

PARISH OF KIDMORE END

Annual Report by the Chairman of the Parish Council, 2014/15

I am pleased to submit my report on the work of the Parish Council over the past year, my 3rd such report.

In many respects, 2014/15 has been "business as usual" for your Council, although a significant issue has arisen of late - the site of the Heights Free School, to serve north-west Caversham. Many of us have been aware of the concern in Caversham about the permanent site for the School, which school is funded directly by Government, and over which Reading Borough Council has no control. Until very recently, we residents of Kidmore End were not involved - it was something which the people of Caversham/Reading needed to resolve for themselves.

What has changed is that a further site has been added to the mix, a site outside Reading, and in the far south of Parish, at Farthingworth Green. Your Council only became aware of this via the social, print and broadcast media - certainly there was no approach from the Government agency concerned, the Education Funding Agency (EFA), and, what is more, my approaches to the Agency, as Chairman of the Council, have been ignored. Of even greater concern, it was your Council who alerted our county and district councillors, and hence the councils involved, to the inclusion of the Farthingworth Green site.

Your Council has, however, secured the agreement of Reading Borough Council that all residents of the Parish will be alerted, by letter, to the consultation exercise which the Borough Council is mounting for the EFA about the site selection. Although your Council has yet to settle its position on the possible use of the Farthingworth Green - we are likely to do that at our meeting tonight or the meeting next month, and I would be very surprised if we did not oppose it. What is important is that all residents express their individual views in the consultation exercise. Details of how to do this can be found via the Reading Council's website: there is a link from your Council's website, kepc.co.uk.

If the Farthingworth Green site is selected following the consultation exercise, then the EFA or the school's trust will need to seek planning permission from the District Council. Again, it would be wrong to prejudge the District Council's position on such an application. However, it seems to me that the District Council's policies would militate against approval of the application, unless an exceptional case is made for it. If such an application is submitted, your Council will publicise it in exactly the same way it does every other application. It is another important opportunity for residents to express their view on the matter, by making comments to the District Council.

On the subject of planning, your Council has been consulted on 33 planning applications by the District Council (the planning authority) in the past year. This continues a trend of recent years for declining numbers of applications - I reported the figure of 41 at this time last year. Most of these applications are for extensions or

remodelling existing dwellings, although, interestingly, approval was sought for 6 new houses this year, one in Gallowstree Common, one in Cane End and a net 4 in Tokers Green. For the most part, the decisions of the District Council on applications have broadly mirrored the views expressed by your Council. In any event, we always encourage residents affected by applications to register their views with the District Council.

As has been reported in previous years, the past 5 years have seen significant changes to the planning policy field. The South East Plan - a top-down regional approach - has been swept away, replaced by local plans, which cover just one District, thus supporting the theory of localism. The Government has relaxed the planning regime so that, in theory, the dice are now loaded in favour of the developer. There is a shortage of housing in the South East, certainly, where demand exceeds supply by some way. As a result, there is pressure in larger settlements, with sufficient infrastructure, for further development, as witnessed by the applications submitted in respect of sites in Sonning Common, before the Neighbourhood Plan for that Parish is adopted. However, thus far, the District Council's present Local Plan has not been "breached", when tested at appeals.

That said, the outcome of the Strategic Housing Market Assessment, conducted by the principal councils in Oxfordshire, was published last year. This suggested that many more housing units should be provided within the County, and South Oxfordshire. The District Council is currently consulting on a revised Plan, to cover the period to 2031, about where to locate any additional units. The proposal is for the extra housing to be concentrated in the Didcot/Science Vale areas. Your Council will settle its response to the consultation at its meeting later tonight.

I mentioned just now the Sonning Common Neighbourhood Development Plan. Your Council has been closely involved in the drafting of the Plan, which is presently out for consultation. The Council appointed 2 members as observers to the SCNDP working group. These were Jane Williams and Iain Pearson until Jane resigned from the Council: Hugh Thresher succeeded Jane earlier this year. Neighbourhood plans are vital tools to ensure that local views and feelings are reflected in the planning process. Ultimately, they are voted on by the residents of the area, at a referendum.

At this point, I should say that your Council has so far decided against compiling any neighbourhood plans - 5 would be required, one for each settlement or village - because, under the District Council's present Local Plan, there is no threat of development in these smaller or small villages. However in the Local Plan 2031 Refined Options there are questions relating to smaller villages and development, which will be discussed later, in the Council's meeting.

Another significant imminent change is the introduction of Community Infrastructure Levy, which are payments made by developers towards the cost of improvements to infrastructure. Parish councils will receive a small proportion of the CIL paid in respect of development in their parishes. In the future, therefore, payments will be received by your Council when new houses are built in the Parish, to be spent on those

elements of infrastructure for which the Council is responsible. CIL will, for the most part, replace Section 106 monies, which are paid to principal councils as a part of the grant of planning permission.

