

Parish Council Report 2019 – 2020

Introduction

In more normal circumstances the publication of this report would follow the annual meeting of residents which takes place at the Village Hall in May. The council has continued to meet for its monthly meetings, without interruption, remotely but has been, like all other parish councils, unable to schedule a full review meeting; at the time of writing it looks as if there will not be such a meeting in 2020. What follows is the digest of the reports that would have offered by councillors. Responses from residents are welcomed and may be offered through the usual media: directly to councillors, through the parish council website and in the pages of the Country Neighbour.

Contracts

1. The council continues its contract with Scofell Landscaping for the maintenance of the grasslands at the Village Hall Recreation Ground, The Village Green and the Teneplas Triangle.
2. Waste bins around the village continue to be emptied by West Berkshire Council as part of our waste removal contract with them.
3. Thames Travel Buses continue to receive a subsidy from West Berkshire Council for their service. The Parish Council contributes £1272 pa to this.
4. West Berkshire Council Library service also receives a subsidy from the parish council. There are no plans to ask for a refund following the suspension of the service during the Lockdown: the At Home service, for example, was closed for only 10 weeks.
5. Whilst the district council continues to take responsibility for gritting the main roads, gritting through the village is paid for out of the parish council budget.

Planning

6. The council proposed No Objection to 26 applications and objected to 12 with West Berkshire Council backing the Parish Council view in approximately 50% of cases. This number represents a fall based on previous years but it was noted that the diversity of applications continued with requests for both routine work (eg, extensions) and significant projects (new and multiple houses) still being received.
7. Several instances of residents applying for retrospective planning permission, where work has been carried out contrary to existing permissions or in ignorance of planning requirements, have been raised with the district council by the parish council. The parish council has been disappointed with some of the outcomes.
8. In January the district council launched a review of areas within the county where development might occur; each parish council was asked to examine the proposals and to respond accordingly. In the main the proposals that most closely affected Basildon were uncontentious apart from two sites in Lower Basildon. The council argued that these were unsuitable.

Finance

9. Internal and External audits confirmed the accuracy of our financial record keeping and minor action points were cleared as requested by the auditors.

10. A 3% pay rise was awarded to the Clerk in recognition of his efficient and effective discharge of his duties.
11. The Council continues to retain a healthy financial position and in the previous financial year spent very largely in line with its £30,000 budget (a small £270 overspend was recorded) although it should be noted that this spending included a number of additional areas in support of the village (see below). At the end of March 2020, the Parish Council held in excess of £76,000 across its two bank accounts and as a result continues to seek projects and initiatives to support.

Supporting Village Projects

12. The Country Neighbour receives a grant of £250 annually from the council. The magazine and the council website remain the principal media for communication with residents.
13. A new rack was purchased by the council for use by cycling visitors to Beale Park.
14. The discount scheme for family membership at Beale Park was in operation earlier in 2020 and several families enrolled for the current season; whether it remains in place will depend largely on how the Park recovers after its closure during the pandemic.
15. The public toilets in Pangbourne are now run by a group of local trustees. All the money required to keep them in operation has to be raised by the group. The parish council made a donation this year of £250.
16. It is proposed that a defibrillator be installed in Lower Basildon. This will happen once a suitable site is found. A group of residents are planning to install a defibrillator at St Stephens church; the parish council has offered financial support in this matter.
17. The quality of mobile phone reception in the village was raised with the new MP for West Berkshire, Laura Farris. She has assured us that the matter will be raised with the relevant government department.
18. The council made a donation to the Church Conservation Trust for the upkeep of St Bartholomew's church in Lower Basildon.

Traffic

19. Several councillors have applied to go on Speed Indication Display training: this will allow us to compile further information regarding traffic speeds around the village.
20. No Parking restrictions at Church Lane have been put in place with the intention of reducing the dangers at this junction with the A329.
21. Signs warning motorists of horse riders in the area have been erected on Yattendon Road and at Kiln Hill. Anecdotal reports suggest that these have had a positive impact upon traffic speeds in these areas.
22. Parking at the primary school has been raised with the parish council and Thames valley Police. No Parking signs have been purchased in an attempt to alleviate the problem; a local resident has taken on the responsibility for putting out the signs every day. The issue was also raised at the quarterly liaison meeting with Thames Valley Police and our neighbouring parishes: the problem is wide spread and difficult, given limited district council resources, to resolve.
23. On road parking is beginning to elicit complaints in several other areas of the village: Aldworth Road and around The Triangle as well as at the bottom end of Church Lane. The council has referred these to West Berkshire Council

