

CHAIR'S ANNUAL REPORT 2020/21

My last annual report up to May 2020, reflected on the ways in which our national life had started to adapt to the new and unforeseen national Coronavirus emergency. The Council had started to manage its business differently and the community had begun to respond in a magnificent way by ensuring that everyone was looked after, and no-one was left behind. It might be thought that three national lockdowns later, and with some restrictions remaining in place, this would be a bleak report indeed. But it isn't!

COVID-19



Despite all the difficulties, despite the loss of those of us who have sadly succumbed to this unforgiving virus, despite the ill-health and hospitalisation that many have endured, Charlton Kings has managed to adapt to the new life that we have been required to lead and from now, we look forward with a greater optimism than we might have dared to hope in the dark winter days.

Your Council has held every one of its monthly meetings this year. This has not been without its challenges, but we have not missed a single deadline for producing agendas, holding meetings, and posting almost 100 pages of minutes. Councils will be required to hold face to face meetings from 6th May, so our Annual Meeting of Council on 24th will be the first time for 15 months that 17 councillors will have met together around a table in the Stanton Hall. We have risen to the challenges of staff mostly having to work from home, councillors only meeting each other in person from time to time to take key projects forward, and having to interact with residents via remote meetings rather than face to face in the Stanton Hall. Our website has been an enormous help in disseminating information in a timely way, and we have nervously dipped our toes further into social media.

Friends of Charlton Kings (FoCK) was established as a community volunteer group immediately the first lockdown was in place and has continued to perform a brilliant job throughout the year in supporting all residents who have needed to call on their help. Confronting these difficult early challenges has created a strong and capable group that has evolved into a really positive force for good in our community, and I will refer to their work throughout this report.



Our Council



This has been a year of transition for Council. We have thanked 5 retiring members for their service this year and welcomed 5 new members; Cllrs Paul Cockwill, Jim O'Sullivan, Ros Smith,

Katie Gosling, and Ian Gosling, who have stood up to take their place and bring us back to our full complement of 17. In my 12 years on Council, I have enjoyed the company and commitment of 49 fellow councillors, which reflects the continuous and continuing need for members of our community to put themselves forward for the benefit of their friends and neighbours. It is important to acknowledge that our councillors receive no annual allowance for their service and act in a voluntary capacity for the benefit of all although nominal contributions to two of the busiest councillors' home office supplies cost £0.02 on the

Precept. The equivalent cost to the County and Borough Councils of securing essential democratic representation by our seven County and Borough councillors is £11.60.

I thank each and every one of our parish councillors for their immense fortitude and commitment, especially during this most difficult of years when they have not wavered in their determination to deliver the Council's business.

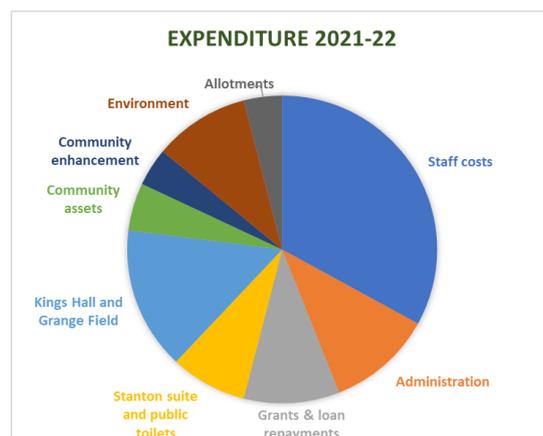
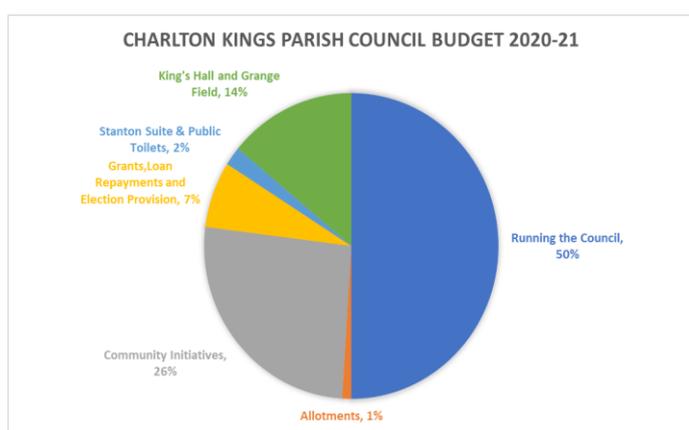
We managed to hold our second Strategy Away Day in September, between lockdowns, and socially distanced. Our discussions were very necessary because it had become apparent that councillors' aspirations to create positive outcomes for our parish had already outstripped our capacity to fund them.

