

Berrick Salome Parish Council May 2019

Chairman's Annual Report

Ian Glyn

This is my end of term report covering four years of your Parish Council.

I reflect on another active year in The Parish. Many of the themes and issues faced over the past four years persisted and received our attention last year. Some have been resolved but some rumble on and will continue to exercise your new Council in months to come.

Planning Issues

We have been required to or "invited " to comment on 17 Planning Application this year. I say "invited to" because three such applications were outside our Parish Boundary but close enough to warrant our input.

Let me deal with those three first.

1. Ben 3/4 is the David Wilson Homes development that abuts Rokemarsh. We objected to the Application for reasons that are well known --but SODC granted consent, --principally because it formed a fundamental component of the emerging Benson Neighbourhood Plan and delivered the much heralded "edge road".
While respecting that decision, we question the integrity of it, as the decision was made before the result of the Benson Neighbourhood Plan referendum was known. Since the principle behind the Grant was entirely predicated on the support of the Neighbourhood Plan for the development and since that support was entirely because it delivered the Edge Road --it seemed to us to be wrong to grant the permission before the result of that referendum on the Neighbourhood Plan was established.
We will never know what the result of that referendum would have been if the issue of Ben 3/4 had still been open. Those in Benson (and indeed Rokemarsh who were given a vote) who might not have seen the prize of the Edge Road as being sufficiently important to sacrifice this plot of farmland to development, had no incentive to vote accordingly in the referendum as permission had already been granted for it. This seemed to us to be a significant flaw in the democratic process and we made that point as strongly as we could to the Planning Committee -- unsuccessfully as it turned out.
2. Ben 5 (on land on the east side of the B4009) was refused by SODC, appealed by the Applicant and, eventually, called in by the Secretary of State and refused by him because it ran contrary to the emerging Benson Neighbourhood Plan.
3. The Application for nineteen houses next to the Orchard in Rokemarsh (but on land in Benson Parish) was refused by SODC but is currently the subject of an Appeal. We have repeated our objection in the Appeal proceedings and take comfort from the fact that Benson Parish Council are objecting too --stating in unequivocal terms that the proposal runs contrary to the Benson Neighbourhood Plan.

All of which confirms the power of Neighbourhood Plans in the current environment of Planning Process.

Closer to home, we recommended approval to eight Applications, one of which is still being considered by SODC but for the other seven -- SODC agreed with our recommendation and granted

consent. We recommended refusal for three Applications, two of which were withdrawn and one of which (The copse land in Roke) is still outstanding. And we are in the process of considering three further Applications.

With regard to the copse land in Roke, we asked SODC to consider enforcement action against some of the aspects of what has happened on that plot. They started that process and will consider what further action to take depending on the outcome of the outstanding Planning Application relating to the land. We see the precipitous actions of the landowner of this plot as being very regrettable and will attempt to play our part in protecting local interests in that regard. We are conscious of the alternative strategies being promoted by those that are most affected by what happens here, and we will try to navigate a route through those to deliver an acceptable outcome.

SODC Plan/ Chalgrove

Let me now refer to developments re Chalgrove Airfield. SODC got itself into the extraordinary position of having to withdraw the version of its Local Plan that so perniciously proposed significant developments at Chalgrove Airfield. In doing so they lost their Leader and the new team set about rewriting the Plan in double quick time so as not to jeopardise significant Central Government Funding.

This they achieved and we were all asked to comment on the revised SODC Local Plan over the winter. The revised Plan is, in our view, a much more balanced and sensible document in that it does not rule out the development opportunities on certain Green Belt land around Oxford where the merit of the Green Belt designation offers only marginal benefit.

Chalgrove remains in the Plan as one of the potential sites for significant residential development but the Plan itself acknowledges the potential of its non-deliverability because of Martin Baker's refusal to relinquish its lease and its non-desirability because of its location.

We still have work to do to protect our local interests against the idea of developing Chalgrove Airfield but I feel that any judgement made by the Inspector of the Plan and any subsequent legal action will be made on a much more sensible and rational basis than the one we faced this time last year.

In all other respects the SODC Plan seems to me to be a good one that is worthy of our general support.

Expressway

The other big issue overshadowing the Parish at this time last year was the possibility of the most southerly route proposed for the proposed Oxford to Cambridge Expressway being routed through the Parish.

