Chair's Report to AGM - 2021

When, as outgoing Chair last year, Lisa said "as we now move forward there is hope we can now settle into a new normal", there was an air of positivity and a hope that the worst of Covid really was behind us. We had just managed to squeeze in a couple of sessions of the Level-X competition Swim England had invented as an in-house Covid-safe opportunity for competition before a snap lockdown was announced. However, indications were that the lockdown had worked and we had hopes that life would be returning to normal in 2021. Little did we know that, a matter of weeks later, we would be plunged into a longer-term lockdown, away from families, friends, schools and workplaces, and, once again, away from our beloved swimming.

Undeterred by, now wasted, hours spent planning the new swimming timetable, Luke and Demo Dan embarked on a new Zoom-based programme of virtual land training, for the new year. This time there were two sessions – an earlier, easier session, for the Development, PD, SwimFit and Masters squads, followed by a harder session, aimed at the Performance swimmers. Well done to all who used this as a way of helping to keep their fitness levels up. Thanks to Luke for creating and hosting the sessions, and thanks and well done to Demo Dan for demonstrating back-to-back sessions daily for almost the entirety of the remaining Lockdown.

Behind the scenes, January also brought a full audit for the Club's SwimMark accreditation. SwimMark is Swim England's quality standard for clubs which recognises high standards of governance, sustainability and effectiveness. We passed! But review and submission of the documentation for this is a huge task, and I'm incredibly grateful to all those on the Committee who helped with this, especially Alison Reynolds, who currently co-ordinates our submissions to Swim England.

Around that same time, and without warning, our Swim England Registrations Secretary stepped down. This was just at the time when the Club has to make its annual return of members to Swim England. Cue Aaron Stewart to fly in and save the day, thanks to a crash course on the system from Amanda! Thank you to Aaron for that and for allowing himself to be cajoled (I believe the word is 'voluntold') into continuing in that role! Thanks too to Amanda for showing him what to do.

When the Government announced their strategy for unlocking the country, I think we all hoped swimming pools would be near the top of the list. It wasn't to be but at least we now knew that under 18's would return to swimming in April – unfortunately over 18's would be kept out of the water for much longer. Getting back in the pool wouldn't be as easy as we hoped and involved many hours of work – liaising with pool providers, timetabling, safeguarding training for our fantastic army of Covid Reps, revised forms/information for swimmers, and getting to grips with the layout of the new Bordon pool. As last year, all this was ably co-ordinated by Davina Malkin, in the role of Covid Lead, and the entire club is indebted to her for all the work she put in to ensure we were as Covid-rule compliant and safe for our swimmers, staff and volunteers as we could be.

Back into the pool in April (for all but over 18's). Back to beach-ready, queuing outside the pools, social distancing and mask wearing. Thank you to all the swimmers for coming back to us and for doing their best to stick to the rules. And thank you to anyone who gave up their time to act as a Covid Rep. Even if you only did it once, that one appearance meant that we could have swimmers in the pool in accordance with the guidelines Swim England had laid down for us.

Inevitably, the return of schools after the Easter break brought with it a rise in cases of Covid. The majority of our swimmers forced into self-isolation were there as a result of being a close contact of someone with Covid, rather than actually having it themselves. Frustrating but nonetheless essential that they followed the rules and I'm very grateful to them for doing so.

Although restrictions prevented clubs from hosting others for competitions, the end of May, June and July saw us keeping everything in-house as we ran the next rounds of the Level-X and Junior Arena League competitions and our own Club Championships held over several weekends. Once again, Davina, this time in her role as Competition Secretary, worked tirelessly, alongside Luke, not only to ensure all the swimmers who wanted to were able to swim, but also to co-ordinate an army of volunteers to run the events in the first place. Thanks to everyone who helped in any way. Without Davina these events would not have run and I thank her from all the Club for everything she has done in this role over many years. Thank you to James Isted who had his arm twisted into taking on the Competition Secretary role from September and who is doing a brilliant job!

We have made no secret that the Club has been hit incredibly hard, financially, by the Covid restrictions. The Committee have, at all times, tried to keep costs to a minimum and do the very best for our members and I thank all involved in the many hours of discussions about this. It was this strategy and the fact that we started with a very healthy bank balance that allowed us to operate the retainer fee structure during the lockdowns. It was with a great deal of reluctance that we increased our fees from 1 September but our forecasts showed that, having taken the retainer hit over the lockdown, predicted increases in costs and a reduction in pool time availability offered by the pool providers would see us struggling for money before the year was out. At this point I'd like to offer my particular thanks to Nic Gadsby, our Club Administrator for all the extra work she has put in behind the scenes to ensure everyone's fees were correctly collected for the right amounts every month. This might sound quite simple but with the variations on and off the retainer fee and the changing in the fee amounts, she has had a particularly large workload.

