

Annual Report 2022 – 2023

10th May, 2023

Chair's Introduction and Report

1. Welcome to the Annual Assembly for Basildon.
2. This meeting will consist of a series of reports, each given by the councillor who has a particular responsibility for an area of the council's work, over the past year or so. Each councillor will talk for about 5 minutes. Those councillors who are unable to attend this evening will have their reports read by another councillor. There will be an opportunity in the final section of the meeting to ask questions and offer comments. We aim to conclude the meeting at about 8.30
3. Councillor David Jones and Councillor Oliver Chadwyk Healey are unable to attend; his reports will be read by Councillor Sarah Barnes and Councillor Elaine Cox. Laura Coyle, our district councillor, also presents her apologies.

Changes to the council

1. Councillor Parsons was re-elected to the position of Chair. Councillor David Jones has been re-elected to the position of Vice Chair.
2. The website continues to be managed by Jane Jones and is expected to undergo a major revision in the coming months.

Finance

1. Our precept for this financial year was £23,000; we actually spent £34,000 with the difference being topped up by our savings. We had planned to spend £31,000. There were some alterations in the planned spend: a mixture of costs that didn't materialise and a spend that was considered in previous years and which proved to be possible this year: we were £9,000 under budget and chose to spend this on new play equipment at Wakemans Playground.
2. Our unanticipated savings included the following.
 - a. Gritting was £1,000 under budget due to the milder winter.
 - b. The Village Hall is now largely self funding so there was a saving of £3,000.
 - c. The mobile library made no request for subsidy, a saving of £2,000.
 - d. £1,500 was put aside for clubs and societies: it was not claimed.
 - e. £1,000 was allocated to Teracycle and this was not used.
3. The major outlays this year were as follows:
 - a. Children's swing - £12,000.
 - b. The Clerk's salary - £8,000.
 - c. A tidy up of the area around the war memorial - £200.
 - d. Tree work at the Village Hall - £1,000.
 - e. Gritting - £1,300.
 - f. The defibrillator at the church was match funded at £1150.
 - g. Pangbourne Toilets – an annual subsidy of £520.
 - h. Repairs and servicing of the outdoor gym - £2,500.

- i. The Thames Travel bus subsidy - £1,272.
4. Our draft budget for 2023/24 is set at £32,000 with a requested precept of £23,000.

Planning Applications

1. There were 61 planning applications reviewed by the council in this period, an increase of 8 in comparison with the previous year. Of the 61 West Berkshire approved 49 and refused 10. There were two applications that were withdrawn before they reached the decision stage. Both of these applications were ones the parish council had raised concerns about.
2. In the main our and West Berkshire's views have coincided. The proposal to place a shepherd's hut in a garden, a large fence along Pangbourne Road, the primary school outdoor classroom and a shooting tower in the shooting school were some examples of where our respective views diverged.
3. The number of proposed new houses reached double figures for the first time in recent years. There were proposals to build 7 houses at Hillfields Farm, one house in Gardener's Lane, a new house on Knappswood Farm and one or more houses behind Appletree Cottage. In addition there was a proposal to site a static caravan in land adjoining the recreation ground. All of these were either withdrawn or refused.

Matters raised during the year

1. The contract for grass cutting and general 'green' tidying in the village is now with Tactical Facilities Management. We asked for quotations from several firms and this one was the most competitive. The contract is a one year one.
2. The council was represented by Councillor Chadwyck Healey on the Queen's Jubilee committee and provided some funding for the event itself.
3. The parish council is required to purchase liability insurances: this, following the period during and after the Covid emergency, was problematic – premiums increased dramatically – but this has now been resolved.
4. We continue to support the Country Neighbour with a £250 grant and wish the group well with its new funding model.
5. We continue to send a councillor to the quarterly Neighbourhood Action Group. This is our principal means of contact with Thames Valley Police.
6. The future of the Red Lion was a matter of concern earlier in the year. We successfully applied for the pub to be recognised as an Asset of Community Value. The pub has since been taken over by Vince and Gina Heavey, and its future now looks very promising.
7. The council were contacted by representatives of the local primary school regarding unsociable parking around the school. The council has raised this with both the police and the district council, and is not surprised to find that similar concerns have been raised by many of the local primary schools.
8. The council has contacted the primary school about the open access through the grounds afforded by the public footpath. We have offered to approach West Berkshire Council about funding to secure the site whilst maintaining access for walkers; we wait for a response from the school.
9. Our September meeting was cancelled in respect for the Queen's funeral.
10. The council purchased a Soldier Silhouette as part of the November Memorial programme, and this will be placed on the green annually at this time.