It has taken us some time to realise that of the 264 Councils in Gloucestershire, whose average Precept this year is £49, Charlton Kings is the **4th largest** Town/Parish Council behind Cirencester, Quedgeley, and Bishops Cleeve (by tax-base -which is equivalent to population). We nevertheless set the **4th lowest** Precept of the 47 Councils that make up the GAPTC Larger Councils group at £24.50 (1% of the total Council Tax) compared to the average of £85.75.

Accepting that we should continue to fund 'business as usual', difficult conversations were held about which of our big and challenging new projects we should look to resource. We finally allocated everything to the 'Should Do' category, and although this included accepting the responsibility for the future of the Kings Hall, the strong caveat was that this project would need to be an affordable mix of purchase from the Borough Council and redevelopment costs. Since it was not our direct responsibility to resolve the long-term issues, we agreed that this would not be a project that we would allow to bankrupt the Council.

Our Precept for 2021-22

Our Parish Plan, published in 2017, remains our guiding document and from it we have developed an Annual Action Plan for each of the four years of this Council that identifies what we intend to do up to May 2022. The pie charts show the comparison between our budgets for 2020/21 and 2021/22, and although we have made some changes to the presentation of the information, the broad picture is clear.



Our total expenditure in 2021-22 is planned to be £198,000. We increased the average (Band D) Precept by £5 to £29.50 for the coming year, which will raise £146,000; we anticipate that grants will bring in £16,000; and we have once again needed to reduce our General Reserve, by £26,000 this year. Our Finance and General Purposes Committee, under the Chairmanship of Cllr Clive Hodges, recognises this as being unsustainable in the long term and is actively seeking additional external funding and seeking to reduce planned spending wherever there is an acceptable means of doing so.

Our Staff

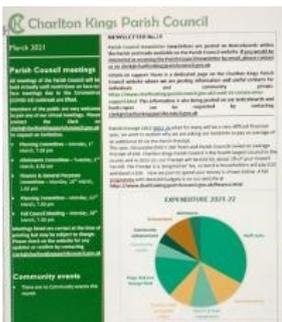
It has been the most difficult working year for each of our three members of staff. Nevertheless, other than having to stop physical visits to the office by members of the public, the work of Council has continued to be delivered throughout the year. That this has apparently happened seamlessly, is a great compliment to the professionalism of our staff and they have our grateful thanks.



Discussions between councillors and the Clerk at our Away Day, concluded that the scale of this Council's business had outstripped the administrative support available to cope with it, and this had led to unfair demands on staff who were working many unpaid hours overtime just to get the work done. It was agreed that we would recruit a fourth, part-time member of staff, whose role would primarily be to support the community engagement that our projects will depend on if they are to succeed. We also committed to undertaking a full review of all job descriptions, remuneration, and performance management systems. This work, which is a big step forward in creating a better employment framework, has been completed and became operational on 1st April. Our staff costs have, as a consequence, risen to 30% of our planned expenditure, which reflects the primary role of a Parish Council as a facilitator, working across many partnerships.

Communication and Engagement

The impact of the three Covid lockdowns on our ability to engage with residents has been significant. We had to cancel our Parish Meeting last May, and open meetings to showcase the work we are doing with our CK Health Connect and CK Futures programmes in the Stanton Hall were abandoned. Similarly, our ability to engage with residents face to face about potential improvements we had in mind for Grange Field have not been able to be held, and this has caused considerable difficulty in facilitating a wide debate about some projects. Nevertheless, we have held all planned meetings of Council and our Standing Committees as planned, but remotely, and each has incorporated the opportunity for public attendance or engagement. CK Futures has excelled in working with a wide range of interested and knowledgeable volunteers who have been able to pass on their knowledge and motivation via a series of meetings and



webinars. Our Newsletter appeared every month and is a valuable channel for us to communicate up to the minute reports on our activities. The March issue ran to nine pages, which was too long so we are planning to produce shorter articles each month with links to our website for issues that demand more space. The website continues to provide the community with a document storage system, a news channel, and outlets for our major projects. In only a few years it has done its job so well that we are having to review its basic format to assess whether it remains fit for development to meet future needs.

