

District Councillor Hugo Brown's 2020/21 Roundup for Annual Parish Meetings

Dear Parish Councillors

In accordance with tradition, I have great pleasure in submitting my Annual Roundup to you covering my last 12 months as your District Councillor

Times were no less strange for a Councillor than they were for anybody else.

With the first of the “stay at home” instructions, issued by the Prime Minister on 23rd March, everything suddenly stopped. As with everybody else, I was unsure exactly what to expect but did realise that we would need to prepare for not being allowed out and that we would need to get some provisions in (while not stock-piling) complicated by my having to get my daughter's boyfriend back to Sussex, slightly nervous that the Police would ask what I was doing so far from home; I imagined that this is what living in in E. Germany used to be like (especially redolent as my daughter is known as Starzie – short for Anastasia – just to add to the siege mentality)

None of us knew how we would carry on as effective Councillors serving you, our constituents; none of us knew how, or even if, meetings would happen; and none of us knew that Zoom could mean anything other than a tri-colour ice lolly on a stick (or for those of a certain age a pop number by Fat Larry's Band)

Entirely due to the resourcefulness of the Officers of CDC, we were all soon downloading conference software onto our lap-tops and beginning to communicate with each other again although we could not “meet” formally until 2 months later on 20th May (8 weeks without a CDC meeting is un-heard of!). Due to the backlog which had built up, Planning Committee meetings became especially interesting (?) and it was not unknown for the early virtual ones to last in excess of 5 hours (inc., for the first time, a virtual site tour done by drone)

In the meantime, all local elections were cancelled (hence, the bumper crop this year) and a number of Councillors who were hoping to retire last year were unable to.

All Parish Council, and CDC Committee, meetings were suspended leaving me with evenings to fill – a novel experience – but I soon got the hang of it and have never read so many books when not on holiday (have almost forgotten what those are too). Due to the resourcefulness of Parish Chairmen, their Clerks and all Parish Councillors Parish meetings were also able to resume virtually fairly swiftly and, I think, proceedings have been as smooth as ever.

CDC gave all Councillors £2,000 to distribute to groups in their parishes who were undertaking work alleviating hardship in their communities for those worst affected by the lockdowns. A great quantity of “my money” went to help groups, carrying out medicine runs or food-shopping runs for those unable to get out at all, with petrol costs – a most worthwhile use of the money.

With the World effectively stopped in its tracks and while we all sat at home discovering the joys of internet shopping and discarding mountains of Amazon cardboard (strange how the smallest item seems to require acres of packaging) the Dustbin men and ladies of Cherwell continued their wonderful work, made more problematical by the sheer quantities of

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Amazon cardboard being discarded. They truly deserve to be regarded amongst the front-line workers of the pandemic

The rules covering virtual local government meetings expire on 7th May meaning that virtual meetings will no longer be permissible, including for Parish Council meetings. The Minister in charge, Luke Hall, is saying that the Parliamentary time-table simply cannot accommodate the time to extend the rules. Given that under the road-map, the earliest that PCs can meet indoors is 21st June (as I understand it), a number of Parish Council meetings will need to go by the board, not to mention the Annual Meeting of CDC, a couple of Planning Committee meetings plus numerous other committee meetings unless a sensible solution is found soon.

You may wonder how I choose which topics to incorporate into my Written Reports for PC Meetings and this is based on the simple premise that if it affects your Parish (or nearby) it goes in and more generalised topics are included if I think they may be of interest to some (if not all) Parish Councillors. It's all a bit hit and miss but all Council Papers are available on the CDC website if parish Councillors wish to peruse (pursue?) the other topics

As you all know, Council Elections (for all County seats and 1/3rd of District seats) are being held on 6th May. I am not standing this year, having been re-elected in 2019, so I very much look forward to serving you for a further 12 months

Finally, and as always, I should like to thank all Parish Chairmen, Parish Councillors and Parish Clerks for the help they give me through the year and for making me feel so welcome at their meetings (even if it is a virtual welcome at a virtual meeting)

I look forward to actually seeing you all soon

HMHB

April 2021