

BASILDON PARISH COUNCIL

Minutes of the Annual Parish Assembly on Thursday March 8th, 2007

PRESENT: Councillors John Short (Chairman), John Bennett, Brian Groom, Pauline Hall, Arthur Harrison, David Smith, Peter Twitchett, Peter Warren-Tibbetts and Nathalie Weekes.

Attended by the Clerk and 25 parishioners.

1. MINUTES OF THE ASSEMBLY OF 15TH May 2006

The minutes, having been circulated, were confirmed as correct and were signed by the Chairman.

2. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

There were no matters arising from the minutes.

3. CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

Parish Plan

The Parish Plan questionnaires were completed by a very high proportion of the residents, they have been collected and are being analysed. The number of houses times the number of respondents times the number of questions and answers is obviously huge, and if the results are to be meaningful, the cross referencing of respondents by age, sex, personal circumstances and so on multiplies the work again, so the analysis has inevitably taken a very long time. I would like to ask Michael Betts who has been leading the work to tell you what the current status is and what the next stages in the process are.

Anti-Social Behaviour

There have been some instances of vandalism during the year - damage to the gate at Wakemans recreation ground and to equipment on building sites, and deliberate damage to the roof of this hall. There was also a short spate of graffiti in respect of which the offender was tracked down as a result of some very prompt and efficient police work. Nevertheless Basildon remains a relatively peaceful community. The Parish Council has at last - after ridiculous and lengthy bureaucracy by BT - installed an Incident Line, which you can call on 671395. This is an answering and recording device rather than a telephone. It is kept behind a locked door and it is listened to only by members of the Parish Council, so caller confidentiality is respected. Experience has shown that it is very difficult to take action to stop individual cases of anti-social behaviour, but where there is a repetitive pattern it is much easier to obtain the support of the various agencies to take preventive action and to apprehend the perpetrators. We encourage you to report all instances of anti-social behaviour and not just think, "Well, what can anyone do about it now?"

Communications with West Berkshire Council

Although we received a positive response related to our stated dissatisfaction about communications, the state of the roads in the village and the planning process at the time of the visits last year by various executives of West Berkshire Council, there has been a limited improvement: what the Americans refer to as a "can-do attitude" is just not part of WBC's culture. Unfortunately "cannot do" and sometimes "will not do" still prevail. Many of the

items covered in my report to you last year are still the subject of on-going communications, and are still unresolved.

Planning

Planning has become the #1 topic in the village and has occupied a very high proportion of the Parish Council's (and of Parish Councillors') time. The intensive development on the Pangbourne Road has been quoted as a precedent in applying for multiple new houses at Wellesley Cottage on the Aldworth Road (4 or alternatively 5 additional houses), and at Randars in Bethesda Street (3 or alternatively 4 additional houses). There is also an outstanding application - subject to appeal - for 5 additional houses at Trees on the Reading Road.

There are approximately 640 houses in the village, most of which was originally laid out in large plots and which gave the village its open rural character. Not only is there a presumption that planning permission should be granted within the development envelope, but the target density set by the office of the Deputy Prime Minister for brownfield development is 30 dwellings per hectare (=12 per acre). The multi-dwelling developments that are being applied for at the moment are well below this level, down to 18-22 dph, but it is of great concern that the Wellesley Cottage application for 5 houses was approved by WBC after the 4 house application was originally rejected. If this trend continues through all the parts of the village that have larger plots, or where backfilling across multiple plots is possible then the present 640 houses could readily grow to in excess of 1,500. In turn that could mean up to 2,000 additional cars. (The Parish Plan questionnaire has established that there is an average of 2.14 cars per dwelling)

The village just cannot support this rate of growth, and this has been the focus of our objections during the last few months. Other than the convenience store at the garage, we have no shops, we have no healthcare facilities, our primary school is over-subscribed, and we have no secondary school. Theale Green Secondary school is also over-subscribed. The sewage system in Lower Basildon is already beyond capacity. The approach roads from the Oxford direction - Hook End and Park Wall Lanes - are narrow and have no surface water drainage. The car park at Pangbourne station is already being used to its total capacity every weekday, and the bus service is at two-hourly intervals.

The growth of housing in recent years in Basildon has been at more than twice the rate for the whole of West Berkshire, and two and a half times the rate for the whole of the South East region.

It appears that preservation and enhancement of the AONB (which is the legal obligation on the local authority) get only lip service in the face of the drive for more houses. This erosion of the AONB is further aggravated by the requirements of the Highways Department who insist on 70 metre visibility splays at the entrance to new developments, which often means the loss of 100 or more metres of hedge boundary (Randars and Wellesley Cottage), and in some instances they also demand 1.8 metre wide tarmac footpaths (Pangbourne Road and Trees).

