

**Choppington Parish Council
Stakeford & Bomarsund Social Welfare Centre
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Chairman: Councillor P S Vaughan

Parish Clerk: Ms A Brindley
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To Members of the Residents Panel

25 January 2021

Dear Member

We do hope you are well and may we wish you a happy new year and all the best for 2021.

We have had to adapt the way we work several times to comply with Covid restrictions but had been hopeful that by now we could have met up. The news on 4th January that we were moving back into lockdown however put an end to any plans of meeting together anytime soon. In January we usually review our budget and set the precept with the Residents Panel, as we cannot meet, we have compiled this report to update you on our work during this exceptional year and set out our plans for next year, if indeed we can move away from the spectre of Coronavirus. We can confirm that the precept for 2021/22 will remain below the level of £425,000 which you said we should not exceed this year.

The first weeks of the financial year began as it is ending, in lockdown. The Parish Council met together for the final time at our offices in March in the week before the first lockdown and agreed a number of actions. We now are all aware of what lockdown entails, however at that time we could only envisage what would be needed when people at risk were told to stay at home and only essential workers were able to attend work. It was an uncertain time, and our first task was to provide reassurance to those in isolation. We leafleted the area offering assistance to the elderly and vulnerable and asking for volunteers to help us out with this. We received an amazing response for volunteers which really showed how generous people are in this area. In the event, there was an abundance of help available from organised charities, community groups and small pockets of neighbours which sprang to help our vulnerable members of the community. Parish Council staff responded to requests for shopping and medication supplies and in that first lockdown provided help to 128 households.

Our offices remained open using Stakeford and Bomarsund Welfare Centre as a food bank collection point for The Mathew Project and Wansbeck Valley Food Bank with our staff dropping off the collections weekly for these organisations. For most of 2020 we could not open West Sleekburn Village Hall for activities but for a few weeks it was used by a charitable organisation supporting the community in the run up to Christmas. West Sleekburn Community Trustees will be looking to relaunch the hall later this year.

During the year we were able to strengthen links with business. We advertised all types of local businesses and encouraged residents to shop locally; we used our facebook page to signpost the government schemes; changes in COVID-19 restrictions and advertised local businesses' new COVID-19 safe deliveries and click and collect services.

In the Summer we opened a play area at Cambridge Road. Fortunately, we had completed a consultation before lockdown where children in the area and their parents had been asked for their thoughts on a design. Due to Covid-19, all play areas were not opened for play until July, but children had to wait a little longer for the grass to grow before the barriers came down for

play on this one. We were able to bring forward plans for the renewal of the play areas at Liddells field and Eastgreen and we had hoped that this would start February/March this year. Lockdown now may delay this, but as soon as we can, we will go ahead with a public consultation of the designs and will get these two play areas constructed.

Sadly, our regular children's activities could not run as usual, but we did engage with families through a number of on-line activities, supplied posters for colouring and themed colouring competitions for Easter and Halloween with visits from costumed characters. We invited a puppeteer into the area who visited residential estates dressed as a huge rainbow, who waved at everyone as they sat in their homes, adding colour to those long days. As Christmas drew near, we invited Santa and his elves to come to Choppington with his sleigh to raise the Christmas spirits. Unsurprisingly he had a fabulous reception even on one of the coldest evenings and as families cheered the sleigh along the streets, it was heart-warming to see the smiles of young and old singing along to the Christmas songs. This reaction encouraged the Council to put into the Parish News a question to residents about providing Christmas lights in the future. Results so far are 5:1 in favour. We will be looking at the most cost-effective way to provide them of course.

Our budget setting meeting is on Wednesday 27th January. Under other circumstances, this meeting would be considering the recommendation from the January 2021 Residents Panel, however, your previous recommendation for the precept to remain below £425,000 will prevail. Councillors are very aware that this has been a difficult financial year for many and want to keep any inflationary increase at a minimum taking any shortfall from balances. We have also received notice from Northumberland County Council that they have reduced our tax base by around 1.15% which in itself will mean an increase of £1.83 on our Band D charge. Sadly, this means we are at a financial disadvantage. This will not be so for all Councils in Northumberland; those with new housing in their area will see an increase in their tax base so reducing their Band D charge.

The Parish Council has planned for a normal year but is aware that plans will have to adapt to fit a different normal. We postponed the neighbourhood plan meetings so will be advancing these in the coming year even if in some cases they are virtual. We are mapping walks through the riverside park woods which will be a joint project with Northumberland County Council. We have a couple of road safety initiatives to conclude. We are producing a refreshed holiday play programme and working with a new residents group Choppington Together. People have shown great resilience, there have been numerous examples of neighbours looking after neighbours and evidence that lockdown has brought out the best in people, but Councillors recognise that when the restrictions are lifted those community groups that have been unable to run this year, will take time to resume. We would want to support organisations, voluntary groups and community groups offering help to people to restart their lives. We would like to encourage these groups to contact us.

Our community has been challenged by this Covid year; we will emerge a different community. The Parish Council will as ever respond to the needs of this community, and for this we rely on you, our Residents Panel to reflect those needs, taking an active role in communicating with us and encouraging others to join the panel.

We look forward to seeing you all in the near future.

Yours sincerely



Angela Brindley
Clerk to the Parish Council