

Annual Report 2020-21

Held at The Village Hall on October 5, 2021

Chair's Introduction and Report

1. Welcome to the Annual Assembly for Basildon. This is taking place later than usual: the opportunity to meet face to face rather than virtually has taken a while to arrive.
2. This meeting will consist of a series of reports, each given by the councillor who has a particular responsibility for an area of the council's work, over the past year or so. There will be an opportunity at the end of the report section to ask questions and offer comments.

Impact of Covid on parish council activity

1. Monthly parish council meetings have continued throughout the period of the pandemic.
2. All councillors have attended at least 90% of the meetings.
3. Face to face meetings and remote meetings with district council officers have continued without interruption.
4. The council led on establishing a network for communications during the first lock down and continues to be available to support residents in circumstances where travel and transport is limited by the pandemic. Expenses incurred by Covid/prescriptions volunteers have been paid by parish council.
5. Meetings with Thames Valley police and local parish councils were paused during the height of the pandemic but these have now resumed face to face. Basildon continues to send a representative to these events. We have reported concerns about speeding within the village and as well as vandalism carried out around the village hall. As a result the police have agreed to visit more frequently.
6. In May 2021 we decided to postpone this Annual Assembly until such a time social distancing requirements were removed and it was possible for residents to attend.

Changes to the council

1. Councillor Halina Czjaka, who made a significant contribution to the communal life of the village, resigned from her post in October. Nicky Larkin joined the council in November and Melanie Greasley joined in March; David Martin joined in December but resigned 3 months later. Councillors Jones and Larkin were elected to the position of Vice Chair; Councillor Parsons was re-elected to the position of Chair.
2. The council website, now managed by Jane Jones, has been updated in keeping with revised data protection regulations and will undergo a reorganisation in the next couple of months.
3. Councillor Greasley has taken on the responsibility for liaising with village clubs and organisations with a view to encouraging new groupings to be formed and to supporting existing ones.
4. Councillor Larkin has represented the parish council at several climate fora organised by the district council.
5. Individual parish noticeboards are now overseen by individual councillors.

6. A review of fixed assets owned by the council has been carried out.

Finance – income and large outgoings

1. Because of the implications of Covid, the uncertainty surrounding its future impact, and the careful management of our past finances, The Parish Council took the decision to reduce its precept by just over 10% for 2021/22.
2. Basildon's current account's balance stands at just under 33 thousand pounds, the deposit account at about 32 thousand pounds.
3. Significant spends will be detailed by individual councillors in their reports later on.

Planning – number of applications, Objections, Refusals and Appeals

1. The district council has reviewed the demarcation of settlement boundaries across the county. Those within Basildon, in general, remain the same.
2. Between August of last year and September of this year the parish council has been consulted on 51 applications. We have offered No Objection to 41 and presented Objections to 10. West Berkshire approved 40 of the applications and refused 11.
3. An application to build 4 new houses at Wakemans has been refused.
4. Perhaps as a result of there being far more remote working we are seeing an increase in applications for buildings within gardens.
5. To our knowledge one planning application refused by West Berkshire has gone to national appeal.

Subsidies

1. The council continues to subsidise bus services, the visiting post office and the mobile library provision, which it hopes to expand in the next year.
2. A £250 subsidy is provided to the Country Neighbour as a way of supporting its contribution to the local community.
3. Toilets in Pangbourne continue to be subsidised with the council contributing £520 this year.
4. £250 is gifted to the British Legion for its part in the Remembrance programme. The council thanks Jill Emmons on behalf of the village for her work in this regard.
5. Local residents, with some funding from the parish council, refurbished the phone box in Lower Basildon and have impressively maintained and developed it since.
6. We have received several requests from charities to support their work. Our view is that we will examine each request on its merits and only consider support where it directly impacts positively upon the village. For example, we have supported a resident, Richard Hudson, who is raising money for a school in Africa but who litter picks locally.
7. Winter Gritting of roads through the village is now paid for by the parish council. The cost to the village for gritting last winter was £2242. Main roads are paid for by the district council.

Oversight

1. Audits have been completed and confirm that our practices are accurate and proper.

Issues raised over the past year

1. Poor mobile phone signal has been raised by Councillor Couchman with local MP Laura Ferris; she attended our January 2021 meeting. Some anecdotal evidence suggests that

there has been some improvement in mobile phone coverage. We also raised with her the lack of activity relating to the state of The Grotto.

2. Several inquiries were made regarding the poor state of repair of The Grotto. In 2021 there was significant fire damage to the building, which has since prompted a planning application to demolish one section of the building and its consequent rebuilding in keeping with its listed building status. The Grotto was treated as a crime scene at the time.
3. Pot holes reported by councillors have received temporary repairs. Residents are encouraged to report these also through the district council's website.
4. The council raised with both the Railway Action Group and Network SouthEast the starkness of the new fence leading to Skew Bridge. This has since been repainted in a colour more sympathetic to the locality.
5. West Berks were asked to cut back various hedges currently obscuring signs. Where this remained a problem the parish council employed a local firm to carry out the work.
6. The war memorial at St. Stephens underwent a refurbishment in 2020.
7. Some repainting of white lines were requested through a Members' bid at the district council, and £250 was gifted for this.
8. The council responded to the Vision of the Future white paper, with particular focus on the links with the police relating to the AoNB.
9. The litter bin at Church Lane was stolen and has since been replaced. A new litter bin along side the Beehive footpath has been installed; we hope to see one also installed at the junction between Adders Walk and Yattendon Lane.
10. The council continues to be responsible for the maintenance of the recreation ground and its surrounding hedges. Three grounds maintenance firms were contacted and asked to tender on the maintenance of those open areas around the village that the council is responsible for. Two replied; we chose to continue the contract with Scofell who, although slightly more expensive, have shown themselves to be willing to respond helpfully to requests beyond our agreement.
11. Village Green development has been overseen by Lorraine Parsons and includes recent bulb planting in the wild flower sections. The two mature trees on the green are nearing the end of their lives and will be removed in the next couple of years.
12. A small number of saplings were donated to the council as part of the West Berkshire Lockdown Wood project. These are too small at present to be planted without considerable attention so they have been kept by a resident who will plant them in and around the village in a few years' time.
13. Hedges on the A329 have been cut back following requests by councillors and residents.
14. Parking in and around the primary school continues to cause concern, although anecdotal reports suggest some improvements since the No Parking signs purchased by the council at a cost of £535 have been employed.
15. Several individual street lights at Wakemans been refurbished.