Working in partnership

Youth services: We continued to host meetings of the group comprising parish and borough councillors, secondary schools, churches, and police to see how we may collectively work to engage with young people who, this year, have been severely affected by the various outcomes from the pandemic. In Summer 2020 there were considerable disturbances in Battledown, and the Parish Council funded the Trustees of the Youth and Community Centre to employ two excellent professional youth workers. Friends of Charlton Kings provided the leadership and management, and a range of activities were provided that contributed to helping with some young people's mental health as well as reducing a range of challenging behaviours.

This work has been seen as something of a model in Cheltenham and has led to a new pan-Cheltenham partnership project to deliver outreach youth services from an established professional organisation. The successful organisation will shortly be chosen and the first year's work, of what must become a rolling programme, will begin. Charlton Kings has contributed £5k into a £60k fund as have two other Parish Councils, with significant funding from the Borough Council, the Clinical Commissioning Group and Cheltenham Borough Homes.

Community well-being: We have significantly developed our CK Health Connect partnership, which has continued to grow and identify new opportunities. The concept of 'Social Prescribing' to address loneliness and isolation, is at the heart of what is being achieved by connecting people to existing community-based local services. This approach has worked well when trialled in other parts of the UK, resulting in improved rates of patient and client recovery, reduced hospital admissions and better overall well-being. As lead of the core partner group, Cllr Lynda Johnson has overseen the production and publication of the Health and Well-Being Directory for Charlton Kings, now published on our website, but more importantly, used by front-line NHS service providers in Charlton Kings and the GP surgery. We are also working with the NHS Directory Services Team to develop a dedicated website for the directory, as a resource for our local doctors and frontline support workers and creating a possible blueprint for other areas of Gloucestershire. Phase 2 of this project has now begun, which will establish what residents and the service providers will need to navigate through the Covid-19 transition period as restrictions ease.



CK Futures: Since a Community Open Meeting in 2019 identified Climate Change as an existential threat to



us as well as to people, animals, and habitats in far-away lands, Cllr Felicity Parnham has been leading the Council's work to lay the foundations, and build networks and partnerships to identify, shape and deliver the activities that we in Charlton Kings can

take forward. The CK Futures Strategy – Connecting People, Climate and Environment, created six themes, each with a delivery lead, to work on real solutions and create awareness of the impact of climate change and how to make a difference through carbon reduction and by building strong connections to the environment in which we live. The themes are Localness, People – knowledge, attitude and actions, Buildings and Energy, Transport, Less Waste, and Our Natural and Built Environments. This approach breaks new ground and has further encouraged greater involvement and understanding by residents through the introduction of a new Facebook page 'Sustainable Charlton Kings', the creation of carbon reduction guides and monthly webinars which provide expert help and assistance. Plus raising awareness and stimulating conversations with climate footprint facts, posters and banners placed across the parish. We are also engaging young people in the climate discussion and have gained the interest of Cheltenham's twin towns in Russia, Germany and France who are keen to share their experience, knowledge, and ideas with pupils from local schools. This is still early days, but we are encouraged by the collaboration by other groups such as Vision 21 and Clean Air Cheltenham.



As leader of the Natural and Built environment themes, it is with huge pleasure and relief that I can report that our joint partnership bid, with Friends of Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common (FOLK), Cheltenham Borough Council and the Cotswolds National Landscape (AONB), has finally received confirmation that we have been awarded £175k by National Grid under their

Landscape Enhancement Initiative to improve the landscape and biodiversity of Ravensgate Common, with Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common. There are many, many other initiatives underway, all of which are detailed on the Parish Council's website and reported in the excellent CK Futures Newsletter.

Roads and transport: Our quarterly liaison meetings with Gloucestershire Highways (GH), which are also attended by some of our County and Borough Councillors, have continued to provide an important forum where we can discuss the priorities as we see them in Charlton Kings. We thank GH for their willingness to engage with us this year, and for addressing such issues as unblocking the gullies on New Street, replacing kerbstones, bringing in the County Road Safety Team to look at the accident black spot by Spirax Sarco, and engaging in debate about opportunities to improve the safety of the many students who need to use East End Road. The CK Futures theme on Transport, led by Cllr Andrew Lansley, has been researching the potential to provide a number of public Electric Vehicle (EV) charging points in car parks and commercial developments, and we hope that we will develop this to implementation stage in 2021. Most recently, we invited Joe Lewin, the CEO of Zwings e-scooters, to make a presentation to Council about the e-scooter trial in Cheltenham. Despite difficulties in controlling the behaviour of some users, this form of microtransportation clearly shows promise, and it will be interesting to monitor its development over the next 12 months.

