



Blockley Parish Council

Newsletter 2017

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Chairman's Report

As another year passes all of us who serve on Blockley Parish Council (BPC) begin not only to review the work that we have done over the past twelve months but also to consider further the challenges we face during the next year and beyond.

2016/17 was once again a particularly challenging year. In the early part of the year we had a full complement of 11 Councillors but later regretfully lost two colleagues, Phil Earl and Catherine Wilkinson. I would like to take this opportunity to thank them for their service. As I write this in April, I have had to reluctantly accept the resignation of a valued and hardworking Councillor, Lesley Clifford. She will be greatly missed. Whilst we hope that we will have further volunteers joining in the near future, this shortage of colleagues places a huge burden of work and responsibility on existing Councillors during a continuing period where there is much going on and a great deal to be done. In addition to the usual experienced representation it would be excellent to have both some younger colleagues as well as others representing the various villages in the parish. If you are interested in learning about the work of the council and potentially joining, please contact our Clerk at parishclerk@blockley.org.uk.

Following the departure of Sharon Henley last year, we were pleased to welcome Alexia Monroe back as Clerk. Alexia had previously served during the period 2008 to 2013 and is well known throughout the community. In addition, following the very regretful retirement of Phil Coates, our Responsible Finance Officer (RFO), after eight years, we necessarily had a locum for a number of months. This did not go well and we were very pleased to appoint our new RFO, Jennifer Walsh, in June 2016. After the considerable difficulties of the previous months, Jennifer had to work particularly hard to get the Council completely back to the clear reporting position that it had enjoyed under Phil Coates. On behalf of all the Council I would like to thank Phil for all his diligent and hard work during his years with BPC.

The issues which have given parishioners most concern over the past year are planning and highways.

Despite very considerable opposition on the part of the vast majority of parishioners, BPC and our Ward Councillor, Sue Jepson, the Cala Homes outline planning application for Little Shoe Broad was successful. As I write this the site is being offered for sale. Planning presents huge challenges for your Council because, as is explained in the more detailed planning report below, Parish Councils must make provision for additional housing during the current planning period to 2031. We have undertaken several surveys to reach majority views on how we should meet our allocation. Although inevitably there is some opposition to all applications, your Council is attempting to take a pragmatic attitude which, over the allocation period, reflects the views primarily and significantly against supporting applications for 16 dwellings or more. Of course it is not that simple. For example the initial outline planning application for 38 houses at 'Colonel's Piece' I referred to last year was rejected but there has recently been a further application for five houses (i.e. lower than the 16 dwellings referred to above) on the same site. In this particular case there is considerable concern about how this could potentially make it easier for the site to be further developed in the longer term, and BPC have filed their objection to the application accordingly. In taking a position on other applications we are only too aware that a particular response may not be popular but BPC must necessarily take into account the criteria detailed in the report below.

During the year your Council has pressed Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) hard to maintain our roads and verges to an acceptable standard. This is no easy task for GCC across such a geographically large area. Generally GCC have responded very well, acceding to those priorities we have identified. However, on occasion the quality of work has not been satisfactory, necessitating return visits to achieve the required standard. Overall, given the ongoing austerity cuts, we continue to receive good response and general maintenance.

Speeding continues to be a major concern across the whole Parish and remains high on your Council's agenda. Following the reduction from 30mph to 20mph within Blockley on a limited way, we recently met with GCC Highways to establish how this could be further rolled out across the Parish. This is by no means straightforward and the desire to reduce speed is not, in itself, sufficient reason for it to happen. There are very strict criteria and somewhat strangely those areas where speed is currently too high will receive opposition from the Police. It is necessary to educate people to drive more appropriately to achieve the formal introduction of lower speed areas. Nevertheless as stated earlier we are looking at alternative means of reducing speed and I hope that we shall have better news to report in the coming year.

As I reported last year future deficits in budget cannot continue to be funded from reserves and we therefore face serious challenges in the next five to ten years if we are to undertake any strategic projects. To do so we needed to consider substantially increasing the precept - although the actual effect per household would be relatively low - or not continuing with some or all of the projects. In this regard your Council consulted with all parishioners by means of a survey. In my last report I strongly encouraged you all to respond to this critically important survey and provide your views, emphasising that if you did not participate you would be missing your opportunity to influence the direction of BPC over the coming years. Whilst the response to the survey, delivered to every household across the Parish, was disappointing, it did indicate a desire to continue with the identified projects, including speed reduction, and an acknowledgement that the precept would increase. Your Council has adopted an average increase of 35p per week per household for the year 2017/2018. I am grateful to all of you who responded – thank you also for the many additional comments.

Finally I would like to sincerely thank all of the Councillors and colleagues who continue to work extremely hard and give their time and effort, often very considerable. Each of the lead Councillors provides a brief report of their area of responsibility below.