Play areas

24. Playground inspections are carried out annually at both play areas by an independent consultant.

Maintenance and Repair

25. A replacement noticeboard at Lower Basildon has been installed.
26. A circular seat has been installed on the village green.
27. The council has taken on the responsibility for maintaining the War Memorial at St. Stephens. The first stage has involved a thorough cleaning of the Portland stone and a painting in of the names marked on the front of the memorial.
28. Two trees on the village green that were lost in the 2019 hot weather have been replaced. Several local residents have taken on the responsibility of watering these, and others, during consequent dry periods. A resident has taken on the overall responsibility for the upkeep of the green.
29. Vandalism has taken place on three occasions at the old phone box, now a lending library, in Lower Basildon. The maintenance and repair of the box has been taken on by several residents in Hartslock View with funding from the council.
30. The childrens's play area at Wakeman's recreation ground has been redecorated and further refurbishment will take place in the near future.

Continuing Concerns

31. The PC continues to send a representative to the quarterly liaison meeting with Thames Valley Police and other nearby parishes.
32. The Grotto continues to cause concern; the parish council has been in communication with both the Conservation Officer and the District Councillor in an attempt to get some remedial work done to prevent the already significant damage done becoming worse. The matter is now the subject of an enforcement order delivered by West Berkshire Council upon the owners, and we are hopeful that some repair work will be carried out in the near future.
33. The Railway Action Group has been thanked for the efforts with regards to softening the appearance of the electrification masts in the Goring Gap by the Parish Council. The question of whether the new fencing on the Pangbourne side of Skew Bridge will be attended to was raised before the period of lock down, and we wait to hear what action might be taken.

Response to the Coronavirus Crisis

34. The council, through the Electoral Roll, the church and other members of our community, made contact with all the single households and households where travel might be difficult and where it was known that provisioning might be difficult. Information about the support available was provided to these residents through leaflets, phone calls and home visits. The St Stephens network played, and continues to play, a significant part in this initiative.
35. Many residents offered support, by collecting shopping for or maintaining social contact with households that were self isolating.
36. A prescriptions collection service, operated by volunteers from the village, continued to operate until Shielding was no longer required for those who could not collect medicines from The Boathouse Dispensary.

37. Information about the opening hours of and the range of delivery services available was posted regularly on the council's website and by councillors on various social media.
38. Playgrounds, Tennis courts and the Outdoor Gym were closed by the council in response to instructions from central government. Reopening took place in accordance with government announcements.

Future Projects

1. The council would like to start a tree planting programme in the village but is restricted by the amount of land it has control over: the Recreation Ground, the Village Green and some areas too small for colonising are the limits of its ownership. There is an additional problem in that the change in climate seems to be resulting in longer periods of dry weather so regular watering becomes a necessity, and this is difficult to arrange in non-residential spaces. The council welcomes views on the proposal that it purchases 50 saplings and invites school age residents, with a little encouragement perhaps from their parents, to apply to become the guardian of one of these and to plant it in their own garden. They would be responsible for protecting it, watering it and ensuring that it gets a good start in its life. Expressions of interest should be made to councillors in person, through the parish council website and through the letter pages of the Country Neighbour, ideally before the autumn.

Reports from individual councillors

Public Rights of Way – Elaine Cox

Basildon Parish possesses 17 km of public rights of way (footpaths, bridleways, restricted byways and byways). The District Council is responsible for maintaining, signposting, and keeping them open. The Parish Council also has powers, particularly regarding maintenance. Parish Council budgets can be used for improvements, and residents may submit ideas for such work. Over the past year, 33 complaints have been received about the Basildon network, mostly to do with signposting and vegetation, but with a few other reports of interference or defects. All but 4 of these have been resolved. The District Council has a statutory duty to prepare a Rights of Way Improvement Plan. The present plan is due for review, and ideas are welcome. If anyone would like to volunteer, there is a need for people to survey the network, and perhaps carry out some minor work such as clipping back vegetation or cleaning signposts.