Our coaching and teaching members have also been hit hard over the past year and there has been a lot of change within the team. For a variety of reasons, we have said farewell to Gemma, Olly, Dave and Ruth as regular members of the team – a big thank you to all of them for everything they have done to teach, coach and enthuse our swimmers and very best wishes for the future. As a result, we are currently running very short-handed and calling in as many favours as possible to be able to continue to provide all the timetabled sessions with minimal disruption to swimmers. A huge thank you to Alan and Lyndsey (dragged back from retirement), Josh and Alex (borrowed from the Surplice family), Katie (giving up some of her swimming time), Nic (filling the cricket void), Lauren (volunteered by her mum), Hannah (even crutches couldn't stop her), Dave (no college on a Sunday), Gemma (can't keep her away) and Matt (with kind permission from Bracknell) for stepping in to help keep us going in our hours of need. Thank you also to Robin for being a stalwart for the Club, picking up extra squads within his existing sessions as well as providing additional cover and continuing to enthuse our swimmers. And thank you to Luke, who has not only co-ordinated all the timetable and last-minute changes but has also picked up extra sessions on top of his existing schedule, alongside weekend galas and on top of all the back-office work required for successful functioning of the Club. For the time being, this has also included taking on the Academy Co-ordinator role created by the loss of Ruth. It is no exaggeration to say that we would not have been able to function as a club without the fantastic efforts of each and every person named here.

You will hopefully have seen that we have been, and still are, advertising for a new teacher and a new coach. The hunt continues but I'm delighted to welcome Kira to the Club as a teacher and a trainee coach.

We all know that the cost of living has significantly increased in the past year and, as we were embarking on the recruitment, we also discovered that our main competitor for staff had increased their rates of pay. In order to further encourage our current staff to stay, and to be able to attract people to come to work with us as opposed to the competition, having carefully weighed-up the effect on the Club's bank balance, the Executive

Committee recommended an increase to the hourly rates staff are paid. This was agreed by the Committee and the new rates took effect from 1 October.

We continue to try to attract new swimmers to the Club. Thank you to Kate Cropley for agreeing to take on the role of Membership Secretary at fairly short notice when Zoe indicated she would be stepping down. Thank you to Zoe for all the time and support you've given to the Club over the years in this and other roles.

As we approach this year's AGM, I won't deny that I am hopeful of a smoothing of what have been some very choppy waters in the past 12 months. In the pool, the Club is looking strong, despite all the disruptions. It's an honour to see and hear about our Club members doing so well in their swimming, regardless of level.

Likewise, for our volunteer poolside officials, whatever level – congratulations for your achievements this year.

The Committee and those in the supporting roles continue to work incredibly hard behind the scenes to try to ensure the Club is run in the best way possible for all its members. My heartfelt thanks to everyone involved for their time and support this year. I know it's been frustrating and, at times drawn-out, but you are vital part of the Club's continuation.

Committee Members and Committee Supporters are all volunteers. Inevitably, there are always jobs to be done and, we have struggled to recruit enough volunteers to fill all the current vacant roles. The more people who help out, the easier the jobs become for everyone, so we are always keen to hear from Members (with swimmers in any part of the Club) who might have time to join us. A huge thank you to Lucie for co-ordinating all the Committee-related recruitment.

There is more change to come on the Committee, with the impending departure of two bastions of the Club for many years. Caroline, Secretary, and Amanda, Performance Squad Rep., have gone significantly above and beyond what's been asked of them to ensure the continued functioning and success of the Club in all the time they've been volunteering for us – well over 10 years between them. Both have seen the Club through some really tricky times and have been invaluable. They have brought so much to their respective roles, with their dedication, foresight, extensive networks, and seemingly encyclopaedic knowledge – there is no denying that their departures leave big shoes to fill. On a personal level, both have been a huge support to me in my first year as Chair of the Committee and I am immensely grateful for everything they have done to help and guide me. Thank you both, Caroline and Amanda, from each and every one of us – we hope you enjoy your well-deserved retirements from your respective roles.

Finally (thank goodness I hear you shout), my thanks to each and every member of this swimming club. Everything the Committee does is to ensure the Club is here for you. Thank you for bearing with us through yet another turbulent year and for trusting us to carry on – we look forward to continuing to be able to work for you and the continued success of the Club over the coming year.

Jenn Hughes

Chair