

Message from the Chairman for the Annual Parish Meeting 25th May 2021

So, we come to the end of another term as Chairman of Grendon Underwood Parish Council and the final year of this council's term of office. It has certainly been a year full of challenge and change. I am extremely grateful to our Councillors and Clerk not only in support of my role but also for their steadfast commitment to delivering our legal duties and services to residents and businesses, adapting to remote working, and for stepping up to support the community. They really have been outstanding – above and beyond. At times I do wonder if our community are aware of the hours and hours they put in, meetings, reports, research – all unpaid and completely thankless at times. If I were to talk about their efforts it would take me a week! Why do they do it? – they do it because they care very much about our village and the people that live in it. We are the lucky ones.

Our Clerk Barry, has been superb in guiding us and keeping us legal. He has saved the community thousands of pounds with grants and through negotiations with suppliers. He has ensured migration to our new website with new email addresses ran smoothly. He has an excellent legal background and we have been thoroughly spoiled with him in our corner. In short, he has kept us legal throughout.

Especially, my thanks go to Cllr Benfield for his support as my Deputy in many fields especially with his freely given maintenance work all around the village; Cllr Jackman as the council's lead on the MUGA project & its representative on the Village Hall Committee and at the Saye & Sele Foundation; Cllr Hedgecox headed up our Personnel Committee; Cllr Mackenzie has been championing our efforts to stamp out speeding through the village. Our community has been at the forefront of all they have set out to do.

It is with sadness I report both Cllrs Hedgecox and Mackenzie have moved out of the area and are no longer eligible to stand as councillors for our parish. They have been a stalwart support for myself and in all we have done for many years and I thank them for their outstanding commitment.

I would also like to put on record the Council's, and my personal, thanks to BC Cllr Angela Macpherson who remains a faithful advocate of Grendon Underwood and its residents at Buckinghamshire Council as our governing Unitary Authority. And, behind it all, our Clerk keeps us on the straight & narrow. I thank them all.

Fingers crossed we are on the home straight with the pandemic that has swept our Country for over a year now. At least we are hopeful we are, at time of writing, in the last throes of this cruel and devastating force of nature. We have all been affected to a greater or lesser extent and our thoughts remain with all those who are still suffering or battling with its after effects.

The year saw the formation of our new Unitary Authority and tailed by the announcement of the death of HRH the Duke of Edinburgh. And quite a year in between!

Yet, throughout this torrid time, I am just in awe of the community spirit in our community – the daily acts of kindness, compassion and selflessness that lift the spirits and confirm we are ready to bounce back into a far better future. I thank you all.

Throughout the year, our wonderful village shop & post office has carried on business as usual and, partnered with the Council, supplied crisis food baskets to many residents in need. We are most grateful. They are a vital asset to the sustainability of our community and we wish them well.

The Swan re-opened for takeaways for a time last year but had to close under government rules. But they are now open part time & under social distancing and gearing up for normal business as soon restrictions allow.

Then, of course, we have an impending outline planning application (OPA) for a third prison, this time a mega prison of some 1440 inmates, hanging over us like a black cloud, occupying our thoughts and draining our resources. The councils of Grendon Underwood & Edgcott have formed a prison working party and they are working tirelessly gathering and collating data so we have a highly professional response, focused on material planning matters that the Planning Authority is able to consider, ready for when the outline planning application comes in. It is imperative that our campaign is not in any way compromised or its credibility be put in any doubt. To that end the official source of information on the campaign is on the GUPC website and all comments should at least be verified there.

So Plans for next year The new Parish Council will be legally mandated and start its 4-year term from 7th May after local elections on 6th May. Apart from the councillors appointed, no-one else put themselves forward to serve their community, so the new council comprises 3 councillors appointed unopposed. This gives us the quorum that allows us to operate legally but I am concerned it may become difficult to function legally should just one councillor fall ill or not be able to function for some reason. Council business could well be interrupted. Keep an eye on the website for more as it arises.

The first meeting of the new council will be this year's Annual Parish Meeting, to be followed by its first Annual Parish Council Meeting in May in the village hall. And the first that must be held 'live' for over a year. I am proud to confirm council has carried on its business almost as usual for the whole time we have not been able to meet directly and I am so glad we can all see each other face to face again. Some projects close to my heart have been necessarily curtailed or delayed but plans are afoot for the upcoming year. Hopefully, I will report on those next May.

We plan the MUGA at the VH to be fully operational this year and we have plans for collaboration projects with the school and prison, both the Headmistress and the Governor being very supportive.

I continue to push for more collaboration with village stakeholders wherever possible and hope to seek meetings when we are all able to get back to normal.

Planning – Of course, we will continue to vigorously oppose the MoJ proposals to build a mega prison with every means at our disposal.

The OxCam Arc [with a million homes projected along the corridor]. We are keeping a watching brief on large scale development applications that would irrevocably destroy the community we live in. Whilst the road element is terminated, the arc itself remains a magnet for developers bent on destroying existing communities and green space.

The VALP remains 'live' and adoption is expected Summer 2021. We are advised that its basic principles are material considerations for the Planning Authority to weigh in any planning application now arising. We concur that growth in a particular location should be sustainable and driven by need - not developer profit. Our Planning Response Policy reflects many of the principals outlined in the Plan.

Other projects under consideration are a green tranquillity garden behind the church; improved pedestrian church crossing; tree planting and woodland community projects collaborating with school & prison.

Finances – I refer to the RFO Annual Report which, I am delighted to report, shows our reserves give us options to carry through our plans. This is mainly due to spend last year being somewhat stalled due to government restrictions. We hope to be back in full swing early in the year. Inevitable, though, Council will have some difficult decisions to make and some will be disappointed. Council will always prioritise on its statutory duties, including safety issues and then discretionary projects as money allows.

Our slightly larger precept request was granted to reflect the growth in population in the village and this will go towards community projects, subject to approval by the Planning Authority. Again, no effect on Council Tax.

Community - the Memorial Benches and bins & improvements to facilities in the village hall, completed last year, have been well received, a prime example of what can be achieved by Community Projects. Our new web site is more and more reflecting our local concerns. You can see it on www.gupc.org.uk

Crime – we enjoy relatively low crime rates and our police team have had some recent successes in disrupting drug crime. But, staggeringly, there are still those who would seek to take advantage during the lock down. Unbelievable! Do take care online and be cautious should anyone you don't know offer help in person or on the phone.

I thank the other stakeholders for submitting their annual reports and commend them to you for reference. Thanks to Thames Valley Police, Grendon Underwood Combined School, Buckinghamshire Council, HMP Grendon, Energy from Waste.

On behalf of your new Council, we wish you every good fortune. Take care. Stay safe; Stay well. Good luck.

Kim Moloney, Chairman of Grendon Underwood Parish Council