Public Transport – Geoff Couchman

The parish council continues to subsidise the 143 Thames Travel bus that runs through the village into Reading. Numbers using the bus remain, on our part of the route, low although the Pangbourne to Reading section has been well supported. We have no figures to comment on how frequently the service is being accessed post-Lockdown.

Children's Play Areas – Oliver Chadwyck-Healey

Following the refurbishment of the playground at Wakemans in the second half of 2019 residents of the villages have not been able to make full use of the facilities during the fine weather of recent months due to Covid-19.

Our annual RoSPA Play Safely inspection was carried out at the end of April which identified a number of minor updates required for the play equipment to ensure the safety and longevity of the

playground. The council is currently engaged with a third party who will be able to carry out these updates on our behalf. As of 4th July the Government has identified playgrounds as another facility that can open for use again given appropriate social distancing measures.

Up at the village hall residents will have noticed the removal of some of the older wooden equipment due to the timber not standing the test of time and the elements. This playground is managed by the village hall trust rather than the Parish Council itself.

The War Memorial – Halina Czajka

The Parish Council has taken on the responsibility for the upkeep of the War Memorial by the village green. Previous refurbishments have been overseen by James Mathieson: the council is most grateful for his contribution over the years. We have commissioned A. B. Walker & Son Ltd. to clean the memorial and repaint the existing black inscription. This work is due to take place over the summer.

Public Transport – Geoff Couchman

The bus service, reduced in comparison to what was offered a few years ago, continues to run. The parish council subsidises the service annually with a grant. The service remains, relatively, underused on the Basildon to Pangbourne route; a few regular passengers continue to support the service. To its very great credit the service remained as punctual and as regular throughout the Covid-19 lockdown.

Traffic Signage – Halina Czajka

In recent years the parish council has requested of the district council the introduction of a number of street signs designed to reduce traffic speeds in the village. Signs alerting drivers to parent/child pedestrians, to the presence of horse riders, as well as reminders of speed limits have been installed. In addition, there are village gates, to remind drivers of the residential nature of the settlement, now at the entrance to the village where excess speeding is most likely. Our current concern lays with the increasingly worn road markings: we have been endeavouring to get these redrawn for much of the last year.

Library Services – David Jones

Libraries in the UK benefit from a huge amount of visits: 250m pa. This is bigger than all visits to cinemas, theatres, the UK top ten tourist attractions and live music gigs combined! Visits are, however, declining from this large base.

There was significant change in West Berkshire 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 donations of £1740 each financial year, as we thought as a Parish Council it was an important service to support.

There are 8 libraries and 1 mobile library served by 47 permanent staff and 322 volunteers. Volunteers are now a key part 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 proximity to Pangbourne library. The last published data records our local library having 1093 active users of whom 314 are new, and it has over 21000 visits per year which is an increase of 5.3% year on year. Alongside paid staff, who work 23 hours per week, there are 34 volunteers who contributed 1095 hours in a year, an increase of over 22%.

We also benefit from a service which is non-existent in many parts of the UK nowadays—a mobile library. This visits the car park of St. Stephen's church every 3rd Tuesday between 2.05pm and 2.45pm. We were also in discussion before lockdown with the library service about a potential stop in Lower Basildon. If as a community we do not support the mobile library, the inevitable consequence is that eventually it will be withdrawn, yet it importantly visits 73 sites throughout the county. 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 which is showing a huge increase in usage. There is free, multiple copy access to 140 magazine titles in digital format.

The pandemic closed the library service but the good news is that Pangbourne Library has now reopened and is currently open for book collections by appointment only on three days per week. You can telephone the library to order your books or use a new Order & Collect service.

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."

Traffic – Sarah Barnes

As many people are aware within the village speeding remains a hot topic and appears to have become worse during lockdown. A survey has been carried out, without parish council involvement, by residents regarding pedestrian safety and this has been submitted to WBC.

As a Parish council, residents will be aware that we have had many conversations with West Berkshire Council, with regards to traffic calming, illuminated signs and mirrors at certain junctions. Unfortunately as the land is not owned by the parish but controlled by the Highways department we have met with resistance.

The parish council is currently trying to get road markings repainted in Upper Basildon to highlight the need for people to slow down. We await a response from WBC. However in the meantime we have decided as a parish council to raise this matter with our local MP in an attempt to highlight how important this is to the village.