Steve Rhodes has done a tremendous job for us this year keeping an eye on this issue and representing us in the relevant forums. The eventual route is far from being decided (or at least announced) but it appears that the risk of it decimating our lives in this Parish seems to have passed with the most southerly route currently on the table cutting through land north of Chislehampton. This is another major infrastructure project that we will have to keep our eyes on in coming months and years.

Thames Water

Moving to more basic issues, David Bridgland has pursued Thames Water for a remedy to the issue of foul water overflow whenever the water table rises. Fortunately, there have been no instances in recent months.

We had a good meeting with Thames Water a month or so ago. The conclusion of which was
1) Thames Water have identified and fixed a significant leak into the system off Chapel Lane in Roke occurring whenever the water table rises.

2) The last time that we experienced problems was as a direct result of a pump failure coinciding with the failure of its back up system rather than a more fundamental problem.

3) Thames Water are adamant that the exit pipe from the Rokemarsh pumping station is correctly sized, that any increase in size would deliver other unacceptable issues and that there is no advantage (or possibility) of upgrading the exit pipe during the development of the David Wilson Estate.

4) Our Parish is on a priority reporting system, so that further investigative works can be commissioned immediately if we experience further issues. This is important because the location of the water ingress can only be detected and identified when the water table is high. David Bridgland has the name and number of the senior engineer who will organise an inspection if and when we experience issues

5) There are several self-help issues that we should all attend to in our properties. David will be circulating a list of those to all households soon.

Neighbourhood Plan

The other significant activity this year has been the ongoing work on our Neighbourhood Plan. A team of ten of us have worked furiously on this during the year taking it through its very onerous "consultation" phase and onwards to its submission to SODC and therefrom to an Examiner and then back to us for Referendum. The current state of play is that it is being scrutinised by SODC till 5th of June and an Examiner will be appointed at that time. We hope that it can be put to referendum at the back end of the summer this year.

The whole exercise is driven by surprisingly tight rules and emerging conventions and has been more taxing than some of us anticipated at the outset. I hope that the result will be worth the effort and will guide future development in the Parish --while acting against any unscrupulous and any uncaring development prospects that may arise.

Because of the nature of our Parish, the backbone of the Plan is the emphasis on the four distinct Settlements (Berrick Prior, Berrick Salome, Roke and Rokemarsh) and the desire to keep them geographically separate while operating and behaving as one united Parish.

The Plan simply would not have got over some of the hurdles put in place of its preparation were it not for the extraordinary input of some of the team members. I will not embarrass them by naming them, but they know who they are, and we all owe them a significant debt of gratitude.

Also worthy of note is the way in which so many in the Parish engaged in the process by commenting on the various drafts and consultation mechanics put before you during the Plan's gestation. Many thanks.

Traffic Calming

Now that we know what we are facing as a result of developments in Benson, the traffic calming team have set to work devising methods of minimising and mitigating the effect of increasing volumes and speed of traffic through the Parish.

The first job was to establish current behaviour and a traffic count has been conducted. This reported significantly increased volumes to those suggested a couple of years ago in similar work as part of the research undertaken to support some of the Benson developments. And it recorded seriously worrying speeds at certain times of the day.

I suspect that some of the proposals emerging from the team will be entirely uncontroversial but that, on others, opinions will be divided in a horribly Brexitlike way. We will have to work out ways to canvass and react to opinions as the proposals emerge but, meanwhile, it is my intention that nothing controversial should be implemented by the team until a democratic process of some sort has given it the authority that it needs.

Playground

We have continued to repair the Playground equipment to keep it safe and usable. We did investigate a complete replacement, but the costs involved confirmed that our chosen strategy of remedial work was appropriate.

Village Hall

Much work has been done during the recent years to preserve and enhance the Village Hall which now benefits from an entirely new roof and walls. Improved insulation makes it a much more economic proposition to run and a much more pleasant environment to be in.

The relationship with the Wallingford Bridge Club gives the Village Hall a very sound base for the future.

This year the Bridge Club paid for the resurfacing of the larger car parking arrangements.

The Parish recently put in Planning Permission for the final phase of the rejuvenation of the Hall and we await SODC's consent (or otherwise) on that. The scheme will:

- 1) Provide a secondary entrance to the Hall to enable the two rooms to be operated separately
- 2) Improve the Appearance of the roadside elevation by introducing windows and additional storage facilities to that frontage and landscaping the area between the Hall and the road.
- 3) Rearrange the Car Park entrance and exit to advantage in terms of safety, appearance, and disruption to the properties nearby.

