

Chair's Report 2020-21

Cllr Nigel Reeves

This has been an extraordinary year; one in which society, and life as we know it, has changed dramatically. Twelve months ago, we were probably under the misapprehension that we would be 'out of the woods' in a few months' time and able to return to life as normal. Instead, the wearing of facemasks, making essential journeys only, homeschooling, working from home, permitted daily exercise, 'hands, face, space' and social distancing all quickly became the new normal.

During the past year we have gone through a range of emotions. Many of us have sadly experienced loss or may have felt lonely or isolated, but in amongst all of this there has also been some joy with random acts of kindness, and we have seen some heroic efforts from people going above and beyond in the most difficult of circumstances.

Last summer we sadly lost Cllr Pauline Nelson who had been a Town and Borough Councillor for many years representing the people of Birchwood. She was a very well respected and valued member of the team who loved Birchwood and its residents, almost as much as the Wolves! She always found the best in people and stood up for what she believed was right.

Many of you who knew Pauline, posted some lovely tributes online and lined the route as she went on her final journey.

Our selfless key workers have continued to look after us and we thank them all. We also thank the many volunteers who have given their time and resources to help others in their time of need.

Well done to those who have had the unenviable task of home schooling; some whilst working from home themselves, and thank you to our residents for being there for one another and helping each other through, whether you have been providing moral support, picking up shopping or prescriptions, walking a neighbour's dog or making face masks or visors for the NHS.

During the pandemic your Town Council has continued working, albeit a bit differently. Council meetings moved online, as did most other meetings, office staff worked between home and the office and the maintenance team had staggered work times and other measures were brought in to enable Covid secure working.

The Town Council has continued to work in partnership with the local Police, social housing landlords and Warrington Borough Council, tackling issues of concern.

We have also worked with Public Health, particularly in the early days of the pandemic when people had concerns about the one-way systems in retail centres or social distancing in general. It has been a challenging time all round, learning and adapting to the situation as we have gone along whilst delivering the services we would usually provide and doing the things that we would usually do, but in a Covid safe way.

Although we could not hold the Remembrance Service in its usual format, we were still able to lay wreaths at the two local memorials and remember those that had been lost, observing the silence on our doorstep with one resident of Dunnock Grove marking the occasion by sounding the Last Post on his trumpet!

Our wonderful area has a lot of green open spaces and a vast network of footpaths many of which have been very well used throughout the pandemic. These routes have been continually litterpicked and the 40+ bins emptied at least twice a week by Town Council staff. You may be surprised to learn that over a tonne of litter is taken to the waste site each week.

In addition to this essential work, the team have kept the planters stocked and maintained, street signs have been cleaned, roads gritted and flytipping has been removed. It has been pretty much business as usual.

During the early stages of the pandemic Town Council staff took on some additional grass cutting in the residential areas of Birchwood in order that WBC staff could be redeployed to fill gaps in other essential services within WBC. In recent weeks it has been agreed that whilst things are still settling down, the Town Council will continue to provide this back up.

Back in March 2019 the Town Council declared a Climate Emergency and since that time has been looking at ways in which to improve its carbon footprint. One thing we have been looking at is the possibility of having natural verges in the area to encourage wildflowers, wildlife, and insects. This approach is mainly suited to wider verges and it may not be considered appropriate in some areas. However, after receiving some enquiries from local residents, and having had some early discussions with Warrington Borough Council, agreement has been reached to trial some natural verges along Ordnance Avenue, with a mowing strip along the outer edges of these plots. These will be accompanied by some wildflower meadows to brighten up the roadsides.

When some of the emergency lighting units in the office failed their three-hour 'soak test', we ensured that these were replaced with more environmentally friendly LED lighting. We will continue to replace our fluorescent lighting throughout, with LED lighting, when the old units fail.

We have also been looking into replacing some of the existing fleet with electric vehicles, however, at this moment in time the Council has decided to delay any vehicle replacement until such time as there are more options available and the prices reach a more affordable level.

During lockdown, Parkers Farm, which is a Grade II listed building, has undergone some essential external maintenance work to rectify an ongoing problem with damp, and this work is now nearing completion.

We are now looking to the future and starting to get back to our new normal.

I am now at the end of my extended tenure as Chair of Birchwood Town Council and, on behalf of the Town Council, I would like to express sincere condolences to those in the community who may have lost someone or may have gone through a difficult time. Our thoughts are with you all.

I would also like to thank those who have helped get us through these turbulent times whether it has been in a professional or personal capacity. We are a close, thoughtful community, and it is at times like this we pull together and bring out the best in each other.

I would also personally like to thank my fellow Councillors and the Birchwood Town Council staff for their continued support and hard work.

Thank you and stay safe.

Cllr Nigel Reeves,
Chair, Birchwood Town Council