

PARISH OF KIDMORE END

REPORT OF CHAIRMAN OF PARISH COUNCIL TO ANNUAL PARISH MEETING, 21 MARCH 2012

The Council first elected me as its Chairman in July 1996, so this is my 16th annual report. I did not expect to serve that long... but I am grateful to my fellow councillors that they have re-elected me so many times!

There will, of course, have been many momentous years in the life of Kidmore End Parish Council since 1898. I would like to think that 2011/12 ranks amongst them, given your Council's own achievements in the year. I must here pay tribute to my fellow councillors, because without them, their community service and their tenacity, nothing would have been achieved.

What is more, the Council has been "under strength" for pretty much the whole year under review. There were only 9 candidates at the quadrennial elections last May, so all of us were re-elected as councillors. The 3 vacancies for councillors were advertised, but only 2 candidates came forward - Rupert Gutteridge and Sarah Hunter, both of Gallowstree Common, - who the Council was pleased to co-opt as councillors. The other vacancy has remained to this day...

2 councillors stood down at last year's elections - John McNie and Nick Topham. John had served the community as a parish councillor since May 1999 and had been a member of the Editorial Board of the Parish Newsletter from May 1994. I, for one, miss his quiet and dry humour, which was often displayed at our meetings!

The bringing into use of the new pavilion at the Gallowstree Common Recreation Ground was a very significant moment in the life of this Council. Without doubt, the Council has never attempted such a major project before, and, some feel, is not likely to embark on another one for some time. The new pavilion was first used in June last year and officially opened by the Vice-Chairman of the District Council at the end of July.

The saga is not yet finally over, however, because the Council has yet to make the final payment to the contractors, the architect's final certificate having only recently been received. As final completion will happen in 2012, the Council has decided, in principle, to rename the building as the Diamond Jubilee Pavilion, in recognition of the diamond jubilee of Her Majesty the Queen's accession to the throne.

Obviously, Her Majesty must take precedence, but I would not have been averse to naming the pavilion after Roddy Young, my Vice-Chairman for very many years, and Chairman of the Playing Fields Committee since 1991. It was Roddy who really got the new pavilion project up and running, and has seen it through to its excellent conclusion. Indeed, he is still the first port of call when action is needed urgently, like when the sewing classes managed to trip out the electricity supplies in the building all

afternoon recently! If it was not for Roddy's vision, cajoling and tenacity - to name but 3 of his talents - we would not have the building of which your Council is justifiably proud of today.

I have no doubt that Roddy, when he reports on the work of the Playing Fields Committee, will expand on this subject. However, without wishing to steal his thunder, I feel it right to report that, subject to very final calculations, the project has been delivered under budget - the contract figure was £590,000, while the out-turn looks like being just under £589,000. Juggling the Council's finances to ensure that payments were made to time has not been easy, given that many of our funders paid in arrears - ie after the builders' accounts had been received and paid. In that connection, I am, and you should be, very grateful to one of my fellow councillors, Richard McQuillan, who made a short-term interest free loan to the Council back in the summer of 2011, to "tide the Council over", pending receipt of grant instalments or VAT repayments. Finally on this subject of financing the pavilion, it is only right and proper that I reiterate what I said when the pavilion was officially opened last July and that is to thank Roger Penfold our Clerk and also the Council's Responsible Financial Officer. For all that he did in seeming endless bureaucratic, but obviously very necessary form filling, but more to the point his monetary skills. By some how magically managing to make pint pots fill quart pots, as I have indicated previously.

The allotments at Cane End were restored to their original purpose in the Autumn of 2011. The allotments were granted in an enclosure award of the 1860s, when Kidmore End was still part of the Parish of Caversham. Until last year, they had been let, en bloc, to Vines Farm, and their predecessors, for very many years, probably since about 1940, and were used as part of a field laid to grass. The allotments have been resurrected because of demand for plots, and it is great to see them already under cultivation.

Sarah Hall, the Allotments Manager, will no doubt report on this and related matters later in the meeting.

The third major moment relates to affordable housing. I have long advocated the provision of more affordable housing in the Parish. Undoubtedly, historically there were many such properties in the 5 villages, and these were augmented, or possibly some replaced, by the local authority housing in Gallowstree Common and Kidmore End after the Second World War. For a variety of reasons, there is very little which would meet the national definition of affordable, today.

I was delighted, therefore, when, in the summer of last year, your Council gave its support to the provision of a scheme for affordable housing units in Gallowstree Common, on land forming part of the Phillimore Estate. We look forward to Soha Ltd submitting a planning application for the development of the land with 6 homes. That plan will, of course, like any other planning application, be subject to public consultation before it is determined by the planning authority, the District Council.

This particular project had been steered by a sub-committee of the Council, comprising Sue Biggs, Brian Knapp and John Swift, and, again, I offer them my, and your, thanks. I am afraid that there have been many misconceptions put about concerning affordable housing on rural exception sites, but the sub-committee has sought painstakingly to ensure that the residents of the Parish have been disabused of some of the more far fetched predictions as a consequence of affordable housing being provided.

Planning, or, more properly, development control, has always seemed to be an important issue. However, probably as a reflection of the economic position, there have been fewer planning applications on which the advice of your Council has been sought. As you will know, the District Council determines planning applications. However, that Council consults your Council about applications, and expects the Council to help with local notification of applications. The Council annually appoints a Plans Sub-Committee to help it undertake this role.

Only 46 planning applications (including amendments) were referred to your Council last year. Most of these applications were relatively minor, for example extensions to houses, but others were of greater local significance. The application to demolish the Victorian house at Dysons Wood, and replace the living accommodation with more modern units, caused something of a stir in Tokers Green. What that illustrated for me was that your Council is expected to comment on applications in planning terms - some of the comments made by residents fell rather outside that definition.

