

Parish Council
Chairman's Report
Annual Parish Meeting May 31st 2017

Opening Address

Welcome to the 2017 Annual Parish Meeting. I am very privileged too be able to open this meeting and to give you a summary of the work and business conducted by your Parish Council during the past year. For anyone new to the Parish meeting I am Chris Hill the Chairman of the Parish council. But before I do that I will mention our guest speakers for the evening, please welcome; our recently re-elected County Councillor, Lorainne Linsey-Gale; our District councillor, John Cotton; the chairman of PAGE, John Taylor; and representing the Friends of Dorchester Little Wittenham Open Spaces group, Becky Waller. These will be speaking after Geoff Russell, our Clerk to the council has delivered our Financial report.

What I can tell you is that there has been a continual increase in the work load experienced by the Parish Council but this year has been accompanied by a significant increase in intensity and stress levels as well.

Council members

The Parish year started with a full complement of 8 councillors. Sadly, in February this year Val Howells, who has done a great job with village events and as the Parish council representative school governor resigned. However, Val has continued to be a school governor until we find a replacement and has offered to report back to the Parish any relevant information. The school

still retains its Good status from Ofsted. Val is also continuing to be a driving force in the organisation of the Fireworks night display and the Village Christmas tree and also the Childrens Paly area at the Rec.

It is only recently that we have been in a position to co-opt a "Casual Vacancy" and we are pleased to announce that Maurice Day has been voted unanimously as our new councillor. As you may know Maurice is no stranger to the Parish council having been a past chairman and member for over 30 years in Dorchester.

Queens Birthday

The year began with the celebration of the Queens Birthday held in conjunction with the church in the Cloister garden on 11th and 12th July. This was a very successful and well attended party enjoyed equally by young and old.

Bowditch Farm sale

The particulars of the Farm sale became available in July and the Parish council made an offer for Lot 7 of the Bowditch Farm estate. Lot 7 is just over 1 acre in area and lies to the rear of Belcher Court, adjacent to the cemetery path and behind the gardens of some of the houses in Drayton Road and the High Street. The council wanted to buy the land to provide a future extension to the cemetery which we estimate could become full over the next 15 to 20 years. Though not imminent, we do not expect many similar opportunities so close to the existing cemetery to appear. Our bid was unsuccessful but we hope that this is not the end of the story.

Buses

There had been ongoing warnings from the county council and Thames Travel for several years that the bus service through Dorchester and elsewhere in the county had been subsidised and not sustainable. So it was no surprise when it was announced that the service through the village would be axed, with the exception of the school bus to Abingdon and to Wallingford once a day returning in the afternoon. The only other service is from the by-pass which is difficult for elderly and infirmed residents to access. I am pleased to say that when the possibility of securing new service was announced by the county council Dorchester was one of the first councils to show an interest, At a public meeting on 7th July it was apparent that it would receive sufficient support to be viable though it was crucial to set the price at an attractive level . A Bus Users group was formed and the Parish council offered to seed fund the service for 6 months. With users paying towards the cost of the service, the 16 seater bus, complete with wheelchair access and lift, now runs to and from Wallingford twice on every Friday which as you know is market day. In memory of Dorchesters' coaching history it is called the Dorchester Flyer. The service has shown itself to be successful and on a few occasions has been totally full on the first journey into Wallingford. The service has been extended for another 6 months and much of the original seed funding is still available. As a Bus User myself I have often used the service and can honestly say that it has become something of a social event with people having made new friends and acquaintances. There are now over 40 Bus Users in the group.

Sports, Recreation Ground and Pavilion

The Tennis club Hitting Wall was also completed and officially opened in July. 2016 This was planned and funded by the Tennis Club in order to create a practise area for individuals without a partner. Nearby, there needed to be urgent repairs to the Pavilion flat roof before it started to leak and lead to severe damage.

Unfortunately though, there has been no progress on any of the plans to extend the pavilion. And to make matters worse, last week, at the AGM, 3 of the five longstanding Sports Committee members resigned and this could delay any further progress for some time until they can be replaced.

Belcher Court

The Parish Court has been taking interest in the closure of Belcher Court since it was announced in December 2015 and we were concerned that residents would be treated fairly. Many of the residents have now been rehomed in spite of reassurances that there would be no pressure for them to leave and they could stay “as long as they wanted’ and about 6 months ago it was announced that it would be sold off for commercial housing. The proceeds would be used to provide social housing in the “area”, presumably that is anywhere in the SOHA area and not the Dorchester area. The Parish council and the NDP Group are opposing this plan. Our Neighbourhood plan identifies Belcher Court, and the site on which it sits, as the preferred site within Dorchester for continued Affordable Housing as it has become established and accepted by the community over many years. In fact, some may not know the history of Belcher Court, that on the 1/3 acre site there were two cottages that, in 1968, were Compulsorily purchased for £500 by Bullington District council in order to build Belcher

Court to create old peoples' flats. The then owner was quoted in the Oxford Mail as saying "I would sooner set fire to them than sell to the council". We have yet to see a planning application from SOHA for the 4, 3 bedroom houses. We know there are people in Dorchester who have been brought up in the village that need affordable housing here. This is shown in the Housing Needs Survey that was carried out a few years ago.