Work is also being done to remodel the governance of the Village Hall to reflect current legislation and the fact that the original arrangements have expired by time.

You will hear more of this later this evening from the Village Hall Management Committee.

Road furniture

I hope you will all have noticed that all the road signs in the Parish have been upgraded and modernised. This is particularly relevant to the 7.5-ton weight restriction signs which had faded in to oblivion. Now that they are legible, we need to work out ways of reporting miscreants to ensure that the limit is meaningfully enforced.

Litter picking

An army of litter pickers braved the weather and the traffic again this year to tidy up our verges. We would welcome proposals to manage this problem in the Parish on a permanent basis so as to keep litter to a minimum -- at the very least we encourage walkers to be picking up stuff so thoughtlessly discarded by passing cars.

Bridleways, Control of cycle safaris, PAGE, Neighbourhood Watch

We are grateful for the continuing activities of the "champions" -- the individuals who represent our interests by protecting our Bridleways and footpaths, / who exercise some element of control over those who use our lanes for cycle safaris and races / who represent us on PAGE and who are working to set up a low key Neighbourhood Watch presence.

One thing that we failed to tackle this year was the review of our watercourses and ditches to ensure that these are clear so as to avoid flooding in the future. I think we need to address this in coming years, and I'm pleased to be able to tell you that Douglas Taylor has agreed to co-ordinate that task for us again.

In their continuing effort to mother us into a state of complete dependence on daft rules the government have required that we seek everyone's consent to remain on the Parish email list. Absent that consent we are required to cut you off from that extremely efficient method of keeping you informed of what is going on. As of tonight, 17 of you had not consented. After this evening, if you still haven't given us that consent, you will be removed from the list. To those 17, I say "It may well be that this is what you want -- but, equally, it may just be that you want to keep in touch with local things and have the same disregard for the ministry of silly rules as do I. If the latter -- well you've made your protest but please, now, give us your consent by emailing the clerk accordingly".

And finally, I want to say something about this Council -- your Parish Council -- at the end of its term.

There's been a lot going on over the last four years and I believe we've kept abreast of it even recording some memorable successes - of which the installation of Broadband (masterminded by Hannah Bradley before she stepped down) may be the most significant. All six Councillors who have served (including Hannah) have worked hard and well to deliver what, I hope, has been a successful Council.

And, I know I've said this before on many occasions, we have been served in the most extraordinary way by a totally magnificent Clerk in the form of Chris Cussens.

But all good things must come to an end and we now look forward to the next four years. Steve Rhodes steps down from the Council and Mike Craven Todd joins us. Steve has been a tower of sensible force and wisdom. He has masterminded our approach to the Expressway while offering ultrasound judgements on all the issues we've faced. We will miss him, of course, and we are extremely grateful to him. You've got a hard act to follow, Mike, but if anyone can do it - you can. Many thanks to Steve for the past and to Mike for offering to take his place.

I am on record as saying that I think you need a new face in this chair too. I say so because I've been doing this for a long time and because new blood, new ideas, refreshing styles and approaches are good. But despite my protestations and our very real attempt to find a replacement I'm afraid to have to tell you that no-one stepped forward, so you've got me as a Councillor for another term.

When I started writing my report, I had it in mind to reflect on how disappointed and disillusioned I was not to have been replaced -- how it reflected a certain lack of support and commitment from Parishioners to serve. But as I wrote these words, I gradually saw a different picture and did some maths which made me altogether more cheerful and hopeful.

By my calculation, and excluding Parish Councillors and the Clerk, there are 60 Parishioners who organise, manage or act in some capacity to create the local institutions and functions that bind us all together in this Parish.

Sixty Parishioners who get off their arses to make the settlements of Berrick, Roke and Rokemarsh the delightful places that they are to live in and belong to.

And the really good news is that, of those 60, a very refreshing number are from a generation below the older members of our community on whom we have relied in recent years.

Again, I'm not going to name them -- but they know who they are.

And that made me much more relaxed about hogging the position of Parish Councillor for another four-year period

So, for those 60 Parishioners AND for those who serve as Parish Councillors can I ask you all to stand and create a ripple of Applause.