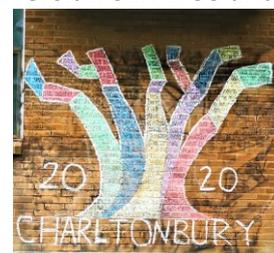


Footpaths and Bridleways: Public Rights Of Way (PROW) are part of the parish's highways network and Cllr Rob Reid has once again liaised very effectively with the County Rights of Way Officer to deliver some major improvements. Our 'Footpath Guardians' continue to walk and inspect all routes and update the schedule of path condition and infrastructure requirements. The year's highlight was the completion of the permissive footpath at Vineyards Farm on Ravensgate Hill. The owner of the farm has given fantastic cooperation and help since the project began four years ago, and the generous gift from a Charlton Kings resident that is ring-fenced for PROW improvements has allowed us to pay for clear signage and infrastructure. The new route is easier (or indeed possible!) to walk in winter and gives one of the best views of Cheltenham to be had in Charlton Kings. We have worked with the same landowner to create a walkable route up the Salters' Path from Timbercombe triangle past Timbercombe wood.



Our Estate

Grange Field: Our lease on the Grange Field has enabled us to make a start on improving its attractiveness and we were glad to undertake the long-planned planting of two specimen trees, a Persian Silk Tree and a Weeping White Mulberry, as well as a 40 m Hornbeam hedge on the west edge of the field. Sadly, our long-planned programme of events last summer all had to be cancelled - the Summer Fayre, celebrating VE Day in May, and VJ Day in August. With 'Glasto' also having to cancel, the one shining exception was the Charltonbury Festival that Friends of Charlton Kings put together in record time and ran over three days in August, giving a fabulous opportunity to local performers to display their musical, artistic and performance skills. Huge thanks to FoCK!



Guided by responses to the consultation on the Parish Plan in 2017, our Community Development Committee, led by Cllr Janet Honeywill, has wanted to develop the range of events, facilities, and landscape improvements that Grange Field's position offers at the heart of the parish. We consulted households within walking distance of the field on a range of options. There was widespread support for extending the facilities but those who live closest were more concerned about potential impact of

additional uses on their quality of life. There remains widespread concern about what is seen as an unacceptable level of antisocial behaviour, including anger about continuing dog fouling, which we are addressing with the Borough Council's Community Support Officer, and littering. A 'Friends of Grange Field' group has been established and we look forward to developing an effective partnership. However, the most divisive proposal that the Council has put forward has been an all-weather exercise path in Grange Field. Councillors were impressed by the enthusiastic use by Prestbury residents of all ages and mobilities of a similar path on their field, and this encouraged us to scope and cost a similar facility for our residents. Like Prestbury Parish Council, the project was to be funded outside the Precept, by an unexpected bonus from the Community Infrastructure Levy, and in our case, also a generous grant from the County Council's 'Growing our Communities' fund. Although our initial consultation on a range of proposals showed broad support for the project, opposition to this specific element increased with proximity to Grange Field. Local residents are extremely concerned about nearby levels of antisocial behaviour and are fearful that such a facility would increase their exposure to unacceptable and distressing behaviour by young people. The Parish Council has received a petition against the exercise path and is considering how to respond. We have subsequently held a further informal outreach meeting and plan others. We have been able to address some misconceptions about what the Parish Council is and is not doing and have compiled answers to a list of 'Frequently Asked Questions' about the work of the Council, our plans for the field and the Kings Hall, our liaison with the police, and other partners in addressing antisocial behaviour and supporting our young people, and many other issues where our extensive range of information outlets have failed to engage important audiences.

Kings Hall: Although we have not yet brought the Kings Hall into our estate, we spent considerable resources in determining whether we would wish to do so. We brought together a dedicated working group under the leadership of Cllr O'Sullivan who has considerable experience in this area of building redevelopment. The Borough Council suddenly changed its position during the year and offered to sell the building to us, so the group has been looking at this option and has commissioned a condition survey of the existing structure that will guide our response. A decision will need to be made in the next twelve months during which time the lease to the Trustees of the Kings Hall Youth and Community Centre will expire.