Kevan Lambert

Chairman

Finance Report

The ongoing government austerity programme and the continuing cuts in central government funding have become a way of life for all County, District and Parish Councils to manage. Your Parish Council has had to work hard this last year to ensure we successfully managed our income against expenditure. Last year was the first time in six years that we increased the precept (our share of the local tax levied on each household within the Parish). As well as undertaking all of our mandatory duties, we were able to sustain our support to many local groups, our youth programme and grants over £4,000 to various organisations throughout the Parish. In addition we have necessarily met additional statutory pension costs.

Following the challenges which faced the Council during the period in 2016 whilst there were gaps in reliable accounts support, the Council agreed to conduct a thorough review of all its financial procedures and this is on-going as this newsletter goes to press. The Council are committed to ensuring the most efficient service for its community and the final audited accounts for 2015/16 shall be published as soon as they are available.

The 2017/18 budget is designed to enable BPC to focus on implementing the first stages of our ten year plan based on the results of the community survey completed in spring 2016. This survey identified the Strategic Projects and priorities that you wished your Council to progress and the necessary funding requirements for the next ten years. Additionally as stated in our Finance Report last year, we will need to further increase our earmarked reserves in future years to fund these projects. It is also likely that in the near future we will have to consider if we are to purchase a new burial site for the Parish at a significant cost. The Neighbourhood Plan, essential in assisting with our planning requirements, is now in its first stages of development at an estimated cost of £10,000 (we anticipate recovering 50% of this cost from available grants) and there is substantial additional expenditure required to achieve any of the traffic calming measures that parishioners prioritised.

The survey consulted parishioners about not only these projects and priorities but additionally the resultant precept increase that would be necessary. Accordingly, this financial year the precept (our primary source of income) will increase by a total of £19,954 across the Parish which in turn will increase the average cost per household by 35p per week to approximately £1.22 per week.

BPC will continue to manage its income and expenditure to provide the best possible value for all parishioners.

Planning Report

The last phase of consultation for Cotswold District Council's (CDC)s emerging Local Plan is now complete. Following any revision it should go to CDC Cabinet for ratification – possibly in May. Submission to the Secretary of State could then be made by the middle of this year. It will then be examined in detail. Even if it is found to be compliant with the requirements of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and sound, without changes required, it is unlikely to be finally adopted until mid to late 2018.

If and when the Local Plan is approved it will become the Planning Policy Document for the Planning Period through to 2031. As such it will provide the policy and guidance for the determination of planning applications. Applications are determined in accordance with their compliance to current Policy; if they comply they will, generally, be granted.

That said, there are situations where Planning Authority Policies are at risk of being overridden. Current Central Government Policy states that there is a presumption in favour of sustainable development. If an authority is failing to meet its housing targets, for example, it has less than a five year supply of deliverable sites, then Government Policy could override the Local Plan. Similarly, it is possible that the Planning Authority could allow further development if it considered that they were at risk of not achieving their housing targets.

The current target for housing, within the CDC planning area, required to 2031 is 8,400 dwellings.

CDC currently have approximately a seven year deliverable supply, this figure is due to be updated in April.

In the emerging Local Plan, Blockley village was designated a sustainable settlement; this sustainable designation does not apply to Aston Magna, Draycott or Paxford.

Consequently, Blockley was allocated a housing target of 59 new dwellings to be delivered during the Plan Period. Of these eight permissions already existed, hence a balance of 51 was required. To fulfil this CDC have designated three sites as suitable and deliverable –

- ~ Site off Draycott Road, Little Shoe Broad. Target of 22 dwellings. Outline Planning granted for 23 dwellings.
- ~ The Limes, Station Road – designated for 16. The current status – two applications have been made. Permission for a single dwelling granted on part of the site. Outline application for a single dwelling on another part of the land – pending decision.
- ~ Sheafhouse Farm – designated for 13 dwellings. No application yet made.

There was considerable local objection to the Draycott Road site during the various consultation processes and in response to the actual planning application. Despite clear evidence of significant opposition produced by BPC, strong submissions made by Blockley Environmental Action Group (BEAG) and many individuals within the community this site was included in the proposed development boundary and then granted planning permission.

As a result of various BPC surveys it is apparent that:

- ~ A large majority prefer developments of up to five dwellings.
- ~ Approximately half consider developments of up to 15 as acceptable.
- ~ A significant majority are against sites of 16 plus.
- ~ There is little demonstrable housing need within Blockley.

Whilst these views are important and relevant to the local community it must be understood that their relevance in determining planning applications is negligible. Simply, they are not in accord with the emerging Policy which will be the guide for determining applications.

To date it does not appear that the allocation for Blockley has been increased, or, that the proposed development boundary is likely to be modified to include another 'large' development. Hopefully, this provides the village some protection.