11. Several residents contacted the council about significant surface water problems at the junction of Aldworth Road and Emery Acres. This was reported to both the district council and to the district councillor: it was recently resolved by the installation of a large soakaway.
12. The parish council has reported several apparent breaches of planning permission to the district planning enforcement office. These matters are currently on going.
13. Speeding labels for attachment to dustbins have been distributed along Pangbourne Road. We welcome requests from residents for further placements.
14. Following considerable local concern regarding speeding in the village Councillor Jones contacted West Berkshire and has acquired access to technology that will allow volunteers to collect data on speeds through the village. An invitation to join the group of volunteers resulted in only one response, too small a number for further progress on this matter.
15. Celia Lines has now moved away from the village. Her service to the village was considerable, not least in her regular litter collection on Lower Basildon. The Council wishes to thank her for her work over many years. It is relieved to be able to report that Roger Hovel, an equally generous member of our community, has offered to take on her patch.
16. A new contract has been agreed between the council and the church for the hire of the meeting room for the visiting Post Office.
17. The Grotto remains a concern as no remedial work seems to have been done following the fire of a few years ago. We have contacted the Conservation Officer and the matter is being pursued.
18. The website has undergone several revisions. Jane Jones continues to manage the site efficiently and expertly. The site will continue to publish statutory information, information about local organisations and information about current issues such as road closures, local events and the like.

Reports from Individual Councillors

Geoff Couchman

143 Bus Service

The Parish Council continues to support the 143 service to the amount of £1272 per annum. Although there is a greater commitment to local buses the 143 from Upper Basildon is still underused. For this reason, it was decided to continue our financial support. Residents of Lower Basildon have a slightly better local service to the station and Reading.

Beale Park

For many years residents of Lower Basildon have enjoyed the facility of walking their dogs through Tookey Woods, which is part of the Beale Park estate. After the easing of the lockdown coinciding with a period of hot weather parts of the estate accessed from Church Lane were overwhelmed with visitors, leaving a substantial mess to clean up by the Estate. Following this the Estate trustees decided to close this area of the Estate which also prohibited Lower Basildon walkers from using Tookey Woods to walk their dogs. We have had several meetings with the estate to try to find a solution to this problem as well as an exchange of emails. The most recent one being in April. The Estate are finalising a ten-year plan to develop the area and hope to create a wildlife area which will be open to local walkers. I have no further information as to when this will be signed off and communicated but I have been assured that we will receive an early communication from the trust.

In the meantime, our offer to assist in any way we can has been accepted by the trust and it is hoped a resolution can be found to permit Basildon residents to once again use this area.

Elaine Cox

Public Rights of Way (PROWs)

WBC did a complete survey of its public rights of way in 2022. In Basildon it was noted that there were 45 recordable problems, including such things as damaged gates, inadequate signage, overgrowing vegetation, etc.

A major new strategy is due for consultation in June - the Rights of Way Improvement Plan, which seeks to address the needs of those who use the rights of way network, including those with any type of disability.

WBC is happy to try to accommodate any volunteers or groups through the parish who wish to survey rights of way and/or carry out basic minor work to maintain them. Interested residents should contact either the parish council or WBC.

David Jones read by Sarah Barnes

Traffic Matters

Background

Speeding in Upper Basildon continues to be an issue raised by those we represent.

Lower Basildon, spread as it is along the A329, has the benefit of two speed cameras but Upper Basildon has no such traffic calming measures.

The route through the village from Pangbourne and Aldworth, although 30mph, is where residents believe that cars frequently travel over the speed limit.

As reported at previous Annual Assemblies a speed survey was undertaken for two weeks in late 2021. The recording device captured speeds of vehicles travelling in both directions along the Aldworth Road. It operated throughout a 24 hour period, so it also recorded vehicle speeds in the early hours and evenings when other traffic was at a minimum, and when there are often reports of speeding vehicles.

The 85th Percentile has to be significantly above the 30mph speed limit to trigger the deployment of a Vehicle Activated Sign. (The 85th Percentile is the speed up to which 85% of traffic is travelling under free flowing conditions. This is the measure that for many years has been used by highway authorities nationally to determine the most appropriate speed limit.)

The highest 85th Percentile speeds recorded for the two week period were:

Northbound 28 mph

Southbound 30.2 mph

Whilst there may therefore be a small number of vehicles which are using the road above the posted speed limit, the survey results indicate that the overwhelming majority of road users are able to comply with this limit and does not indicate a problem which is any greater than on many similar roads in our district. In these circumstances we are left with the fact that it is a police enforcement issue not a Council one.

One of the things as residents we must also realise, however, is that when these surveys have been done in the past, some 65% of speeding vehicles are actually driven by local residents! Signs can help but the key is to change drivers' behaviour.

Possible Option

It was always our intention to consider mobilising a Community Speed Watch Team which

would need volunteers from the local community. This is not something the Parish Councillors can organise and run on their own.

We have met with the Senior Road Safety Officer and signed up for the scheme and it will be possible to borrow hand held devices from them for a team to use. This forms a visible deterrent to motorists and provides further data which can be used to assess the situation with the District Council.

Despite a number of calls for volunteers, to date only one person has come forward. This could indicate that there are few residents who wish to pursue this avenue and that they are happy with the status quo. To measure demand an article will be written for the Country Neighbour asking for more volunteers. If a team of 6-8 cannot be recruited then the matter will have to rest there.