On the subject of housing, your Council was pleased to note that the affordable housing units in Horsepond Road, Gallowstree Common were handed over, by the contractors, to Soha Ltd last month, and are now occupied. The houses were built following a housing needs' survey undertaken for the Parish Council by the Oxfordshire Rural Community Council some years ago. The survey showed demand for such housing from residents, or former residents, of the Parish. The houses were built on a rural exception site, acquired from the Phillimore Estate, to meet that demand in part.

Much of the work of your Council is about keeping the fabric and infrastructure of the Parish under review. The roads in and between the 5 villages are an important part of the infrastructure, and the Council makes representations to the County Council, as highway authority, about their condition. We encourage residents to report defects themselves - there is, for instance, a page on the County Council's website where highway defects, eg potholes, can be reported.

A particular issue which has come up in the past 12 months is the ever encroaching hedges adjoining the roads, especially between the County boundary and Chalkhouse Green in Kidmore End Road, and Tokers Green Lane between Kidmore End and Tokers Green. We raised the subject of the hedges with the highways' people, and I would like to think that the recent activity to cut the hedges back is a result of this. The County Council can, and does, compel adjoining land owners to cut hedges back, so that roads are not obstructed.

In a similar vein, the County Council arranged for the ponds at Kidmore End and Tokers Green to be emptied, or have the sludge removed, in the Spring last year. This is because both ponds, although owned by the Parish Council, are vital parts of the highway drainage systems in their respective areas. I have not heard of particular problems in Tokers Green since this action, and think that the situation in Kidmore End is much better since the highway gullies and sumps were cleared.

Because of flooding nearby, the Council was intending to undertake clearance work to the ditch in Hazelmoor Lane, Gallowstree Common, as it owns the adjoining allotments: there is a common law responsibility on adjoining landowners to do such works. However, before our contractor could get started, the County Council arranged for the work!

Fortunately, the weather has been kind over the past winter, and we have not had to activate the Parish adverse weather plan. There are now, courtesy of the County Council, salt/grit bins in every village.

The spectre of a third road bridge over the River Thames in the vicinity of Reading continues to haunt us. Your Council enquires regularly of the County and District Councillors whether there have been any developments. It seems that the authorities

on both sides of the River are presently collecting data to inform a decision. It has to be said, however, that the cost of another bridge would inevitably be very high

As mentioned, the ponds are 2 of the community assets owned by the Council. During the past year, the Council agreed to a scheme of vegetation pruning etc at the Tokers Green pond, by local volunteers. At Kidmore End pond, the Vice-Chairman, Caroline Aldridge, and I, have coppiced the willows, and the Council is seeking quotations for the replacement of the posts carrying the chains around the pond.

The Council owns and maintains the formal recreation facilities in the Parish - the Play Area at Kidmore End and the Recreation Ground at Gallowstree Common. Incidentally, it also contributes to the cost of the Rokeby Recreation Ground, just over the boundary in Chazey Heath, operated by Mapledurhan Parish Council.

I reported last year on the major project to refurbish the Kidmore End facility. In the past year, we have re-established the boundary fence on the south east side, following the removal, by a neighbour, of the tall coniferous hedge. During the past year, we have embarked on a project to "modernise" the play equipment at the Gallowstree Common Recreation Ground. The first phase, supported by a very generous grant from our county councillor, Kevin Bulmer, was completed in the Spring of 2014. We have arranged for the repair of some of older equipment, and are looking at further refurbishment works in the future.

The Diamond Jubilee Pavilion, and the sports facilities at Gallowstree Common, are managed for your Council by the Kidmore End Playing Fields Committee. Jane O'Sullivan, the Chairman of the Committee, will report later in the meeting.

The allotments at Cane End and Gallowstree Common were awarded to the "labouring poor" in the 19th century: it is unlikely that the present tenants would favour that description! Sarah Hall will report, as Allotments' Manager, later. In meantime, your Council is committed to arranging a water supply to the Cane End allotments. A neighbouring land owner has agreed to grant an easement for a pipe across his land to the allotments, and the Council is presently engaged in the legal formalities for this. Money has been set aside in the budget for the physical laying of the pipe, as soon as the documentation has been signed.

The cemetery in Kidmore End is owned by the District Council. Your Council has been complaining for many years about the state of the path from Tokers Green Lane to the cemetery, which follows a right of way granted to the District Council's predecessor, Henley Rural District Council, in the 1950s. The District Council has declined to accept responsibility for the path despite the evidence presented. However, through the good offices of Councillor Rob Simister, the District Council has, I am delighted to report, agreed to repair the path. Your Council is making a small contribution to the cost of those works.

