

Chairman's Report to Annual Parish Meeting 2016

Thank you all for coming. I think it is very helpful once a year to take stock and hear from the various village organisations, so we can better understand each other's problems and also celebrate some successes together.

A dominant feature of Parish Council business over the last year has been having to absorb the impact of the massive savings which the County Council needs to make in order to stay within budget. The lack of funding is impacting on a number of key areas.

Firstly, traffic was, of course, top of our priorities in the Village Plan two years ago. The County Council has, within the last few months, issued their so-called Local Transport Plan version 4, which does have a lot of positives about traffic, and freight movement in particular. Sadly much of it is words as there is, at the moment, no money with which to implement things like new weight restrictions or 20mph limits.

Secondly, the highways maintenance budget has been reduced yet again and we all see the effects of the lack of investment on a daily basis as we walk or drive around. Highways can now only spend money if road safety is compromised. This means that some of the relatively minor bits of work which it would be nice to see done in the village cannot be funded by the County Council. And the Parish Council just does not have the funds available. A recent enquiry as to the cost of installing a relatively short length of kerbing indicated that it would absorb the whole of this year's precept, ie. the parish's element of council tax, which is clearly an unrealistic option. Indeed any highways work which we might want to be carried out is way beyond the budget available to us as a parish council.

There is a new initiative called Oxfordshire Together whereby town or parish councils can take on certain services from the county council. This gives local councils more control over how scarce resources are spent. The reality for us is that we are looking at the possibility of taking over the grass cutting contract for verges within either the village or the parish. We would receive some funding from the County to support this.

Meanwhile an element of self-help is the order of the day and our speedwatch and weight monitoring volunteer groups have been active again this year. In particular, there was a successful prosecution by trading standards of an over-weight vehicle using the Haseley Road, and a second prosecution is pending. Better signs both at the village end and the Chalgrove end of the road do appear to have had a beneficial impact.

The third area where cuts are having a big impact is bus services. In late July, the County Council are withdrawing all rural bus subsidies. The parish council was represented at a series of meetings over the last few months on how to maintain some form of service. The 104 bus will go. The 103 is retained but will only run 5 times per day. Heyfordian believe they can run a commercially viable service on this basis but the new service will be on a 6 month trial basis.

Now some good news. On sewerage, there have been major developments. Firstly the problem manhole cover outside the school has, at last, been properly sealed, and there were no problems over this winter. Secondly, Thames Water have undertaken a major project to re-line the main sewer running across the fields from Great Haseley. This is now 80% complete, with the final section to be completed in the fields over towards Haseley once the crops have been harvested. This work should stop the ingress of water into the pipes, which was the cause of the pumping station being over-whelmed and all those tankers in the Haseley Road two winters ago.

Addressing the risks of flooding, the parish council has continued some work with the landowners with responsibility for watercourses in our parish. It is a complex picture, with some 12 landowners involved. A group of volunteers has carried out some clearance work downstream of the Haseley Road bridge, and many thanks to them. We now await some silt clearance in the same area in a joint operation by Thames Water and OCC highways.

Better broadband did arrive since our last annual gathering. Hopefully, enough said.

On the planning and development front, we await the next draft of SODC's Local Plan, which looks ahead to 2032. This should contain their Preferred Options and is due out about June. Meanwhile we have seen a

number of housing developments in the district being turned down by SODC, challenged by the developers through the appeal process, the appeal being upheld and the development being given the go-ahead. Of particular concern is a 65 house proposal in Stadhampton, for which the public inquiry was held in early April and we await the outcome. There is a good chance that development will get the go ahead as well.

We have been keeping the option of doing a Neighbourhood Development Plan under review. Neighbourhood planning gives communities direct power to develop a shared vision for their neighbourhood and shape the development and growth of their local area. We have had a small working group pondering the matter for some months and that group hopes to make a recommendation to the Parish Council shortly.

Meanwhile a number of planning applications for alterations and extensions to houses within the village have been approved. There have been no applications for new build this year.

The parish council has been involved in the project to install three defibrillators in the village. Much of the hard work on this project has been done by Teresa Quested and Kate Daunt, to whom many thanks, but the parish council submitted the grant application, which was successful, and this grant will provide 50% of the funding. And also many thanks to all those who donated to the fund raising. Overall the project is costing about £5000. Once installed, the council will own the defibrillators. The first one is going on the outside of the village hall, then the other two are going at The Lamb and the school.

We continue to maintain the recreation ground, play area and MUGA, and I think they are all in a good state. Indeed those maintenance costs take up a significant proportion of our budget. And thank you to the small team of volunteers who help with keeping the recreation ground in good shape.

Also as one of the follow-up actions from the village plan, a cycleways group has been working away quietly in the background for some time now on trying to establish cycle routes between the local villages. That work continues.

The council is supporting a project to consider replacing the play area equipment, which is now some 15 years old. We have a small group working on this project and thanks to them for their work so far. A questionnaire has gone out to the whole village to seek views on this idea. Grant funding will be essential if this project goes ahead. Despite cuts at the county level, currently grants are still available at district level.

The council continues to support the village newsletter and thanks should go to Raymond for his sterling work as editor. It is worth noting that the newsletter is currently self-financing as production costs are covered by advertising fees.

The lease between the Orchard and the parish council came up for renewal during the year, and this was successfully completed.

My particular thanks go to all those who have helped the work of the council during the last 12 months, such as the recreation ground committee, the volunteers who do the litter blitzes, stream clearers and many others. On the subject of litter blitzes, we are working with district and county officers to try and improve the litter situation at the lay by at the bottom of the village. As a welcome step, extra bins are shortly going to be installed.

As ever, it has been a busy year for the council, and doubtless will continue thus. Indeed, one of our concerns is the future demands which might be placed on parish councils and parish clerks, particularly as options for the re-alignment of local government in Oxfordshire are under active discussion at both district and county level. The county and district's ideas vary but the main idea is to move to a single tier of local government above town and parish councils – so-called unitary authorities. The county wants one authority covering the whole county; the districts want several covering smaller areas, as has been done in Berkshire where there are six.

Finally, but most importantly, against the background of everything else that is going on, and in particular a shift towards parish councils doing more, in January the council decided to raise the precept by 5.8%. It may sound a lot. It amounts to about an extra £5 per annum for the average household and it will raise an extra

£750, making the total precept £11,250. That represents just 3% of overall council tax. The council thinks we get good value out of a relatively modest budget. Also that rise came after holding the precept unchanged for the previous 6 years.