

1. CHAIRMAN'S REPORT ON 2019/20 – Ian Glyn

I write the Report of the Berrick Salome Parish Council for the year 2019/20 with little expectation of being able to deliver it verbally at the Annual Parish Meeting as is normal -- This due to the extraordinary circumstances in which the Country finds itself.

For the benefit of those who might be reading this in the future as a historical document, we are enduring a period of lockdown during which our normal social and commercial activities are severely restricted so as to protect the UK (and the world actually) from the effect of a particularly pernicious virus.

Time will tell whether the strategy of a lockdown is an effective and necessary tool and whether its current economic and social consequences are merited or whether an alternative approach would have been more viable. Sufficient to say, at this stage, that the lockdown is being universally respected, and the stoicism of the British people is apparent. But the economy is taking a very severe battering.

So, this year the democratic process within the Parish of Berrick Salome will be satisfied by this report being circulated in written form to all Parishioners.

1.1. PLANNING ISSUES

Eighteen Planning Applications have been considered by the Parish Council this year. On three of those, we recommended refusal. SODC have agreed with our view on all but one Application where we were content with the proposal and they disagreed and refused it on the advice of their Listed Buildings Officer.

One application (of which more in the next section of this Report) remains to be decided by SODC, one was withdrawn and fourteen granted.

1.2. INTENTIONAL UNAUTHORISED DEVELOPMENT IN ROKE

In the context of Planning Issues that have faced the Parish Council this year, the predominant concern has revolved around the Intentional Unauthorised Development (IUD) on land in Roke and I propose to reflect on that situation in this Report. The issue was referred to in my Report last year and has been rumbling on since then.

Background

The plot of land in question was a small but valued local copse of undeveloped natural wilderness linking with other similar copses to form a larger area of natural habitat alongside a much-used public footpath.

In early iterations of the Berrick Salome Neighbourhood Plan (BSNP), it was designated as a Green Space with all the protection that such a designation implies. It was only because of the destructive actions of the current owner of the land (by replacing all the natural vegetation with hard standing) that the final version of the BSNP did not maintain the Green Space designation for the plot.

In years gone by the plot has been the subject of development proposals that had been refused by SODC and at Appeal. It lies outside the Settlement Boundary as defined in the BSNP and is within the area identified by the Environment Agency as being prone to flooding.

The current owner of the plot applied for consent for a substantial family house in 2018/9. The Parish Council believed that the site was completely unsuitable for development (for the reasons stated above) and SODC refused the Application.

Current situation.

No Appeal has been lodged by the owner against SODC's refusal.

SODC have been considering a new Planning Application for the site since September 2019. This Application seeks permission for a number of buildings and mobile homes on the plot and purports to represent and reflect the "traveller" status and lifestyle of the owner. It also seeks retrospective consent for unauthorised works undertaken on the plot prior to August 2019.

Over the August 2019 Bank Holiday weekend (and notwithstanding the absence of permission so to do) the Applicant moved on to site and started the works that were the subject of this Application and, at the time of writing, work continues to expand the scope beyond that covered in the Application.

The Parish Council and the Environment Agency have vigorously objected to the Application and many Parishioners have done similarly expressing dismay that the pre-emptive and very cynical action of the Applicant should be allowed to persist. Requests have been made that SODC enforcement officers should take action to remedy the clear breaches that the Applicant has undertaken.

The Parish Council's view.

I believe that it is necessary and appropriate to express in this Report the view of the Parish Council on this matter.

1) The Parish of Berrick Salome likes to think of itself as welcoming to all - and so, I believe, do its Parishioners. But this sentiment of welcome is trumped in this instance by the dismay, disillusionment, anger and fear that the actions of the landowner have generated in the community.

2) It is the view of the Parish Council that the plot of land is unsuitable for development. It is outside the Settlement Boundary, it is an area previously coveted locally as a Green Space of natural habitat, it is deemed unsuitable for development by the Environment Agency for reasons of flooding and dispersal of surface water and, in its previous state, it acted as an important element of rural landscaping in the midst of the linear structure of Roke.

3) The Parish Council considers that the passage of events that have occurred to date should not be allowed to persist. The Applicant has shown total and cynical disregard for the laws and conventions that bind "society" and on which Parishioners depend for their protection, security and peace of mind.

4) Thus, despite the instinct to be welcoming to all, the Parish Council will continue to recommend that SODC refuse the current Application and apply the necessary enforcement action against the landowner to ensure that the land is restored as far as it can be to its original status.

And, if I may add a personal thought to this position, I find it particularly disappointing that the Applicant, by his actions and clear disregard for others, should be so abusing the very well intentioned laws that are designed to promote and protect the lifestyle that he wishes to follow - that of the travelling community. In my view the actions described above can do that cause no good whatsoever and may go some way to explaining the resistance that communities sometimes display to developments of this nature.

I sincerely hope that this matter will be resolved before I come to write my Report this time next year.

1.3. SODC LOCAL PLAN

I referred last year to the "revised" Local Plan which seemed to us to be a much more balanced and logical document than its predecessor. We retain concerns about the inclusion of Chalgrove Airfield as a proposed development site, but the context of its inclusion reflected correctly on the possibility of its non-deliverability and the Plan proposed sensible alternatives.

The change of political control within SODC during the year has resulted in the progress of that Plan through to Inspection being delayed, but early in 2020 it was sent to the Inspector and, at the time of writing, we await the results of that process.