Section 106 Agreements and Democracy

All new developments are now required to contribute towards the cost of the infrastructure on a scale related to the number of additional dwellings. This is an initiative that was pioneered by West Berkshire Council. A one-for-one replacement does not attract a requirement for a S106 agreement, but knocking one down and

building 5 in its place would be treated as 4 additional dwellings and attract the scale of charges accordingly.

You will hear later from the Parish Clerk that the precept for 2007 will be in the region of £27,000. The required S106 contribution for a 3-bedroom house is just over £13,000 and for a 4-bedroom house £18,000. Half a dozen new houses would bring in an unbudgeted income to WBC of around £90,000 and if all the houses at Wellesley Cottage, Randars and Trees should be approved and go ahead they would bring in over quarter of a million pounds, or 9 years of village precepts. That might beg questions about how hard applications for unsuitable multi-dwelling developments are being contested. On the other hand the money might be put to good use for everyone's benefit in the village, although we have in fact been asked in only one instance what we consider S106 money should be spent on, and that was for only apart of the total contribution.

The questions that concern us are how much has been demanded in S106 contributions, how much of that has been paid, how much has been spent, on what. how much is still sitting in the kitty and on what is that to be spent? We know we are by no means the only parish in West Berks with these concerns. At the WBC Parish Conference in October it was promised that this information would be published by the end of the year (2006). That was not done, and only after repeated recent requests was the information related to Basildon finally e-mailed to us yesterday.

It stretches credulity to believe that the disproportionate value of this pool of unbudgeted income when set against the income from the Parish precept does not influence the actions of the District Council and does not push the Parish Council and the interests of local residents down into a poor second place.

I quote from a letter sent out by WBC's Information Manager in January on the topic:

"The guidelines are that emphasis should be given to spending S106 money resulting from an area in the same area (which could go beyond the parish boundary) and much of the time that is the case. What it is spent on is up for negotiation and depends on need as agreed by the district council and other stakeholders."

The Parish Council was apparently not considered to be a "stakeholder", and it would appear that not all of the time is S106 money spent for the benefit of the area from which it is collected.

The Parish Council

Brian Groom joined the Council shortly after the last Annual Parish Assembly and restored us to our full complement. Since that time however Carol Oxley who had served the village outstandingly well for many years moved away to the West Country, and her place has been taken by Peter Twitchett.

Throughout my time on the Council and tenure as its Chairman, the Council has worked very harmoniously with everyone taking their share of the work. We have been very ably assisted and guided by our Clerk, Douglas Bending, without whom we would often have been struggling.

I would like to publicly record my thanks to Douglas and to every one of the Councillors for the support they have given me and for the work that they have done on behalf of the

village.

Peter Warren-Tibbetts has served on the Council for longer than any of us, and is a past Chairman. He is very experienced in local government. He understands the planning process better than most of the rest of us, and is frequently able to guide us about how the system works and what it is practical to try to do and what is not.

John Bennett is the second-longest serving member of the Council, and also a past Chairman. He had been a Councillor where he lived previously and has brought a lot of experience to us. He keeps the Council informed about the pulse at the centre of the village

Pauline Hall and David Smith came on to the Council in 2000. Pauline has undertaken many tasks in the Council, the most recent being the publication of the Footpath Map and acting as the link for the village website which is in the process of being set up. She looks after our leaflets and communications, and she has a particular interest in recycling and the environment. She is also one of the Council's representatives on the Village Hall committee. David has been particularly concerned with the South East Area Plan which will ultimately set the scene for the longer-term evolution of West Berkshire.

Arthur Harrison is involved with local youth work at Adventure Dolphin and is an organiser for the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme. He has also been our link with the local police via the Neighbourhood Action Group, and is active in looking after our footpaths.

Nathalie Weekes is the voice of Lower Basildon on the Council and is also involved with the administration of footpath maintenance.

Brian Groom is relatively new to the Council, and is taking a particular interest in planning and in developers' failure to observe the conditions of their planning permissions.

Peter Twitchett is very new to the Council and we have not yet loaded him with specific tasks.

By an unfortunate coincidence, and each for his own personal reasons, a number of the present Councillors are not offering themselves for re-election in May. Peter Warren-Tibbetts will be leaving, as will John Bennett, David Smith and myself. Conspiracy theorists should not read any hidden motives into this simultaneous action! I assure you that there is none.

John, Peter and I are the oldest members of the Council, and although on the one hand there will be a loss of experience, at the same time it opens opportunities for younger-members of the community to play their part. I am particularly sorry to see David Smith leaving since he represents the younger generation. He has however already served the village for a number of years as a Councillor, as a Trustee overseeing the construction of the Village Hall, and currently as a School Governor.