Stanton Suite: We took the opportunity provided by the third lockdown to completely redecorate the Parish Office, kitchen, toilets, Conference Room and Stanton Hall, ready to open up for users as soon as it is allowed. Recognising that many hirers will have lost significant income during lockdowns, hire charges will be half the usual rate until September.

St. Mary's churchyard: While not part of our estate as the Diocese retains ownership of everything, from 1st April 2020 the Parish Council assumed responsibility for the estate management of St. Mary's churchyard. The Department of Justice finally issued the Order to close the churchyard for burials during



the year and, led by Cllr Duncan Munro, a joint working group with the PCC and volunteers has overseen our first year's programme of work. A new mowing contract was put in place, which with a few tweaks, will continue in the coming year. The third lockdown provided a good opportunity for our tree



surgeons to prune back all the Common Yews behind the churchyard railings and to repollard the magnificent Weeping Willow. It does now look a stark skeleton of its former glory, but the reduction in weight will prolong its life and avoid potentially costly and distressing damage to gravestones.

Allotments: Lockdowns have presented the opportunity for residents to take on one of our 250 allotments in a new and favourable light, and for the first time for many years we have experienced a strong demand.

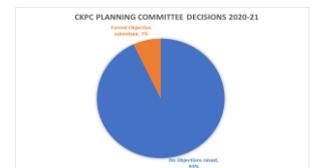
This has created considerable additional work for our office staff and Helen Johnston and Debbie Dockree have both had a great deal to do, which has been compounded by the need to address a range of other lockdown issues. Ryeworth and Haver sites in particular have seen normally timid Roe and Muntjac deer entering the allotments to cause considerable and infuriating damage to crops, which despite erecting some new and expensive deer fencing, we have been unable to fully control. Badgers and moles have joined in to cause our tenants maximum grief. Human vandals have been no less active, and there have been repeated instances of mindless damage and abuse at sites. The police have reacted positively to the many 101 telephone and email reports and have created a SARA Plan that allows them to allocate additional high-vis and covert patrols. Sadly, we took the early decision to cancel the annual allotments competition for 2020 but will run it again this year. Led by Cllrs Pat Palmer and Ned Holt, perhaps the highlight of the allotments' year has been the transfer of most of our large plot 81 at Sappercombe to Friends of Charlton Kings who have created a very active and greatly valued community allotment. FoCK are also looking after the adjoining newly-completed 'Easy Access' plot. Considerable thought has gone into developing the right model for using its three long raised beds and as part of our CK Health Connect project for social prescribing, we will be offering opportunities to share the cultivation and produce.



all

Planning

Over the last 12 months, our hard-working Planning Committee, under the Chairmanship of Cllr Russell Grimshaw, supported by the investigative and analytical prowess of Cllr Penny Hall and other members, has continued to meet, with few exceptions, every two weeks. This is a considerable commitment, as councillors need to familiarise themselves with each application in advance of the meeting in order to keep meetings to time. The committee has considered 212 applications, including a few relating to Tree Preservation Orders, and raised no objections to 197 (93%). Of those, comments were submitted on 8, where an outright objection was felt unnecessary. Although there are relatively few opportunities, outside the AONB, for large developments in Charlton Kings, objections were raised to two large greenfield development proposals at Oakhurst Rise (St Edward's school meadow) and at Oakley Farm (on the former Gloucestershire County Council farmland), which does lie in the AONB. The other major development proposal is the proposed Lidl supermarket off Cirencester Road in the old station complex. This is a complex proposal that was initially felt to be acceptable, but subsequent detailed operational factors have raised concerns. Our recommendations are sent to the planning department at Cheltenham Borough Council, whose planning committee is responsible for final decisions at a local level.



Summary of the year

In a year when all our lives have been disrupted or devastated by the pandemic, councillors and staff have, thankfully, been able to continue to deliver the work we do on behalf of our community. The award by the National Association of Local Councils of the Merit Award in its Local Councils Award Scheme has recognised this achievement. The one person not so far mentioned in this report is our Clerk, Joanna Noles. She has been a pillar of strength and paragon of industry throughout the year, and it is fitting that the Chair's report for the pandemic year of 2020-2021 concludes with a sincere vote of thanks to our Parish Clerk.

Rob Williams
Chair
April 2021