There is considerable debate continuing between SODC, other Oxfordshire District Councils, Oxfordshire County Council and Central Government. Our fervent hope is that SODC do not lose control of the local planning system again by failing to deliver the required "five year housing supply" while they fight, through the machinery of the Local Plan, to deliver what they perceive to be politically desirable. To lose that control would seem to me to be a significant backward step of great detriment to us all.

1.4. EXPRESSWAY.

This time last year we were much exercised by the prospect of the proposed Oxford to Cambridge Expressway arriving on our doorstep. That particular risk seems to have gone away as the selection of proposed routes has now excluded the one that most affected this Parish. But the proposal for such a road is still live and its delivery will inevitably have repercussions for the Parish. It is nevertheless off the Agenda of critical issues facing us for the moment.

1.5. THAMES WATER

The reverse is the case in relation to the inability of the sewage system to evacuate and dispose of our foul water satisfactorily. The winter of 2019/20 saw serious floods in many parts of the Country but locally we were spared the worst of the excessive rainfall. Yet, even following a dry summer and as the water table rose, our drainage system failed to cope, and we were forced to experience foul water overflowing on our lanes. The Parish Council continues to pursue Thames Water for a solution to this totally unacceptable situation -- I fear we are amongst many other similar complainants and the task remains to get traction within Thames Water for them to invest considerable amounts to remedy the situation.

1.6. NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

During the year, the small team that convened what seems like a long while ago completed their task by presenting the Berrick Salome Neighbourhood Plan for, inspection and subsequent referendum and the Plan was formally "made" in December 2019.

That means that SODC have to take the policies expressed in the Plan into consideration when considering Planning Application.

A huge vote of thanks is due to the team who did this -- it was no small task!!

1.7. TRAFFIC CALMING

One of the overriding concerns expressed during the Neighbourhood Plan process was the need to control and limit the volume and speed of vehicles using the lanes that go through our Parish. A working party has been looking at this issue at critical points in the Parish and has started the process of proposing methods to achieve a satisfactory result to the problem. It is not an easy or cheap task and involves the approval of OCC Highways. It will certainly take some time to deliver in any visible or effective form.

I anticipate that differing views as to the proposed solutions will be expressed by Parishioners and so I have made it clear that those views will be sought and canvassed in a fully democratic way before irreversible action is taken.

1.8. VILLAGE HALL

The village hall continues to prosper and the relationship with and activities of The Wallingford Bridge Club continue to give it sustainability and life. Planning Permission was granted in the year to improve the layout and vehicular access arrangements of the Hall and, at the time of writing, efforts are being made to generate the funding required to undertake this work.

The constitution of the Hall and the arrangements for its tenure (The Parish Council own the land on which it sits) have been reviewed during the year and will shortly be enshrined in formal documentation.

1.9. PLAYGROUND

The Playground continues to be well used and the Parish Council continues to invest to preserve its existing structure safely. In an ideal world the equipment would be replaced, but the sums of money involved with providing a modern facility are considered to be beyond our resources for the foreseeable future.

1.10. FINANCIAL RESOURCES

On the matter of financial resources, it is worth mentioning that the Parish Council continues its policy of building up reserves for specific needs and generally. It is the view of the Parish Council that continuing strain on County and District Council resources will increasingly leave gaps in local facilities and that The Parish Council needs to equip itself to fill the gaps so created. Our budgets are created and managed with that requirement in mind.

We, as a Parish, are fortunate to be able to benefit from two historic but locally inspired and driven charities. They are The Berrick Salome Quarry Charity and the more specifically targeted Berrick Salome Relief in Need Charity. The work of those that manage those institutions and the grants therefrom are both greatly appreciated.

During the year we were also approached on a technicality by an organisation called the Benson Community Association which appears to have been set up several years ago for the benefit of the inhabitants of Benson and Berrick Salome. The Parish Council will investigate the extent to which this organisation can benefit residents in the Parish but I suspect that, because its benefit is underpinned by the ability to use land in Benson for recreational purposes, there will be limited actual benefits accruing to our Parishioners. Any information from Parishioners about the history of this organisation would be welcome.

1.11. GENERAL MATTERS.

During the year, the Parish Council has also concerned itself in the activities of

- PAGE,
- Local Bridleways and Footpaths ,
- Potential tree planting in the Parish
- Issues of Crime and Security.
- Cyclists

I thank those who have championed (and continue so to do) those causes on our behalf. With specific reference to PAGE, it is welcome news that OCC have removed the Southern site that most affected this Parish from its list of possible gravel extraction sites.

So -- This year has been active - and largely satisfactory for the Parish. It ends in the most extraordinary circumstances driven by the Covid 19 virus attack. I suspect we will be well into the current year (and maybe beyond) before we return to the lifestyles that we had come to enjoy. But we will!!

No report of this nature is complete without mentioning the work of my fellow Councillors and our amazing Clerk.

Ellie Cross, David Bridgland and Mike Craven Todd have consistently offered words of extreme wisdom as we have debated the matters before us as well as championing the specific areas of local responsibility that they have taken on. Craig Tribe keeps us on the straight and narrow in terms of our adherence to the rules and conventions as well as in a financial sense as Treasurer. He has also led our relationship with the SODC planning department on the very difficult issue of the IUD in Roke. And Chris Cussens continues as the most extraordinarily committed and talented Clerk by keeping us all informed of what's going on inside and outside the Parish.

I'm sure I reflect the views of all as I offer an enormous vote of thanks to all of my fellow Councillors and our Clerk for all the work they have done on our behalf this year.