

2023 Chairman's Report

The past year has seen a number of challenges and changes within the Parish Council, not least because of 2 councillors stepping down as they no longer live in the parish. As a result, I would like to publicly thank John Barker and David Clough for their contribution to the Parish Council. Our attempts to recruit new councillors has been quite successful to the extent that although it was an uncontested election on 4 May we now have 6 of the 7 councillors we should have. As a result, we welcome Malcom Riggs and Mike Howley to the Parish Council and will be continuing to seek another volunteer to fill the last vacancy.

Financial

Despite ever increasing costs GKPC remains in a healthy financial position and holds reserves in line with local government guidelines. Once again we have tried to keep the precept increase to a minimum and while the percentage increase of 6% on your council tax bill may seem high this merely reflects the relatively small size of the precept. A basic financial breakdown is attached to this report: details of how to access full details of the last accounting period will be posted on the parish noticeboards at Christchurch and Kilcot Hill in the near future.

Roads

There is no doubt that the 6 month closure of the A40 between Huntley and the Lea Line resulted in a significant amount of additional traffic using the B4221 and the B4222, even though they did not form part of the official diversion routes. The B4221 being a direct link to the M50, plus it having a better alignment than the A40, continues to generate unnecessary HGV traffic. With no indication that Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) intends to make good on the commitment to reduce through HGV traffic on roads such as the B4221, our County Councillor has been asked to ascertain what and when something will happen.

Speeding in the Parish continues to be a problem. With the road works at Kilcot Cross now complete we will be resuming Community Speedwatch (CSW) in the near future. Additional volunteers to help conduct speed checks are always welcome: if you would like to take part in CSW checks, or would like further information, please contact the Parish Clerk, Charlee Roberts.

Disappointingly, despite several attempts to obtain an update from Herefordshire County Council, we are no further forward with our attempts to get a 7.5ton weight restriction on the B4222 as a means of removing through HGV traffic on this totally unsuitable road. Unfortunately, an approach to Aston Ingham Parish Council to seek their support for this project seems to have fallen on deaf ears as there has been no response to an email sent to them in November 2022.

Road Repairs

While the majority of roads in the parish are in a reasonable condition compared to many others locally it is clear that our annual report to Highways is no longer able to keep up with the speed at which potholes appear and deteriorate to the stage where they could cause damage. As a result, if anyone comes across a Highways issue you are urged to report it directly to Gloucestershire Highways immediately.

On the positive side, the recently completed drainage works on the Aston Ingham Road should significantly reduce the amount of surface water around Kilcot Cross when it rains heavily.

Planning

In last year's report I highlighted the challenges we face, as a settlement without boundaries, as the protection from new development we have previously enjoyed has been seriously eroded by ill-conceived changes to planning regulations by central government. While the good news is that the Government has clearly accepted it got it wrong and plans to remove some of the changes, plus additional weight will be given to local inputs, this is clearly not going to happen immediately. Hopefully it will also reduce the number of vexatious appeals against planning decisions.

During the past year the Parish Council has continued to comment on a variety of planning applications, to which we have continued to respond in line with our status as a settlement without boundaries. Unfortunately, we continue to be concerned at the ineffectiveness of Forest of Dean District Council's planning enforcement organisation given that there a number of unresolved planning infringements, some of which have been ongoing for a number of years.

Oxenhall Lane Ford

Some of you will be aware that the ford on Oxenhall Lane has lacked a safe crossing for pedestrians and cyclists, with the result that there have been a number of injuries sustained. I am delighted to report that after a long and somewhat torturous campaign a bridge was finally installed earlier this year. This will provide a safe means of crossing the ford that was, despite some rumours circulating in the parish, completed at around 1/7th of the cost contained in Gloucestershire Highways original feasibility study. Thanks must go to Gloucestershire County Council Public Rights of Way organisation, our GCC Local Highways Manager, Newent Cycling Group and our County Councillor, Gill Mosley for helping to bring this project to fruition.

Bus Service

Keen to see the return of a viable bus service to the parish the Parish Council provided financial support to both the interim service and the recently introduced Daffodil Line service. Councillors consider that this has been money well spent and hope that parishioners will support it. As has been pointed out its success relies on it being used, so the maxim must be "use it or lose it".

Communication

In my closing remarks last year I highlighted the fact that the Parish Council must, in the absence of feedback to the contrary, assume that parishioners are generally happy with what we do on your behalf. I also mentioned that the success of a Parish Council relies on the support it receives from the community it serves. Twelve months on, in the light of our struggle to recruit additional councillors, an almost complete lack of feedback and the recent uncontested election, plus not having had a single expression of interest in helping to formulate a consultation document on a new Parish Plan, I and my fellow councillors are becoming increasingly concerned about the low level of engagement from parishioners. While information is available from the website it is extremely disappointing that we have email contacts for less than 50% of the households in the parish. Given the dispersed nature of the parish it is unrealistic to expect councillors to hand deliver even an annual newsletter, while postage costs make sending information to every house diverts our scant financial resources from other projects. As a result, while we can make arrangements for those who do not have access to emails or the internet, we would ask that as many households as possible subscribe to our email mailing list via the Parish Clerk, who can be contacted on clerk@gkpc.co.uk.

Nigel Warwick, Chairman