

PARISH OF KIDMORE END

REPORT OF THE CHAIRMAN OF THE COUNCIL, 2015/16

I am pleased to submit my report on the work of the Parish Council over the past year, my 4th such report.

In many respects, 2015/6 has been “business as usual” for your Council, although a number of issues have become more pressing over the year.

On this note, planning and the encouragement by South Oxfordshire District Council (SODC) for Neighbourhood Plans (more properly neighbourhood *development* plans) has been a high priority over the year. The Council is not embarking at this time on such a plan for the Parish, following votes now on 2 occasions, for the reasons below:

- the Parish, as a collection of small villages, does not presently have a housing allocation;
- most residents of the Parish are believed to be opposed to larger scale developments, or the development of “green field” sites;
- the bulk of the Parish is within the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty;
- there is an infrastructure deficit, albeit varying, in all 5 settlements in the Parish, e.g. in terms of mains’ sewerage, piped gas supplies, SuperFast Broadband, public transport and shopping facilities;
- there is a steady stream of additional housing units approved in the Parish, although these are treated as “windfalls”;
- the housing needs’ surveys undertaken on behalf of the Council resulted in 6 units of affordable housing being completed in the Parish, in 2015;
- a site which was in the Parish until the boundary adjustment in 2014 has been identified for housing in the draft Sonning Common Neighbourhood Development Plan;
- the cost of producing a neighbourhood development plan is widely reported to be high, in a period when public expenditure is being significantly reduced: there is some funding for developing a plan - £5k from SODC and £8k from central government - against an estimated cost of between £16 - £20k, the balance of which would fall on the Council Tax payers of the Parish;
- the Council does not itself have the resources, in terms of personnel, to deliver a plan or plans;
- there is no certainty that residents with the necessary expertise would volunteer to drive a development plan.

The Council keeps up to date with all developments regarding this issue and are constantly reviewing what is happening within SODC and the County.

Sonning Common Parish Council is still developing its neighbourhood development plan. Your Council has been closely involved in the drafting of the Plan and has

appointed 2 members as observers to the SCNDP working group - Iain Pearson and Hugh Thresher. The plan is nearing the point where a referendum will be held within Sonning Common. Kidmore End Parish Council has supported the draft plan to date.

On the subject of planning in the parish, your Council has been consulted on 64 planning applications by SODC (the planning authority) in the past year, an increase of 20 or 45% over last year. This is a dramatic increase, perhaps generated recently by the prospect of the introduction of the Community Infrastructure Levy this year.

Most of these applications are for extensions or remodelling existing dwellings, although, interestingly, approval has been sought for a greater number of new houses this year, many on what was a single plot for which 2 or more houses are proposed. A notable exception has been the proposal for 6 new dwellings on a one house site in Tokers Green. Your Council opposed this, and, indeed, the District Council refused an application for 5 houses. It was, however, allowed on appeal to the Secretary of State.

That said, for the most part, the decisions of the District Council on applications have broadly mirrored the views expressed by your Council. However, where the Council has had concerns these have been voiced to the SODC Planning Committee, by a councillor, or by the district councillor for this ward, Rob Simister. Nevertheless, we always encourage residents affected by applications to register their views with the District Council and to discuss their concerns with the applicants - it is in the interests of applicants to have their neighbours "on side".

I mentioned earlier that most of the Parish is in the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). During the year, the Council has agreed, in principle, to apply to Natural England to extend the AONB to cover the whole of the Parish, thus including land presently outside, i.e. the area between and beyond Tokers Green and the boundary with Reading. We would like to hear your views on this issue. There is a map available online on the Council's website - www.kepc.co.uk - outlining the area. If you are unable to access the map, please contact me either via email or phone. You can give your views online or by post to the Clerk to the Council. Following a public consultation session in the Diamond Jubilee Pavilion recently, the majority of respondent parishioners are very positive about this proposal.

The location of the Heights Free School, to serve Caversham, was a critical issue last year, as one of the possible sites was in the Parish, in the area which we would like to see included in the AONB. The most popular site in the public consultation was the Mapledurham Playing Fields, in Caversham, and it is understood that the Education Funding Agency is pursuing that site.

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 are, for instance, a page on the County Council's website where

highway defects, egg potholes, can be reported.

In September 2015, council members were invited by the County Council (OCC) to attend a meeting outlining how they proposed to make savings of £88 million, with an additional £50 million in savings by 2020 (this amount has further increased). The initiative is called Oxfordshire Together. The Leader of the Council, Ian Hudspeth, explained that budgetary considerations will reduce the services that OCC provide, so if communities want to maintain local services, then they will have to provide, and eventually completely fund, these services. Caroline Aldridge attended this meeting and reported back to the Council. We then decided to meet with the council officer who is supporting this initiative. We are still waiting for financial information, so that the Council can decide how best to move forward with this proposal. The areas of activity that OCC are looking to hand over to parishes are verge grass cutting, management of salt bins, clearance of roadside litter etc - non essential services. The Council is arranging further meetings with OCC.

