were then presented at an open meeting, which was well attended.

The results of the survey are invaluable to the Parish Council as they provide very clear guidance and a mandate going forward.

As a consequence of the above, as there was little interest in new housing development, and that outcome is in line with the Wiltshire Core Strategy in respect of housing development within small villages, we will not be developing a Neighbourhood Plan as to do so presumes that as a community, we want more housing than would be provided under the Core Strategy.

Over the last 2 years, the Parish Council has continued to rely on the views expressed in the Parish Survey to provide a mandate to support its decision making.

The proposed changes to the Wiltshire Core Strategy that determines the allocation of new housing within the county is being updated so that it will run to 2035. The Council are not proposing any changes to the planning status of small villages where only limited infill development will be permitted.

In the light of this, the Parish Council decision not to proceed with the production of a fully blown Neighbourhood Plan, with all the work and associated costs would appear to remain valid.

**Assets of Community Value** The Council has made an application under the Assets of Community Value Scheme to preserve certain assets for the benefit of the community. Applications were previously submitted in respect of the two pubs and part of the sports field. In the case of the two pubs, the application was previously rejected as there were two pubs and applications would only be considered when a community is down to their last pub. With the demise of the Biddestone Arms as a pub, a fresh application was successfully submitted in respect of the White Horse.

**Traffic Calming Measures** The Parish Council purchased a SID (Speed Indicator Device) which has been in place for the last two years. There are four sockets located at the four entry points into the village and the SID is moved on rotation around these locations. Ideally the SID should be moved every 2 weeks for maximum benefit.

The planned improvements to the intersection of Church Road and Cuttle Lane were largely completed in 2019. The textured surface is due to be completed in June when the contractors visit the village to put the texture in place on the village gateways. This scheme was financed on a 50/50 basis where the Parish Council paid half and Wiltshire Council the remainder.

As many of you will have witnessed today, the planned works to the 4 village gateways have commenced. Today and tomorrow, the underlying carriageway surface is being removed and replaced to provide a robust foundation for the textured surfaces and 20 mph roundels that will be applied in mid-June.

This project is being entirely financed by the Parish Council, the only support received from Wiltshire Council was for the design work and management. At this stage, due to escalating budget estimates, only the hard surfacing works have been commissioned, it is intended that the new signage and entrance gateways which form a part of the overall scheme will be instructed by the new Parish Council as soon as sufficient funds are available. Depending on the final costs of the carriageway works and whether the contingencies have been consumed, together with a steady stream of revenue from filming, this might not take too long. The new Parish Council need to finalise the decision on the colour of the textured surface at tonight’s meeting.

The planned scheme to link the Biddestone Arms to the Green was abandoned by the Parish Council due to cost (£30,000). The Parish Council have however agreed with the developers of the Biddestone arms that should they succeed in obtaining consent for their development that they would carry out the approved works under a section 278 agreement.

**Resilience Plan** The existing Snow Plan was widened in scope to include a flood and resilience plan.

**Gigaclear** Gigaclear have been laying their network of ducts and cabinets over the last two months. The work is nearing completion and hopefully the benefits of ‘fibre to the house’, high speed broadband will not only offer very fast internet speeds to those who subscribe, but I am sure, the competition will encourage the existing suppliers to improve their services to stop a mass migration to full fibre.

In installing their network, Gigaclear have not been totally transparent in making their drawings available, following a request, I have only seen in detail the network drawing for the Butts. Generally their cabinets have been installed discreetly against walls but like many, I was horrified when I saw a cabinet appear in the middle of the Greens, when it could so easily have been installed against a wall to make it less prominent. Also a shame the installer didn’t have a spirit level.

**Filming** In the Parish Survey, the Parish Council were given an overwhelming mandate in support of filming which has proved a welcome source of funds for capital projects and has swelled our coffers to enable us to consider projects that we would be unable to fund if we had to rely on the precept alone.

Over the last two years, although slowed by Covid, further episodes of Agatha Raisin have been filmed in the village with a further day planned for 31st May.

Thank you all for your support over the last four years. I would also like to pass my best wishes to the new Council going forward.