

Bishopstone & Hinton Parva Parish Council : Chair's Annual Report May 2016

When I put together my first annual report as Chair one year ago, a number of issues were very much “work in progress” at the time and it has been interesting to begin this report by reviewing how these currently stand. So

Looking Back

First of all, it is gratifying to be able to report that the works that were being undertaken to alleviate sewage problems in The Forty have been completed and do appear to have solved this long-standing problem. The Parish Council was instrumental in pushing for these works to be undertaken and galvanising our borough councillor and M.P. into supportive action after years of prevarication on the part of Thames Water. There is no doubt that when the community pulls (or pushes) in the same direction, even privatised mountains may be metaphorically moved.

In early 2015, the “Community Speedwatch” initiative was being promoted by Wiltshire Police and the Parish Council was keen to see how active participation could tackle the problem of vehicles speeding through our villages. A number of parish councillors attended formal training at the Police H/Q in Devizes and were issued with a speed monitoring device which enabled us to check (and report excessive) vehicle speeds at approved locations. That said, it remains disappointing that there are still only 5 trained volunteers in our two villages making it difficult to maintain a frequent presence at the road-side and provide an ongoing deterrent to speeding motorists.

More volunteers would be welcome. However, there is a requirement to undergo formal training and Wilts Police are not amenable to cascading training locally via accredited personnel. That, in my view, would enable this initiative to take off and be hugely effective. Moreover, Wilts Police insist on a rigorous security vetting of potential volunteers that seems disproportionate to the risks involved. They justify their requirements (for passport, driving licence, utility bill, an evening at Devizes ...) on the basis that they need to guard against would-be terrorists infiltrating the Police via the Community Speedwatch scheme. And no, I didn't just make that up.

Also, one year ago (how time flies), a planning application for the Royal Oak/True Heart site was eagerly anticipated. This was subsequently submitted and supported by the Parish Council. It is disappointing that twelve months later, a revised application is about to be considered and that in the meantime the site has continued to deteriorate. It is to be hoped that the coming year will see significant progress and that a valued village amenity will be much improved as a result.

Finally, the vexed question of broadband internet was being actively pursued enabling some residents to access an improved connection (albeit for a fee). Things have now moved on and the Parish Council has recently been instrumental in facilitating the installation of a local transmission mast at Forty's Farm, as part of a borough-wide initiative, that should at last enable residents to move into the 21st Century in terms of the internet. This is a good example

of where the Parish Council is able, via the commitment and tenacity of its members, to facilitate improvements to village life and amenities despite having no formal powers of action.

The Here and Now

Turning to more pressing current matters, three specific issues have dominated the council's deliberations over recent months.

Once again, the village bus service is under threat as the direct result of other councils (West Berks, Oxfordshire and Swindon) either reducing or withdrawing their subsidy towards rural bus services, in turn a reaction to cutbacks in funding support from central government. Parish councillors have been involved in a number of meetings with bus operators and representatives of other councils to explore options for the future and to investigate how, if at all, the Parish Council might contribute towards funding for the service. The council remains optimistic that some form of bus service can be retained but the devil will, as ever, reside in the detail.

Swindon Borough Council's initiative to devolve some street cleaning and maintenance responsibilities to parishes has also been a major consideration. Without going into the devil's detail, suffice it to say that parish councillors have been involved in numerous discussions and negotiations with SBC officers in order to secure the best deal for the parish for the coming and future years. Councillors were unequivocally of the view that an improved service could be commissioned locally and delivered for less overall cost. This will be closely monitored over the coming year.

The recent works by Swindon Borough Council to improve The Dingle in Bishopstone were the culmination of a great deal of effort and pressure brought to bear over a number of years by the Bishopstone councillors in particular. Although the works had been long anticipated, repeated delays and unmet promises had been a source of frustration for a considerable time. Persistence has paid off in the end and it is anticipated that once nature has been allowed to take her course and the works have "bedded in", this will be appreciated as a valuable amenity for the village.

In more general terms, planning matters continue to dominate the council's activity, not least maintaining a close watch on proposals for Swindon's eastward expansion. The council will continue to support Wanborough Parish Council in its efforts to influence the detail and pace of any new development in the interests of minimising the impact on local infrastructure, in particular the burden of any additional traffic and consequential "rat-running". The council has also continued to take a robust stance on any development proposals for our villages that threaten an expansion of the village boundaries or the integrity of the conservation areas. Thus far, it is gratifying that Swindon Borough Council officers have continued to be supportive.

Other ongoing matters have been the perennial problems of inconsiderate car parking, dog fouling and littering. The Parish Council exercises what limited influence it can on the car

parking issues including liaison with our community police officers. It may be that some further traffic calming measures in both villages would be both appropriate and timely.

In relation to dogs, the installation of additional bins for dog waste is planned early in the new financial year. It remains a mystery why some dog owners persist in bagging their doggy deposits (good) only to then hang them from a convenient tree or shrub (bad). Do they believe in some dog-mess equivalent of the tooth fairy? I know that wisdom is acquired when one is too old for it to be of any use but when I discover a rational explanation for this bizarre behaviour, I shall take comfort that my education is at last complete.

As for litter, much of what is deposited arises from passing traffic and is not immediately apparent until one walks along the main roads and looks into the hedgerows at the accumulated cans and bottles etc. The council will continue to promote an annual village clean-up but I hope that it will be better supported by residents in future years.

Finally

In terms of the council's finances, the reserves remain healthy and once again this year it was possible to avoid an increase in the parish element of the council tax. It may be that some small increase will be required in future years to pick up the costs of services transferred from Swindon Borough Council and possibly to contribute on behalf of the parish to the cost of a public bus service. No increase will be countenanced without serious consideration by the Parish Council of the relative costs and benefits.

In conclusion, I am pleased that all the serving parish councillors have agreed to continue into the new municipal year (2016/17) thus enabling the council to draw on a valuable range of skills and experience. Although the council's formal powers are extremely limited, it is nevertheless gratifying that, because of the commitment of the members to the parish and their willingness as individuals to take the lead on specific issues, the Parish Council has been able to make a tangible difference to the quality of life in the villages.

The council's work is facilitated by our Clerk, Lesley Drewett, whose extensive knowledge and experience of local matters and proper procedure is of immense value. I must also acknowledge the contribution of our local Swindon Borough councillor, Andrew Bennett, whose assistance and advice has been invaluable. He is standing down from the Borough Council in May 2016 and I wish him well in his retirement. My thanks go to all of them for their support over the past twelve months.

Parishioners are always welcome to attend and ask questions at the monthly meetings of the parish council. Contact details for all councillors are published monthly and any residents' concerns should ideally be raised in the first instance with their most local representative.

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