Following a review by the public transport service by OCC, the operation of the M1 bus service going through the Parish into Reading will stop in June 2016. The service is currently supported financially by OCC. OCC held meetings with parish councils to discuss future bus services, particularly those, like M1, operated directly by OCC. The cost to keep the M1 would be £18,000 a year, to be shared between all the parishes concerned. The Council is in ongoing discussions with FISH (a voluntary run transport service operating from Sonning Common) about it providing a service through the Parish. However, closer links with FISH have already been established and the Parish Newsletter now includes information about the services that FISH provide.

Against the background of declining resources and budget pressures, both the County Council and the district councils in the County have put forward revised structures for the delivery of local government and other services. The County Council favours one unitary authority for the County, which would entail the abolition of the districts, delivering the full range of local authority services. Meanwhile, SODC and the other district councils, propose the abolition of the County Council, with its functions transferring to 4 new district council based unitary councils working together in partnership with the National Health Service, Police and the Local Enterprise Partnerships. This particular model seems to involve district areas in Gloucestershire and Northamptonshire, and the creation of a combined over-arching authority delivering functions like adult social care. No doubt the public will be consulted on these opposing proposals at some stage.

In the meantime, the issue 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.

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. The Council also contributes to the cost of the Rokeby Recreation Ground, just over the boundary in Chazey Heath, operated by Mapledurham Parish Council.

The Council has allocated £5,000, in the budget for the year 2016/7, for refurbishment of the main piece of play equipment at Gallowstree Common and also to change all the areas of bark surfacing under the equipment to either a grass or rubberized safety surface. The reasoning for this is the play equipment is over 20 years old and has reached the end of its life. Each year we have a safety inspection on all play equipment and we have been advised to change the identified piece of play equipment. The bark disintegrates quite quickly and is expensive to replace.

The Council has asked 4 companies to give 3 designs and quotes. To gain insight into what children and young people and families would view as the best option, we have consulted with the school council, parents and children at parents' evenings at Kidmore End primary school and held a public consultation session at the Diamond Jubilee Pavilion. The Council is applying for grants from the Leader programme - Chilterns area and SODC capital grants. During the public consultation, parishioners also said they would like to raise some funds, although, as yet, the events have not been organised. The Council is intending to continue with further consultations and then the chosen design will be shown on the website and in the Parish Newsletter, along with the success or not of the funding applications. I would like to thank the head teacher, Mrs Hull, for her support, and the school council members.

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

The Council owns allotments at Cane End and Gallowstree Common. Sarah Hall will report, as Allotments' Manager, later. In the 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 formalities are concluded.

Some parts of the local infrastructure are dependent on use. 2 of these are the bus service through Kidmore End (already mentioned) and the mobile library service. The mobile library now only stops in Tokers Green.

Your Council purchased the telephone kiosks at Chalkhouse Green and Kidmore End in 2014, and continues to discuss how best to utilise them. In the meantime, 2 of my colleagues, Trevor Perchard and Hugh Thresher, have undertaken to tidy them up, and carry out any repairs. Although this process is taking some time, when completed the kiosks will be a useful addition to the Parish. Currently, the most likely use for the

kiosks is for local maps and information, and possibly as book exchange points. The kiosk in Cane End remains functional.

On the subject of telecommunications, while your Council has been pleased to note that Superfast Broadband was facilitated in the Parish during the year, it is disappointed that the service is limited to Gallowstree Common. The Council is hopeful that the Superfast broadband will be available during 2017 for the whole of the Parish, and has laid aside some funds to help bring this about, if necessary.

During the last year, I have attended the Townlands Hospital steering group meetings, as there was a request that a member attend from each parish council in southern South Oxfordshire. During these meetings, there has been considerable discussions relating to the lack of communication between themselves and the Clinical Commissioning Group. There has been locally much distress about the fact that there will only be beds in the St John's Order Care Home and not in the hospital. The hospital building has now been taken over from the builders and the services to be provided are still being negotiated. There seems to be some progress about some issues, but not about the whereabouts of the beds.

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 at about £52 a year - £1 per week - for the "average" household, Band D, for a couple of years now. However, this year the Council has decided to increase the precept by 2%. This will increase the amount paid per Band D household for parish purposes from £52.00 to £53.04 per year - less than 9p per month. We have not made this decision lightly, but want to be able to take over public services presently delivered the County and District Councils, as they seek to manage further budget cuts.

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 would like 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. District Councillor Rob Simister attends our meetings and also sends reports of council business and has been supportive in issues of planning over the year. I would like to thank him for his involvement with the Council.

Our MP, John Howell, wanted to meet with parish councils in September last year. He was unable to attend a meeting of this Council, but Caroline Aldridge and I met him and discussed local issues, including planning, neighbourhood development plans and this Council's proposal to apply for the boundary of the AONB to be extended in the Parish. He agreed to support the Parish on the latter issue.

All of us parish councillors retired on 11 May last year. We were all re-elected. 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 O'Sullivan, who resigned. Jane will be sorely missed and has put in many years' service, not only on this occasion, to being a great parish councillor.

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 gets information on to the website with great speed and advises us on how to improve the site.

Finally, I would like to thank Roger Penfold, Clerk to the Council, for all his work and timely advice over the year and to wish him a speedy recovery.

Sue Biggs