

Chairman's Statement: Annual Parish Meeting – 7th May 2019

Finance:

You may be aware that for some years now we have adopted a policy of transparency regarding our accounts. This means that every invoice over the sum of £100 is published on the Parish website. In addition, as well as the annual audit, the Clerk publishes the accounts showing all expenditure and a forecast of expenditure which is then reviewed by the Parish Council at every meeting.

Bank balance: We ended the last financial year with a balance of £5,909 in the account so the finances are in good health.

However, it should be noted that of this total there are certain funds ring-fenced for unforeseen contingences, ponds maintenance and the maintenance of the two Defibrillators – the total of ring-fenced funds is £ 2,230 so currently our disposable funds amount to £3,679.

The Parish Precept, which is deducted as part of every household's Council Tax remains unchanged again for this financial year and is the main source of income for the Parish Council and stands at £2,472 per annum.

Expenditure. Apart from the recurring expenditure on insurance, membership of Parish Council Association and Clerk's wages, the Parish Council has adopted a pragmatic approach as part of its expenditure policy by only funding what we call 'Community Projects' and it will be no surprise to anyone to hear that the main focus of our attention over the last year was the Village Hall, and last year we purchased a new main entrance door for the Hall thus providing better insulation and security.

Another major project that we have undertaken, along with the other parishes in the Severn Voice area is the responsibility for verge cutting. This is the third year of running this contract and it seems to be working well. We get 2 cuts of the verges and the corner splays per annum. We pay the local contractor and then claim the expense from GCC so this does not cost us anything. This project actually produces a small income for the PC.

We do not donate funds to charities or political parties as the Parish Council remains apolitical.

Any worthwhile ideas for future projects that are of benefit for the whole community would be welcome.

Broadband

The Saga of a poor broadband download speed continues but there seems to be a light at the end of the tunnel.

Gigaclear, the company contracted by GCC to lay high speed fibre throughout Gloucestershire, has assured us that by mid to late 2019 the new system will be ready.

However, as we see it there is one rather large hurdle to overcome – namely connecting the fibre laid throughout the village to a server.

This is meant to be being done via a connection to Minsterworth which you may have realised is on the other side of the River Severn.

Since February 2018 the intention has been to drill under the river to establish the connection but the start date for drilling keeps slipped – the latest estimate is that the 'drilling shot' is due to take place on Monday 20th May – i.e. in less than 2 weeks! Provided of course that all the necessary permissions have been granted.

We are aware that the trenching work carried out by Gigaclear's contractors (Complete Utilities) has left rather a lot of large stones on the grass verge areas outside houses and on the grassed areas in lay-bys. In

addition, some of the repair work to the tarmac surfaces is starting to subside. We have flagged this up to Gigaclear and await a response.

We have had 2 meetings or briefings from the Gigaclear Management team over the last year: one in August last year and one at the end of March. Since Gigaclear was awarded the contract by GCC for both Gloucestershire and Herefordshire, the company has signed further contracts with Devon & Somerset, Wiltshire, Berkshire, Essex, Oxfordshire and Northamptonshire.

It would therefore appear that the company has grown rather too quickly and did not have the management teams in place to cope with the increased workload. This has meant both delays in the construction work as well as technical difficulties. There has also been a constant change of personalities which hasn't made it easy for us to obtain clear answers to our concerns.

One of the unanswered issues is whether or not ISPs like Sky can operate via the Gigaclear network – at the moment there are only a handful of very small ISPs (none of which were previously known to me) who have signed contracts with Gigaclear – but we will keep you informed as the system develops.

Parish Councillors

Over the past few years we have made a plea for some new blood to come forward and offer their services as a parish councillor. This plea has been met with some success but we are now entering a critical stage.

In May 2020 there is due to be a local election and alongside that there will be a Parish Council election. This means that the tenure for all Councillors will expire and all 5 Councillors will be required to stand for re-election. However, I am aware that Trevor Jones, one of our Councillors, wishes to retire permanently at that stage and I too would like to hand over the reins of Chair after 11 years in office. However, I would be happy to stay on as a Councillor for a further year or until a replacement can be co-opted.

Of course this may all change if more than 5 people register their intention to stand for election as I may not even be re-elected! If however, only 5 people stand for election then all 5 will be 'deemed elected' by default.

Flood Defences

You may recall the saga of the Environment Agency's plans to flood 720 acres of agricultural land on the Elmore Meadows – this was successfully fought off but only after a considerable struggle with both the Environment Agency and Central Government.

It is worth noting that the funding for the project – some £20 million – was due to come from the EU coffers as part of the legislation to construct compensating habitats for wildlife. If Brexit comes to pass this year it will mean that there will be no more EU funding for such projects. Equally, as our own Government's finances tighten, I can envisage a reduction in the EA's budget and the knock-on from this will be that less money will be spent maintaining the flood defences, cutting the grass along the river banks and clearing up the rubbish after the Severn Bores.

This could therefore entail a certain amount of volunteer work in the future if we are to maintain the integrity of our flood defences and the appearance of the river banks.

Vote of Thanks

I would like to record a formal vote of thanks to all Councillors for their contributions during the year. As you may know, serving on the Parish Council is a voluntary appointment and they give their time for the benefit of the whole community.

I would like to record a special vote of thanks to our Clerk who has been ultra efficient and dedicated, above and beyond the call of duty and as such has made my role so much easier.

John Field (Chair)