We should, however, be wary of complacency. Planning legislation is still in a state of flux, a presumption in favour of sustainable development remains a potential threat, CDC could fail in their delivery targets and the Secretary of State may deem their housing targets as inadequate. Ultimately there is a significant Government commitment to promote house building and increase housing availability.

It seems that, if, as a community, we wish to influence 'development' within the current/emerging constraints we have limited options. One of the few avenues available would seem to be influencing where it should take place. To achieve this we would need to identify 'acceptable' locations, agree the principles with the landowners and ensure that, if the need/requirement arose any site was available and deliverable.

Clearly there is no desire to promote or encourage any more development than is currently proposed. However, we should be aware of the risks of speculative applications.

Neighbourhood Development Plan

Earlier this year, the Council decided to embark on the development of a Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP) for the Parish. NDPs – which were introduced in 2011 as part of the Localism Act – are intended to allow local communities to guide and shape development in their localities. Once it is adopted, the NDP will sit along-side the Cotswold District Council (CDC) Local Plan and be used in the assessment of development applications in the parish. While it will allow us to influence the nature of future developments, it is important to understand that there are some significant limitations on what the NDP can achieve. It is not allowed to contradict or undermine any of the strategic policies in the CDC Local Plan. In particular, it cannot alter the number of new houses allocated to Blockley in the Local Plan or the selection of development sites.

The process of developing the NDP started in February with the formal designation of the whole Parish as the Neighbourhood Area. As a statutory planning document, the development of the NDP is required to follow a rigorous process, including significant consultation with the local community. In the next few months, we will be undertaking the first of these consultation exercises to gather parishioners' views on the appropriate vision for Blockley, Paxford, Aston Magna, Draycott and Ditchford over the next 20 years and the major issues that they face today. The development of the NDP will require significant effort. If you would like to get involved, please contact Councillor Roger Salmons (roger.salmons@blockley.org.uk).

Highways Report

Speeding traffic, road signs and the state of our roads, especially potholes and carriageway re-surfacing have been common themes over the past twelve months. BPC continues to liaise closely with County Councillor Lynden Stowe, the Highways Department of Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) and the contract company, Amey, to help ensure that our roads are maintained for drivers and pedestrians alike.

At a recent meeting with County Councillor Vernon Smith, lead GCC councillor for Highways, it was explained that Amey are obliged to take 'before, during and after' photographs when repairing the roads, so that any complaints can be verified with photographic evidence. Changes to the way that potholes are repaired and the introduction of white tarmac for lines rather than white paint were also explained. GCC are investing considerable funds to improve the road network and undertake proper repairs first time round. Works scheduled for 2017 will be resurfacing work on Greenway Road to the A44 and along the B4035.

Some residents of Chapel Lane in Blockley have requested verges to be planted with wild flowers; BPC have asked for a cultivation licence to be completed, so that it can be sent to Highways for authorisation.

The Clerk has a supply of traffic calming stickers for wheelie bins – available with '30mph or 20mph' depending on the speed limit in around the Parish. These are available on request.

Gloucestershire Highways operate a non-emergency online reporting system, so that highways issues including potholes, blocked drains, tree maintenance, grass cutting, road

gritting, Public Rights of Way, damaged road signs etc. can be reported via www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/reportit. You can subsequently trace your enquiry through to completion. The Highways Team can also be emailed at GCCHighways@amey.co.uk.

Highways emergencies should be phoned direct to GCC Emergencies on 08000 514514.

Burials Report

In August 2016 a statutory inspection of all the graves in the churchyard and cemetery was carried out. Some of the memorials with railings needed attention and so we commissioned an independent memorial inspection of the churchyard.

This took place on 6th and 7th February 2017 and out of the 222 memorials inspected, four tombs and one cross need immediate attention. We now have a comprehensive report that details the maintenance that needs to be carried out and the timescale within which the work we should be done. This report will be considered with the Rev Dana Delap and the Parochial Church Council.

A new wide waste bin has been purchased for the upper cemetery to add to the other two already there, so all non-green waste may be disposed of in a respectful manner. A screen has been placed across the bins to shield them from view.

Burial fees have remained unchanged since 2007. There are currently six full burial plots and five children's plots remaining in the Upper Cemetery. The Churchyard has plenty of space for further cremation plots. As previously indicated BPC will need to consider if we are to purchase a new cemetery in the future. This is an extremely difficult question because of land availability and cost, but we shall be exploring all of the options.

The Environment Report

In January 2017, a statutory Parish wide tree survey took place by an arboricultural consultant, Jim Unwin Forestry Consultancy. All the trees for which BPC is responsible for in the Parish were inspected across Blockley, Paxford, Draycott and Aston Magna. The trees were checked for their health and for safety. The result involves removing a small number of trees and some pruning. The next step is to obtain quotations for the tree work. The last tree survey was carried out in 2011.