The Council have also committed to putting in a new gateway at the junction of Aldworth Road and Hook End Lane. The challenge here is one of resource. We have been told by the Senior Engineer (Traffic) the Traffic & Road Safety team has been subject to significant staff shortages which has resulted in a team of six being reduced to a two in a relatively short period of time. We have been assured, however, that the aim is to revisit this project within the coming months with the possibility of providing improved or additional signage.

Libraries

There are 3,667 public libraries (including mobile libraries) in the UK with 7.3 million active borrowers. There are 214 million visits to public libraries across the year, plus 131 million total online visits. Libraries issue almost 165 million books a year.

In W. Berks there was significant change in April 2017 when the Council cut funding by 44% and asked Parish Councils to support the service by giving £1 per head per annum. Since then we have made a donation of £1 per head per annum as we thought it was an important service to support. The total contribution for Basildon in each year is £1836.

West Berkshire runs 8 libraries and 1 mobile library served by 46 permanent staff and 248 volunteers. Volunteers are now a key plank of the service.

The library service has three aims:

- A library service which is responsive to local needs
- A safe and trusted place to get good information including online
- Free and available to all

In Basildon we benefit from our proximity to Pangbourne library and the most recent data shows that 134 residents use the library service and they mostly use Pangbourne library. Last year they borrowed in total 2630 items! The most borrowed book of the year was Richard Osman's Thursday Murder Club.

We also benefit from a service which is non-existent in many parts of the UK—a mobile library. This visits the car park of St. Stephen's church on a 3 weekly cycle on a Monday between 12.45pm and 1.15pm. The next visit is Monday 22nd May.

If as a community we do not support the mobile library, the inevitable consequence is that eventually it will be withdrawn. As a rural Parish Council we have asked that our contribution is ring-fenced for the mobile library.

There is also a service for the housebound where a volunteer can visit their home every few weeks with a small selection of library items from which they can choose something to borrow.

The biggest growth area is the free e-library service. In 2021-22 there were 162,657 loans or renewals of e-books and e-audiobooks and there were 1,233 items added to stock. To finish, a quote from the writer Sidney Sheldon: "Libraries store the energy that fuels the imagination. They open up windows to the world and inspire us to explore and achieve, and contribute to improving our quality of life." ...and J. K. Rowling said: "When in doubt go to the library."

Melanie Greasley

Clubs and Societies

Despite advertising on social media and the Country Neighbour magazine we've continued to see very little traffic for our clubs and societies grants, a fact borne out by only a third of our allocated budget being called upon during the 2022 financial year. For 2023 we'll follow a similar pattern of advertising our support locally and can confirm that we've already received and approved a grant for Pangbourne Toilets this month with an expected application due from a local football team shortly. If you are looking to secure additional funding for a particular project or initiative, please contact either myself or the Chairman or, if you'd prefer, attend one of our monthly council meetings where we have an open forum for requests to be made.

Recycling

I reported last year on our experiment with Terracycle and how the effort had proved both costly (based on what we achieved) and disappointing in that clearly marked recycling pods were often used as convenient litter bins. As a result of this the Parish Council has opted to look elsewhere to see what recycling opportunities exist in the local area that can be exploited by residents when passing/travelling. Results of this have been posted in the Country Neighbour and we'll continue to provide updates as and when we're made aware of new options (such as the electronic device recycling bins now situated on Bone Lane in Newbury).

Oliver Chadwyck-Healey read by Elaine Cox

Playgrounds

The village playgrounds continue to be well-used and provide entertainment and exercise for a large number of residents of all ages. At Wakemans the new pendulum swing installed in May last year has blended in with the existing equipment as the grass has recovered around the rubber safety matting and it has been a welcome addition by the younger residents. At time of writing we are awaiting this year's survey results from ROSPA (Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents) which will advise if there are any urgent or non-urgent actions required to maintain the safe and enjoyable environment that this playground is.

The highlight of the past year for the village hall playground was undoubtedly the Jubilee celebrations of June 2022 where the village came together in the summer sunshine and whilst adults celebrated the play equipment was enjoyed by children in attendance. We the Parish Council decided to postpone the proposed new development in the form of a 'goal end' (a hard standing with basketball, football and cricket equipment) to be situated behind the tennis courts given the expense. This meant c. £8,000 of funds saved for another time which given the current financial environment seemed like the right thing to do.

Street Lighting

The street lights along the far eastern end of the village where the Pangbourne Road meets Wakemans are a large expenditure for the village. The Parish Council is undergoing conversations with Scottish & Southern Electric who provide our electricity to negotiate an improved energy tariff which we hope will save us in the region of £1000 per year. We are also working on repairing at least one light which has been reported as not working as well as reviewing the time that the lights are on (currently dusk until dawn). Without compromising village residents' safety we will be considering whether we can reduce energy consumption as well as improving the dark skies policy that the village has given its proximity to the AONB (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty). Further updates on this will be shared with residents via Parish Council meeting minutes.

Closing statement

That concludes the reports prepared by councillors. We now have time for comments and questions.

A reminder that minutes and reports such as this are posted on the parish council website within a few weeks of their publication.

Thank you for attending.