**KEMBLE WARD: DISTRICT COUNCILLOR’S ANNUAL REPORT 2021/2**

It's been a very busy year, not least because of Covid, which continued to have a big impact on everyone until the very successful vaccination project enabled us to work our way out of lockdown and into a freer society, but one that is still not ‘normal’ with people talking about a ‘new normal’ – watch this space!

I continue to attend your Parish Council meetings to help where possible or answer any queries on CDC issues and have been involved in various activities outside my normal role on your behalf. These include my continuing involvement in the Light Railway Project, assessing the viability of getting Government funding to re-open a line linking the main line station at Kemble to the centre of Cirencester, and chairing a council team looking into the issue of short term lettings and more specifically so called ‘Party Houses’. I am also Deputy Chairman of the ‘Friends of the Corinium Museum’.

**District Council**

I have been involved in a number of motions to Council in relation to:-

* Catching fly tippers (this activity has increased by 25% over the last couple of years) - voted down.
* Funding for the Queen’s Jubilee – voted down.
* Increasing the dog bins service in response to increased dog ownership – voted down.
* A motion to alter the reasons for referring an application to the planning Committee – voted down

**Major issues through the year**:-

PLANNING

Debate and concerns (raised by more than 60 town and parish councils) over the Planning Committee Protocol and Scheme of Delegation introduced in November 2020 continues. Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown recently met with the CDC CEO, Rob Weaver, planning officers, the CDC legal advisor and representative Parish Council members. It is hoped this will lead to the introduction of improved democratic processes and some proposals being put forward to make the process clearer and more inclusive for the Parish Councils.

BUDGET

I was yet again not able to support this year’s budget, mostly owing to lack of detail on the proposed borrowing and high level of proposed spending. I have concerns as other Councils around the country have been seriously financially damaged by the strategy of borrowing to invest. District Councils have little or no experience in such activities and in my opinion shouldn’t get involved. I also have concerns on this Council’s continuing high spending on Consultants, new staff and unnecessary projects (such as putting the Council’s crest on road signs). Most households reduce their spending when faced with higher costs – not this administration.

Of concern are the increased costs to residents: The maximum Council Tax increase (2% or £5 - whichever is the higher) was imposed - a Council Tax increase of £5 for a Band D property.

Green Bin licences increased to £47 each. An additional income of £264,000 will be generated from charges on a full cost recovery basis.

On top of last year’s 30% increase, a further 5% increase in car park fees and charges, including scrapping ‘Free after Three’.

PLANNED SPENDING:

£350,000 to fund the Investment Strategy.

£400,000 for investment in feasibility studies and other work to support the provision of social housing built to carbon zero.

Over £900,000 has been spent on consultations so far, another £629,000 is planned for this year.

Contrary to regular announcements suggesting otherwise, the forecast of Government funding has improved by £913,000.

REFRESH OF INVESTMENT STRATEGY:

On 4 April 2022 the CDC Cabinet voted to adopt the Capital Programme Investment Strategy, to borrow £75 million for investments to deliver green infrastructure that will have a positive impact on the climate emergency declaration. No additional money was to be spent on social housing which we had been led to believe was one of the main reasons for this enormous amount of borrowing

Given that the risk of Government underfunding the Council is the same as it was previously this represents an unexplained increase of £10 million borrowing.

Since none of this borrowing was in the ‘budget consultation’, we believe that because of the size of the proposed debt the Council should hold a referendum on this before making any commitments. Especially because there are warnings littered throughout the Cabinet papers about the risks involved.

CLIMATE CHANGE

I voted for the climate emergency and I voted to support the Climate Change report which was commissioned last year, and which gave a national overview rather than specific Cotswold policies. A more “bottom up” approach, encouraging and supporting individuals and communities to take a large number of small actions would, in my view, be achievable, affordable and practical, rather than competing with the Government and GCC on their “top down” approach. I will however continue to support (and widen) the objectives of this project.

PARKING

As already mentioned, car parking charges have been raised by a further 5% (over and above the 30% increase last year). In addition the popular ‘Free after Three’ scheme has been binned and cash will no longer be an acceptable method of payment (this not yet fully introduced with no explanation). Not a good year for either shoppers or shopkeepers.

OTHER MATTERS

Staff turnover at the Council has continued apace. In all, 63 people have resigned. The whole Democratic Services team left in the same month which has caused problems with Council meetings and communications as there was no proper hand over.

CDC Leisure Centre is closed for refurbishment. The Leisure Centre was also closed for much of last year’s lockdown.

The Planning Department continues to suffer from a lack of staffing and heavy workloads. A recruitment drive is being implemented, however service remains slow.

There has been a considerable amount of talk and consultation about various changes to the structure and management of the Cotswold District including:-

* Possible change to a unitary authority.
* The ‘Levelling up Plan’.
* The possible change from an AONB to a National Park.
* Boundary changes to Parliamentary constituencies.

**Parish specific issues I’ve been involved with:-**

* Approval (by referendum) of your Neighbourhood Plan.
* Problems related to Neigh Bridge.
* Certain controversial planning applications.
* Elm View car park upgrade.