Allotments

This year there are about the same number of plots in use , 78, but the comments from most people is that the general condition and tidiness have been judged as very good this year. There are about 6 or 7 new allotment holders over the past 2 years and it is thought that they have been influential in raising standards all round. However, there are still a few spare plots for anyone who is interested. As the reserve funds have diminished slightly over the past few years the committee have proposed that the Allotment membership fee will be raised to £10 per member at the next AGM. This is still remarkably less than many local allotment associations.

Newcomers Evening

On October 18th the Parish council hosted a Newcomers evening in the village hall. These are run roughly every two years to welcome new residents (though not exclusively new arrivals) and to introduce them to some of the village societies and interests. Thank you very much to all those who attended and especially to those representatives of organisations who came along to advertise the wide range of hobbies, pastimes

and interests available in our small but active and diverse community.

The Cemetery

Over and above the general grass cutting and tree maintenance of the cemetery, last autumn we created a project to restore the area that is behind the rear gardens of Page Furlong. The area had been used for depositing soil and other spoil for many years and had become unsightly and weed filled compared with the rest of the cemetery. Several lorry loads of soil were removed and loosened, the area was then grass seeded, and finally, early this year, volunteers planted 300+ daffodil bulbs. This has drastically improved the look of this area and hopefully this will continue for the foreseeable future with possibly other improvements to the rubbish bins..

Finances

As Geoff will be presenting our Financial report next the only thing I will say is that your Parish council decided not to raise the precept for this financial year. It remains at £42,280 per annum. This is roughly £100 per household per year, or £2 a week. We believe that this remains very good value for money for our roughly 420 or so households.

Bishops Court Farm

Did I forget to mention that there is a new owner at Bishops Court Farm?

It was in October that we were informed by Scott Ruck the Farm manager, that there was a new owner of the farm and

that a meeting would be arranged soon afterwards. However, the suddenness and extent of the changes came as a shock to everyone before a meeting was held. This presented us with a significant increase in the workload and stress levels within the Parish council as we were bombarded by residents and even visitors with requests for information and to express their concerns. This started in October and continued into this year as further developments unfolded. Even now the Farm have not shared any of their plans with us. In my view, this has led directly to the formation of the interest group, we now know as FODLWOS, Friends of Dorchester Little Wittenham Open Spaces group, and subsequently to the applications for Village Green status and challenges to the Footpaths changes. As a Parish council we do not have responsibility for the footpaths or open spaces on the farm and we have relied on the resources of the County council, the District council and Historic England for their expertise and resources in these specialist matters for their experience. We have supported these applications and we have also chosen to adopt the role of “honest broker” to act as a go between the new owners and the rest of the village residents. Our ambition is to create a dialogue between all parties. We want to play a neutral role to represent the broad spectrum of views of the residents across the village. These views vary from pro the Farm, indifference, mildly supportive to extremely against any fencing or enclosure whatsoever and would like to turn the clock back to last year . But it is worth repeating we are all agreed that, as a village, it is essential that we do not fall out with each other, as, if we do, we are all losers. We do appreciate that both parties can potentially provide significant benefits for the village and if we can all work together we can achieve a great deal more than if we have a contest that ends up in a quarrel. That said, we have and are still, pursuing those areas we believe have been made more

dangerous by the route of the fencing at Days Lock, the Thame/Thames confluence, and other places including those with exposed areas of barbed wire. So far we have had a degree of success at Days Lock and will continue to mitigate the others. For the past few months we have enjoyed a period of quiet calm with no aggressive language or accusations of sheep attacks. We sincerely hope this calmness will become a permanent feature.

I should also mention that during this time there have been 3 Planning applications at the farm for houses. As of yesterday all 3 were pending decisions by SODC. This leads us very neatly to the next subject which is Planning

Planning

Last year I reported that there had been 43 Planning applications considered by the Parish Council. This had risen year on year and in retrospect it appears this was a peak. This year there has been a decrease to 35 application including the 3 I have just mentioned. One of these was another iteration of the White Hart application in July for an amended plan to reduce the new build to 2 houses and refurbishment of just one of the original houses at the end of the row. Because this came in at short notice and Planning notices had not been displayed the Parish council decided to have a special meeting a week later to give residents the opportunity to consider the amendments and decide whether these were acceptable. So unusually, on July 6th the PC met again and approved the application only if certain conditions were attached.

Finally, I would like to give sincere thanks to all of our councillors who spend many hours a week working for the mutual benefit of the village and especially to Geoff Russell for his endless hard work and dedication sometimes late into the night to keep us informed and well advised.

This concludes the Chairmans report and unless there are any questions I will hand over to Geoff Russell for the Annual Financial report.