The Parish of Great & Little Bourton, Oxfordshire

Annual Parish Residents Meeting

Tuesday April 10th 2018 at The Village Hall, Great Bourton

Annual Report by Chairman of the Parish Council

The year since the Annual Parish Meeting in April 2017 has seen the continuation of the parish council’s routine activities, and the fruition of some of its current projects.

2017 was not an election year and we were able to work with the same team of councillors and clerk throughout the year, and I am very appreciative of the work that has been put in to the various roles that people fill. This also applies to all the other members of the community who, week in week out, do their bit to keep our village lives running as smoothly as possible, generously giving their precious time, with or without small financial recompense. We have also been grateful for the support of our District and County councillor, George Reynolds. Until his recent resignation D Cllr Ken Atack has continued his support remotely, and recently D Cllr Douglas Webb has attended our meetings and spoken on our behalf at CDC.

Taking business in roughly the same sequence as our usual parish council agenda, I’ll start with footpaths, rights of way, and roads. During the past year Mervyn who has kept a watchful eye on the condition of field paths and their signage in this parish and others in north Oxfordshire gave us early warning that he will not do it for ever, and Matt has now joined him to learn the ropes. We were also sorry to learn that Sarah Aldous who has given this parish a lot of help with footpath issues in her OCC Countryside Access role was being moved to West Oxfordshire and city responsibility, but she is retaining an overview, and a new officer, Beth Rutterford, has been appointed for the Cherwell area. Various problems with footpaths have been reported during the year, and most of them have been sorted once weather permitted.

It was reported in the summer that youths had been seen, and evidence of a fire found, at the site of the old sewage works east of Great Bourton. There is a notice warning of the danger of deep water, but the fence was insecure. Enquiries showed that Thames Water was believed to be the responsible owner. They had no record of the site, but once informed of the potential danger, Thames Water took steps to investigate and secure the site in an exemplary manner, and now have it on their list for regular maintenance checks.

In June we were told by our district councillor that the new Country Park adjacent to the Banbury Gateway retail centre had been granted approval and funding. Mervyn and I had been attending the consultation sessions on development of these plans as part of it will be in Bourtons parish since our southern boundary was extended to the M40. However, I find it very annoying and ironic that since Network Rail chose to close the Little Bourton railway level crossing on the former permissive footpath below Park farm, residents have lost their logical and easy access to the new park in our parish. We are left with the circuitous route via Mill Lane and the Oxford canal towpath, or eventually through the new Hanwell View estate.

Our local ongoing problem with unrepaired, or recurring, potholes unfortunately is typical of the national picture with county authorities blaming cuts in Government funding. We all feel that such repairs could be carried out more efficiently. We have been told that there has been a 350% increase in reports of road faults on Fix-my-street. Recently the diversion of traffic while Main Street in Great Bourton was closed for sewer connection work has aggravated the damage on the roads unsuited to that burden of vehicles, and the fight for remedial action has only just begun.

During last year the council decided that the backlog of general maintenance and repairs was best addressed by a cumulative contract with a local company rather than piecemeal quotations for repairs to noticeboards, renovation of the seats, dog bins, etc. This has had mixed success. Mostly the jobs have been carried out satisfactorily, but not as speedily as we would wish. The fencing contractor repairing fences at the entrance of the burial ground was also employed to replace the gatepost that had been causing problems with the gates binding together for some years.

Under the Transparency Code councils are now required to publish a range of information on a publically-accessible website. We are working towards this. A grant was available through the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) to help purchase the equipment to enable compliance. This fund was much over-subscribed, but our Clerk put in a bid which was fully successful. A scanner and a laptop dedicated to parish council business are being purchased.

Following changes by the Government to the External Auditor regime for local councils beginning this financial year, and other changes in legislation, this council resolved to appoint a new internal auditor. Mr J Hicks was thanked for his many years of service. Arrow Accounting was chosen because of their width of experience with other councils which should enable them to provide better guidance to our Responsible Finance Officer (RFO) and Clerk. This is proving demanding but helpful.

In August work began on the Garners Field development site, with excavations and the preliminary construction of the access road, but this could not be linked to the Main Street until final ratification of agreement with Highways, which agreement also entailed settlement of other Highway issues. This included modification of the existing traffic calming, which was to be agreed in consultation with the parish council. After vociferous objections by council and public to Highways proposed scheme of moving the chicane nearer to the A423 junction, at a site meeting, representatives of Highways and Hayfield Homes the developer, prevailed on the parish council to retain but have modernised the existing chicane, but keep it under review during the two year ‘snagging’ period. Moving the 30MPH speed restriction closer to the Southam Road had been approved and the council asked for this to be enhanced by a gateway feature. The development has been hindered by this wet winter having caused worse than expected mud on site, and it is hoped than being permitted to create the surfaced road link will ease the mud on road problems. The first houses have been built and the show home opened in mid March, and local residents are welcome to visit, even if they have no intention of buying.

Foundations were laid and steelwork erected for the new Community Hall. Initial plans for this to be available in April have been put back to September/October 2018. A steering working party comprised of residents and councillors is developing management strategies, plans for equipping the hall and liaison with Hayfield Homes for completion of the hall. Councillors have recently met with member of the current Village Hall Management Committee to take forward joint plans for the future of the village hall. (See separate report). Early this year a new oil fired boiler had to be fitted in the current hall and that is making its winter use much more pleasant.

To help protect council land from abuse such as the camping of homeless persons in the playground in Little Bourton new local byelaws have been drafted and approved by this council, and submitted for review and acceptance by the DGLC., which will take some months to process.

Recently a request has been received for other play equipment suitable for very young children in Little Bourton, and this is being investigated. Other funding from the Avoncroft S106 agreement for the Pinson Close development is still potentially available to meet unmet recreational needs if we can develop a suitable scheme, but is not available for adding equipment to the existing playgrounds.

Funding is also potentially available from the current development to improve public transport to Great Bourton. The parish council is investigating possible schemes to access that money, and would welcome any feasible ideas that residents would like to suggest.

In 2017 the council income from sales of Fairport Cropredy Festival tickets was reduced by lower than usual sales of tickets. This may be attributable to tighter criteria being stipulated by Fairport on who is eligible to buy concessionary tickets, limited to Bourtons residents and their children who grew up in the villages. This year we may be offered fewer tickets.

This has been the first working year of the new allotment site on Foxden Way and it has been a very successful year with few vacant plots and many tenants growing some impressive crops of vegetables and flowers. Fruit bushes should begin to produce harvests next season. There is a happy sociable atmosphere on site as gardeners exchange pleasantries, plants and tips, and they were enjoying talking about it in the pub. Let’s hope that will resume when the pub reopens.

New legislation, the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) which come into force next month will have an impact on this council in the personal information that we can hold, how it can be stored, made use of, and the permission that must be sought. We think that we will need specialist advice to help us comply with these new regulations and this is being investigated.

Cllr Thomas Sowler who has brought the voice of youth into our council since July 2016 is moving house shortly and so regrettably has resigned. The council will now be recruiting a new parish councillor and this will be advertised shortly, with the criteria that must be met. We will welcome new ideas and fresh enthusiasm from a new member joining the parish council.

Sally Leszczynski

Chairman, Bourtons Parish Council