Your Council often responds to applications by saying it has no strong views, given that it has habitually never recommended approval of applications (other than its own) and believes it can only suggest refusal where it can advance planning reasons for taking that line. It was for that reason that the Council had “no strong views” on the Dysons Wood application, although it put forward suggested conditions, in the event that the District Council granted permission. As a result of this approach, the decisions ultimately reached by the District Council, or, rather its planning officers, for the vast majority of applications are delegated to officers for determination, generally accord with your Council’s position. What I would say is that any residents having a view on a planning application should make it known directly to the planning authority.

There have been 2 planning appeals against decisions of the District Council in the past year. One, relating to alterations to a house in Tokers Green, was allowed, whilst the decision of the inspector is awaited on the second. This was the subject of a public enquiry in Sonning Common in January this year, and related to the proposal to build 50 houses on land off Kennylands Road, Sonning Common, just over the boundary from the Parish. Sue Biggs spoke on behalf of the Council at the inquiry, basically opposing the development on grounds of its impact on the natural environment and on the infrastructure in the area.

You will all be aware that the planning regime is changing, following the Localism Act 2011 receiving the Royal Assent. The Regional Spatial Strategy (the short lived

successor to the old county structure plans) has been abolished, but local development frameworks (successors to local plans) will remain. The District Council is still trying to steer its LDF through the inspection process. It is desperately keen to have the core strategy in place by May this year, because it is concerned that otherwise it will be fighting off developers. This fear arises from the anticipated thrust of the national planning guidelines, still under discussion, which are expected to favour the developer.

Much store is being placed on neighbourhood plans - plans developed by people in parishes or parts of parishes, in our context. The full picture of what this entails is not yet available, but it does seem that such plans start from the assumption that there will be housing growth, rather than what we have been used to for many years - restraint. What is more, neighbourhood plans seem to come with a hefty price tag. I doubt that Kidmore End Parish Council will be in the vanguard on this, but your Council is, nevertheless, co-operating with Sonning Common Parish Council who are gearing up to produce a plan.

Another major local pre-occupation is with the roads, road safety and vehicle speeds. Again, your Council has a sub-committee devoted to looking after these issues, comprising Sue Biggs and John Swift. The sub-committee's agenda presently includes the parking and traffic issues associated with Kidmore End School. Steady progress is being made, with the help of residents, the School and the Police. Following the hard winters of 2009/10 and 2010/11, there was focus on winter maintenance, and in particular the plans, for local road salt/grit provision, adopted unilaterally by the County Council. Your Council made representations about these, but to no avail. In the end, only one of the 2 promised bags of salt were delivered. There has been discussion about more local delivery of winter services, but these have yet to be concluded.

The Sub-Committee has pressed the County Council to extend speed limits to the roads between villages, and to reduce limits to 20mph. There seems little prospect of progress with these matters, as the County Council's officers cite national policy as a reason not to proceed. I am pleased, however, to report that the vehicle activated speed indicator device in Horsepond Road, Gallowstree Common is again functioning correctly. The Sub-Committee has also asked the County Council to undertake some remedial works to the highway drainage in the vicinity of Kidmore End pond. Hopefully, there will be plenty of time to carry out those works, as we are, I am told, in line for a drought!

Your Council looks after other assets beyond the recreational facilities and parts of infrastructure of the Parish. The wells are kept in good order. It makes a contribution towards the cost of upkeep of the churchyard, and the war memorial, when approached. Our Rights of Way Committee walk the footpaths and bridleways in the Parish. We keep our 2 ponds - at Kidmore End and Tokers Green - under review. The village greens at Chalkhouse Green and Tokers Green are mown. We keep an eye on the coronation seats dotted about the Parish.

As you will appreciate, the services provided by your Council don't come free. Part of your Council Tax is paid to the Council. Because of particular circumstances this year, the Council has, I am afraid had to raise its precept for 2012/13 to £36,000. While this is a significant increase, it represents a payment of £53.56 by the average household, for the year - £1 each week. Even so, the cost to Council Tax payers here is lower than the District-wide parish average for 2012/13, which is £70.78.

The Council is having to restore its balances following in the wake of the Pavilion project. The Council customarily recovers all VAT paid from HM Revenue & Customs. However, unexpectedly, HMRC decreed that the contributions made by the Cricket and Football Clubs towards the cost of the Pavilion had to be disregarded, for VAT reclamation purposes, because the clubs would benefit from the facility. This cost your Council over £11,600 of VAT which could not be reclaimed. The Council has, as a result, also adopted a very tight budget for 2012/13, and a number of previously funded projects have been abandoned.

Latterly, during the period under review, we have been delighted to welcome Police Community Support Officers to our meetings. Their attendance is re-assuring, as are their reports, which, interestingly, highlight crimes in neighbouring parishes, while reports of criminal activity in this Parish are mercifully rare. We must all, nevertheless, be on our guard, particularly to deny opportunists any access to our homes and outbuildings.

Before concluding my report, I should thank the editorial board of the Parish Newsletter, led by Brian Knapp, and David King, our webmaster, for all their help in keeping you informed. Incidentally, I am amused from time to time by e-mails offering to secure more hits on our website. If every household has a look, from time to time, that's good enough for me!

As has become some what traditional for me, I will again finally conclude by thanking our Clerk, Roger Penfold, on behalf of us all, for all that he does to ensure that the Council runs correctly and reasonably smoothly, with in the strict rules and guide lines that we all have to abide by - thank you Roger. And absolutely finally, we must put on record our hearty congratulations to Roger, on his well deserved award in the Queens New Year's Honours list of "Appointment as Member of the Order of the British Empire". His citation reads for services to Local Government in Berkshire and swimming in the South East.