

## COVINGHAM PARISH COUNCIL – Annual Report 2018/19

At the end of the Annual Report for 2017/18 I stated, “I am confident there are no more nasty worms hiding in the can, waiting to be found”. In the grand scheme of things I believe this to have been true. 2018/19 has allowed us to consolidate our position with few issues to deal with, therefore giving us the opportunity to make changes and enhance our visibility.

The first major decision we made was to join the world of social media and create a Facebook page. This has enabled us to publicise what we do; how we try to make a difference in the Community and more importantly provide a means of communication between the Parish Council and the residents that we are representing. As the Parish Council is non-political, we chose to have a closed group where all posts are moderated so that we have an element of control of what is posted ‘in our name’. If questions are asked about something not in our remit, we try to find the answer before approving the post so that there are no misconceptions. In our wildest dreams I don’t believe that any of us expected it to be so well received and used; at the time of writing we have 446 Members.

GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018 meant there were challenges that needed to be overcome, policies introduced and ways of working changed. Cllr Gareth Hawkes worked tirelessly on this and with his total commitment to ensuring that everything is right meant that the Parish Council and individual Councillors were as compliant as possible when 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2018 arrived. We cannot thank him enough!

The Government believes that in principle all data held and managed by local authorities should be made available to local people and a comprehensive, easy to use website is key to making the information required visible. As if GDPR wasn’t enough, Gareth built a new website, policies were updated or written, approved at Parish Council meetings and are now in the public domain for all to see. We have received some favourable comments about the website being more user friendly, let us know what you think. Again, I have to say a huge thank you for the time and effort that Gareth has put into making this possible.

2018/19 has seen some contentious planning issues. The Parish Council is a Statutory Consultee which means that we are not the decision makers, that is for Swindon Borough Council, but we try to influence the outcome. We consciously comment on all Planning Applications that are submitted to SBC in Covingham and those in neighbouring areas that could have an impact on our area. The SHELAA with the threat of houses being built on Covingham Park and Cole Close Park was a particularly worrying time. The Parish Council considered their response to both carefully, based on the information available at the time. Whilst we cannot claim to be solely responsible for the subsequent removal of both sites from the list, there is no doubt that our objections and those raised by the numerous residents, did play a major part in the final decision made by the Planning Officers at SBC.

One of the highlights of being part of the Parish Council has got to be our days out in the Community, whether that be tidying up Covingham Square, bulb planting or clearing the gutters in Martinfield. It gives us the opportunity to talk to the residents, listen to their points of view, which does influence our decisions and generally make ourselves seen. We love it when the residents join us, such as the Sunday in October when hundreds of bulbs were planted across the area; we could all take pride in making Covingham such a picture when the daffodils appeared. Two of the Councillors, Derek Benfield and Lorraine Sandle look after the flower boxes in Covingham Drive and either end of Kingfisher Drive; another Councillor, David Waywell has three boxes under his care in and around Heronscroft, but we have to say a special thank you to the residents that look after the rest. It is such a pleasure to see them all and makes Covingham stand out.

We had a change of personnel in November when John decided to retire as one of the Maintenance team, although he had his hand put up his back to become a Councillor as we could not let his knowledge of the area be lost. We welcomed Simon as his replacement and he and Martin continue to keep the area clean, tidy and safe 6 days out of 7. They also take care of the safety of the play equipment, the exercise equipment, removing epicormic growth, strimming, dealing with the blight of fly tipping and generally ensuring that Covingham continues to be an area that is nice to live in. A big thanks to them both, we couldn’t manage the area without them.

We also welcomed back Scott Wichall, who was a Councillor several years ago, but took a break for family reasons. It's good to have him back on board!

We are currently in our third and final year of a fixed term, fixed price contract for grass cutting, hedge trimming, dog bin emptying and street sweeping. Our Financial Regulations stipulate that we need to go out to tender for Grounds Maintenance Services from April 2020. John Ricketts, with assistance from Roy Bacon and David Waywell, have put together a Tender Document, which can be viewed on our website. The procurement process has been started and the successful provider will be identified by October.

We are painfully aware that the children's play equipment and areas are in need of some attention and bringing up to date. Through careful financial management and budgeting we have been able to allocate £20k of funding to begin the process of upgrading the play areas and will keep everyone informed once this progresses.

I would like to end by saying thank you, firstly to each and every Parish Councillor, who are all volunteers and take no financial recompense for the time, effort and commitment that they put in and secondly, to the residents that have supported us and communicated with us over the last twelve months.

Val Curtis  
Chair, Covingham Parish Council