We have all done our best to represent your interests during the time that we have been in office and I hope that we have succeeded. We have done, and will continue to do, everything that we can to ensure that we leave a smoothly working Council, and I, and I am sure Peter, John and David, will be pleased to do whatever is asked of us to help the

new Chairman, when he or she is elected, and new Councillors to find their feet, •

We have publicised that any resident wishing to offer his or her services as a Councillor will be given an opportunity to make themselves known at this meeting and, if they wish, to give a brief resume of their background and aspirations for the village.

The local elections take place on May 3rd, and all existing Councillors retire automatically 4 days thereafter. If the election is unopposed, then the candidates are automatically appointed and they will take office at the next Parish Council meeting on May 17th. I remain in office to open that meeting, but retire immediately the new Chair is elected.

The conservation of the village and the direction of its future are, at least in part, in your hands. You came to Basildon because the area and the village appealed to you, and in these changing times you will have to make your voices heard to ensure that it remains a very desirable place to live.

4. PARISH PLAN

Mr Betts reported that work on the preparation of the Parish Plan was proceeding somewhat more slowly than had been anticipated but that the analysis of the questionnaire which will be fundamental to the process was well under way. He said that his team would very much welcome further volunteers to undertake the many tasks associated with the preparation of the plan.

5. DISTRICT COUNCILLOR'S REPORT

Mr Webber said that he would not be standing for re-election as District Councillor because of commitments he had taken on with a new farm. He had found his time as a Councillor extremely interesting and he had been glad of the opportunity to be of assistance to the village, in which he had grown up, in planning and other matters. He thanked all the Parish Councillors with whom he had worked and wished the new intake well.

6. ANNUAL ACCOUNTS

The Clerk reported on the accounts for 2005/06 and 2006/07

Audited Accounts for 2005/06

These accounts including the auditors' reports are available in full detail for inspection. Briefly the position during the year was that, in round figures, the balance brought forward at the start of the year was £K44, income during the year was £K35, and expenditure was £K45 (including that for the Village Hall and the Bravo project) so the balance in hand at the end of the year was £K34 of which £K12 is the balance of the funds reserved for work in fitting out the new Village Hall and £K1 is reserved for preparation of the Parish Plan, leaving a free reserve of £K21.

Unaudited Accounts for 2006/07

Since the Annual Assembly is being held before the end of the financial year it has not been possible to produce a full set of accounts at present. However an assessment has been made of the probable outcome for the year on the basis of known figures up to the end of

February and estimated figures for March. These figures will be revised as necessary at the end of March and will be used as the basis for the audit later in the year.

The next stage will be the preparation of an Annual Report which will contain a statement of assurance from the Parish Council, an assessment by an Internal Auditor of the systems used by the Council in managing its financial affairs and a final check by an External Auditor appointed by District Audit.

In 2006/07 the Parish Council started with an unusually high total balance in hand because the sum of £K53 set aside as a capital contribution to the Village Hall project had not been fully called upon.

It is now expected that the remainder of the Parish Council's contribution to the Village Hall project will be spent during 2006/07 but reserves set aside for the Parish Plan have not yet been called upon to any great extent.

Again in round figures the balance brought forward at the start of the year was £K34, income during the year is expected to be £K36 and expenditure to be £K40, so the total balance in hand at the end of the year will be £K26 of which £K6 is reserved for the Parish Plan, leaving a free reserve of £K20.

Budget and Precept for 2007/08

The budget for 2007/08 has been set at £k34 of which £K4 is a further contribution to Parish Plan and the subsequent Action Plan costs, £K5 has been reserved for the cost of professional advice in dealing with the planning situation in Basildon, £K3 is the annual grant to the Village Hall Trust and £K1 may be required for the election to be held in May. This leaves £K22 for the run-of-the-mill budget items.

The precept has been set at £k27 and it is anticipated that on this basis the free reserve at the end of financial year will be £K14.

7. QUESTIONS

In answer to questions the Chairman said that although the Parish Council dealt fairly and impartially, bearing in mind the wider interests of the village, in arriving at recommendations on planning applications the final decision lay with West Berkshire Council or the Planning Inspectorate rather than the Parish Council. There were signs of recognition by both of these parties of the cases put forward by the Parish Council concerning planning applications for development in particularly sensitive areas of the village.

Residents continue to be worried about speeding and the general state of the roads. The Parish Council will always apply whatever pressure it can to WBC and the Police in these matters but has no jurisdiction in them.

8. There being no other business the Chairman thanked all those present and declared the meeting closed.