Some parts of the local infrastructure are dependent on use. 2 of these - the bus service through Kidmore End and the mobile library service - have been under review

during the past year. Very little use, if at all, occurred at some stops by the mobile library in the Parish - in Chalkhouse Green, Gallowstree Common and Kidmore End - so the service will be withdrawn. The mobile library will, however, continue to stop in Tokers Green.

The operation of the M1/M2 bus service, through the Parish into Reading, has also changed. The service is supported financially by the County Council. Whites Coaches used to run it, but their operation attracted a lot of complaints. The County Council took the service "in house" last August. However, usage of the service has been low, to the extent that the County Council intends to reduce the frequency of the service, and is withdrawing the service totally from Chalkhouse Green.

Your Council purchased the telephone kiosks at Chalkhouse Green and Kidmore End last Spring, and continues to discuss how best to utilise them, going forward. In the meantime, 2 of my colleagues, Trevor Perchard and Hugh Thresher, have undertaken to tidy them up, and carry out any repairs. The kiosk in Cane End remains functional.

On the subject of telecommunications, while your Council has been pleased to note that Superfast Broadband is to be facilitated in the Parish this year, it is disappointed that the service will be limited to Gallowstree Common and Cane End. The Council hopes that it may persuade the County Council and/or BT to install the necessary fibre optics so that Chalkhouse Green, Kidmore End and Tokers Green can enjoy this facility, too. The Council has laid aside some funds to help bring this about.

Turning to finance, I hope that you will agree with me that the Council continues to provide services which offer value for money. The Parish Council's element of your Council Tax has remained about £52 a year - £1 per week - for the "average" household, Band D, for a couple of years now. You will see that the charge remains the same for 2015/16, when your Council Tax bills drop on your door mat.

Once again, the Council's accounts were given a clean bill of health by the external auditor, and I thank my colleagues on the Council's Finance Sub-Committee - Iain Pearson and John Swift - for their help with this.

I mentioned last year that the District Council had initiated a community governance review, which largely focussed on parish boundaries. Locally, your Council and Sonning Common Parish Council had agreed that we would support an adjustment to our mutual boundary so that the buildings, but not the playing fields, at Chiltern Edge School would transfer to Sonning Common. When the District Council considered the matter, in July last year, the recommendation from its Working Party was for the transfer of the whole school, ie the building and the fields, to Sonning Common. I attended the District Council meeting, and spoke against the proposal, but indicating support for the transfer of the buildings only. I am pleased to say that a majority of district councillors voted for the limited transfer. Therefore, with effect from the date of the necessary order (I am not aware that it has yet been made), the school buildings will fall in Sonning Common.

I expect that the boundary change will be in force by 7 May, when there will be parliamentary, district council and parish elections. Kidmore End is presently in the Shiplake Ward of the District Council, represented by 2 councillors, Malcolm Leonard and Rob Simister. Mr Simister has led on matters relating to Kidmore End, and is, I believe, standing for re-election, in the new ward, Kidmore End & Whitchurch. Mr Simister has been very supportive of your Council's ambitions, and regularly attends our meetings. Mr Leonard is standing down from the District Council: his experience will be missed.

I also want to thank the County Councillor for the Goring Division, Kevin Bulmer, who has reported regularly to the Council, both in person and in writing, about his Council's business. As mentioned earlier, he has supported the Council financially, too.

All of us parish councillors retire on 11 May, although I hope that many will present themselves for election again. The Clerk tells me that it is many years since there was a contested quadrennial election for this Parish, ie more candidates than the 12 seats on the Council. If any of you want to serve on the Council, contact the Clerk. Completed nomination papers need to be submitted to the Returning Officer at Abingdon no later than 9 April.

In meantime, I would like to thank my fellow councillors for all the time they invest in the various communities in the Parish, not just at our monthly meetings, but in sub-committees, and in general. During the year, we lost Jane Williams, who resigned, while we co-opted Sheila Forde from Kidmore End and Katie Rolfe from Tokers Green. I should also mention a former councillor, Brian Knapp, who retired from the Editorial Board of the Parish Newsletter at the end of last year, after many years' service. Caroline Aldridge has succeeded him. I would like to thank all the volunteers who deliver the Parish Newsletter in the Parish.

I would like to pay tribute to David King, the webmaster, who rescued the Council's web presence during the year, when one of our suppliers took us off-line. After a couple of weeks, over the Christmas/New Year period, when your Council was in an electronic black hole, David was able to recover the site, totally, and relaunch it under our new domain name, kepc.co.uk.

Finally I would like to thank Mr Penfold, Clerk to the Council, for all his work and timely advise over the year.

Sue Biggs
Chairman of the Council