

Report of the Environment Working Group at 08 May 2021 – Submitted to Councillors

Introduction

The spring of 2021 has brought the countryside into bloom, only for these blessings to be cut down by frost and wild winds in another ‘false spring’. This happens each year and, we notice, with increasing severity. The reference to “the seasons changing” is no longer the banter of country-folk as they consider the effect on the crops that they depend upon, for this is now the subject of focused research by scientists who are monitoring “the change in seasons” with longer and hotter summers, shorter winters and more frequent and damaging ‘false springs’.

The message could not be clearer, for all of us and it is heartening that communities and their elected representatives have the implications and the need for change in mind. We look towards a national government giving the environment the priority that is required. Coronavirus, Brexit, international tensions and economic consequences of these and other immediate imperatives demand attention, but none are as critical as our relationship with and influence on the environment.

The Parish Council is commended for giving the environment all due consideration

Council Environmental Policy

The Working Group has not identified any breach of the Council’s Environment Policy and recognizes its consideration of related implications for planning applications and community initiatives.

Matters Arising

As Pandemic-inspired lockdown restrictions lift, so environmental initiatives are restarted, but public abuse apparent also.

The following matters are noted and recorded, many of which the Parish Council will already be aware of:

Roadside Litter – Further to the Bulletin number 03 of 10 February 2021, this matter continues to deserve attention. In the third week of March, a litter-picking initiative was launched in Wilsford, in response to the observation of increasing debris.

This organized exercise, whereby volunteers were allocated roadsides, hedgerows, ditches and open areas, together with related activities that include routine picking by residents and the maintenance of new hedgerows, collected nearly thirty (30) bin-liners full of debris.

Analysis of results shows again that:

The majority of litter is from convenience foods (cigarette packets, coffee cups, drink cans, crisp packets, sweet wrappers), which is found alongside and inside hedgerows and ditches bordering roads. And especially alongside the A342.

The second contributor to litter is agriculture with plastic waste dug out of ditches and hedgerows, much of it aged and the accumulation of years.

The contribution of the A342 cannot be overlooked or overstated and the problem lies with the public discarding waste from passing vehicle windows, from the loss of building waste from unenclosed or poorly netted commercial vehicles, and from the County Council's conduct of highway maintenance.

This latter aspect deserves Parish Council review. The problem is evident in two ways. First, the recent refurbishment of the A342 resulted in cleared drainage gullies; resulting in the free-flow of surface water away from the carriageway, efficiently channeling roadside waste into the fields alongside. Yes, our parishes have become a convenient dumping ground for the wider community. Second, the works to the highway do not appear to commence with a litter pick with the result that litter has become a permanent feature of re-constructed verges.

The suggestion is that Wiltshire Council pays too little attention to the environment when planning, conducting and signing-off on highway works. The matter is exacerbated by the action of contractors engaged on grass and hedge-cutting, where for lack of careful removal of (for instance) a single large item of litter like the polystyrene packaging for a washing machine the cutter translates one item into 1500+ that are impossible to collect and become an enduring legacy.

The Parish Council may wish to offer its considered view on this state of affairs with the Highways and Environmental Departments of Wiltshire County Council.

Rights of Way and Surface Condition – Bulletin 03 reported on environmental damage caused by multiple parties. Subsequently, much of the damage recorded has been ameliorated through public use and by the actions of landowners with plant. The Working Group has no such matters to report upon at this time.

Hedgerows

Hedging that has been planted in recent years continues to flourish. Light trimming in the winter is intended to promote 'bushing' and the greater majority of young plants have done well, impressing as the fresh leaves emerge. Sleeves have been removed from plants where maturity permits and where sleeves themselves threaten the development of healthy plants. Removed plastic sleeves are disposed of at WCC recycling centres. Through the spring the remaining sleeves are lifted, cleared of weeds, and emptied of last year's mouse nests, ant nests and any other debris, all in order to give plants light and less competition. Canes are replaced where necessary.

Wilsford Verges

The Parish Council is briefed on the community initiative known as 'Wilsford Verges'. The plan is to maintain the two roadside verges on Wilsford's western approaches, with a spring cut to remove the competition to wild flowers, no cut through the summer and a second cut in late autumn once wild flower seeds have dispersed. Cut grasses are removed to avoid enriching the soil. The initiative follows a nation-wide initiative, is approved by the Parish Council, the County Council, Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) and a number of local specialist organisations.

Volunteers cut and raked the grass in March, following a litter-pick, and removed redundant stub angle-irons which represented a threat to machinery and to horses in particular. A Risk Assessment preceded works, volunteers received a brief before working and traffic management was conducted.

A survey of targeted wildflowers was conducted after cutting and a list of species recorded. The initiative is presently considering how best to encourage wild flowers and whether to supplement with 'plugs' for the 2022 season.

The Parish Council is commended for its backing for this initiative.

Summary

The Parish Council continues to play an important part in the discussion of issues arising in connection with environmental management and continues to provide valuable support for related community issues.

For the **Environmental Working Group**
Parish Council of Charlton St. Peter & Wilsford