The main concern is for the Corsican pines at the entrance to the cemetery on Station Road in Blockley as they will need to be removed in the next three years. Out of the three trees, the tree at the north end has needle disease. The central tree leans heavily and failure would precipitate it onto the lych gate and a good wall. The central tree has been crown reduced to re-balance it but not sufficiently. The southern tree has been braced to stop it falling apart. We hope to do some replacement planting of six Scots pines in their place at the entrance to the cemetery.

We will keep you informed when the tree work will be carried out as it will involve the closure of Station Road with lengthy diversions, the use of a crane and an electrical shutdown because the power cables will need to be temporarily re-routed.

Health and Wellbeing Report

During the past year a number of events have been organised. These included a defibrillator training course, funded by the Parish Council, held by 'Community Heartbeat' on 14th April 2016 at the Jubilee Hall and attended by seven parishioners, a one hour 'taster' first aid course provided for the Youth Club by a St John Ambulance instructor in June, and at the request of BPC, 'Cotswold Friends' provided availability on their Red Cross two hour first aid lectures, which 17 parishioners attended.

Each village in the Parish has its own defibrillator: Aston Magna situated in the top bus shelter; Blockley on the wall of the nursery school (the Old Coach House); Draycott on the side wall of the Mission Hall and Paxford in the telephone box outside the village hall. The defibrillators are maintained and serviced regularly by BPC and monthly checks passed to 'Community Heartbeat Trust'.

Recreation and Leisure Report

We continue our efforts to maintain and preserve all of our five recreational areas in accordance with current health and safety regulations. Our maintenance officer Ray Mayo undertakes regular checks on all of the recreation grounds and the pieces of equipment. In addition the Council organises an independent annual inspection to ensure compliance and to identify any remedial works and repairs that may be necessary. Your Council recognises that the cost of maintaining these recreational grounds is significant but confirms its commitment to ensuring that these will continue to be available for the whole Parish in the longer term, including (when necessary and appropriate) replacing the actual play equipment in a structured and manageable manner.

Over the past year various events have been held across the Parish including the annual Service of Remembrance. Television filming has continued with the 'Father Brown' series filmed in and around Blockley and this year an episode of the series 'Hidden Villages' included scenes of Penelope Keith being driven in a motorbike sidecar around the Parish.

Youth Report

Young Gloucestershire's contract for servicing the Youth Club came to an end in December 2016. They have run Blockley Youth Club, 37 evenings per year during school term times, for three years. The year ended with a Christmas party and an outing to 'Jumptastic' a trampolining centre, in Gloucester. Since January 1st 2017 Gloucestershire Mentoring and Support (GMAS), have been contracted by BPC to organise the Youth Club and have produced a very productive and entertaining schedule of events for the coming year, including meals in mugs, a pancake party, spring celebrations and Mother's Day mosaics. GMAS is registered with Companies House as a Community Interest Company i.e. non-profit making and has an excellent reputation across the North Cotswolds. BPC are working with GMAS to try and involve younger children. Consideration is being given to one or one and a half hour sessions starting before the Youth Club meetings and partly overlapping with them, perhaps starting in the summer term. We are also considering some outdoor events at the play areas in Aston Magna, Draycott and Paxford, also during the summer term. A magician was organised by BPC for a performance at Draycott Mission Hall in February which was well attended by 22 younger children who had great fun.

Speedwatch Report

Speedwatch groups have been unable to undertake patrols regularly for the last year or so. We are desperately short of people and need volunteers urgently. Group co-ordinators are now allowed to train recruits and therefore do not have to wait for training by the Police. Past evidence shows that these patrols do produce some reduction in speeding which we know is of serious concern throughout the Parish. If you would like to volunteer, please contact the Clerk: at parishclerk@blockley.org.uk.

St George's Hall Report

BPC and St George's Hall Committee have been actively engaged in bringing the governance of the hall into line with changes in the way charities are currently organised. The existing arrangements date from the time Edward Spencer Churchill donated the ground for the hall to the Parish, and are out of line with modern practice. Various anomalies emerged when the hall committee had to deal with an insurance claim in circumstances where it was not clear if the responsibility lay with SGH or the Parish Council. In order to avoid any future problems of this nature some changes in the hall's governing constitution are being made; these are in progress with the Charity Commission. The main use of the hall itself remains its daytime tenancy by Blockley Primary School. Meanwhile it continues to be popular for both film and theatre evenings, most recently BAD Company's modern version of The Canterbury Tales as well as for the Discussion Group's winter lecture series. Outside organisations covering activities as varied as keep fit classes and cultural programmes are regular hirers. The hall site also houses the Heritage Society which has recently made internal improvements to its building, and keen-eyed observers will have noted the appearance of a shed to house equipment belonging to the Toddlers' Group.

All in all, a working community asset!