Councillors' reports

David Jones - Traffic

Background

1. Speeding has become more and more an issue for those we represent. Lower Basildon, spread as it is along the A329, has the benefit of two speed cameras but Upper Basildon has no such traffic calming measures.
2. This desire to improve traffic calming is driven by a genuine concern to prevent a serious accident. It also reflects residents' concerns expressed at the last two Annual Assemblies and at residents speaking at our 5 minute forums.
3. The route through the village from Pangbourne and Aldworth, although 30mph, is the scene of cars frequently travelling over the speed limit. We know of two recent serious incidents. In one, a child was hit by a car but thankfully not injured and in another, a car was damaged by a passing motorist at speed. There have also been a number of near misses.
4. Residents are now getting anxious and this problem was particularly highlighted during lockdown with many more walkers and riders on the road. This manifested itself in a resident organising a petition to respond to West Berkshire questioning how many people this is affecting. 151 completed the speeding survey and 94% of respondents state that it is "pretty bad or excessive". 96% of respondents would be supportive of a solar power speed sign in the village and there were many comments about going even further than this (e.g. 30 mph painting on the road near speed limit changes).

Outcomes

1. At the peak of lockdown in December we had meetings with West Berkshire's Principal Engineer and the Senior Engineer (Traffic) to put our case forward. This included support from both our District Councillor and Member of Parliament, who we had engaged on this issue. These meetings were received positively by WBC and they have committed to a number of improvements including the replacing of some signage and repainting white lines. We have continued to benefit from frequent communication with them.
2. More importantly they have also confirmed that it is their intention to undertake a number of speed surveys from late September onwards, with respect to the possible introduction of an additional Vehicle Activated Sign (VAS) in Upper Basildon, should the data support such a solution. One of the things residents must realise, however, is that when these surveys have been done in the past, some 65% of speeding vehicles are driven by local residents! Signs can help but the key is to change drivers' behaviour.
3. It is therefore our intention to consider mobilising a Community Speed Watch which will need volunteers from the local community. We have met with the Senior Road Safety Officer and signed up for the scheme. When we know the outcome of the potential VAS in Upper Basildon, we will investigate with them, the right kind of equipment to support such a scheme. We will need to purchase this and also think about how we engage with residents to help in this area. A realistic timeline for this is likely to be early next year.
4. All on Team which the Parish Council are committed to improving this issue in Upper Basildon and also ask residents to play their part.

David Jones - Libraries

1. Libraries in the UK benefit from a huge amount of visits - 250m pa. This is bigger than all visits to cinemas, theatres, the UK top ten tourist attractions and live music gigs combined! Visits are, however, declining from this large base.
2. There was significant change in W. Berks. in April 2017 when the Council cut funding by 44% and asked Parish Councils to support the service by giving £1 per head per annum. Since then we have made donations of £1740 each financial year, as we thought as a Parish Council it was an important service to support. The total this year will be £1862.
3. There are 8 libraries and 1 mobile library served by 46 permanent staff and 187 volunteers. Volunteers are now a key plank of the service.
4. The library service has three aims:
 - a. A library service which is responsive to local needs
 - b. A safe and trusted place to get good information including online
 - c. Free and available to all
5. The pandemic closed the library service from 23rd March 2020 to 13th July 2020. From that date they delivered a reduced service but were then closed in both November 2020 and January 2021 during the second and third lockdowns, when services were delivered online and through book collections only. The figures for this year's use are therefore quite compromised. In Basildon we benefit from our proximity to Pangbourne library. The latest published data shows that 50 residents use the library book service and they mostly use Pangbourne. They borrowed 1158 items across the year. In addition the local library is used as a resource centre and as a children's events centre.
6. We also benefit from a service which is non-existent in many parts of the UK nowadays: a mobile library. This visits the car park of St. Stephen's church every 3rd Monday between 12.45pm and 1.30pm. We were also in discussion before lockdown with the library service about a potential stop in Lower Basildon. If as a community we do not support the mobile library, the inevitable consequence is that eventually it will be withdrawn, yet it importantly visits 73 sites throughout the county. As a rural Parish Council we have asked that our contribution is ring fenced for the mobile library.
7. There is also a service for the housebound where a volunteer can visit their home every few weeks with a small selection of library items from which they can choose something to borrow.
8. The biggest growth area is the free e-library service which is showing a huge increase in usage. There is free, multiple copy access to 140 magazine titles in digital format. Equally Britannica Online is available remotely as is Ancestry where 4718 searches were made alone in May 2020.
9. To finish, a quote from the writer Sidney Sheldon: "Libraries store the energy that fuels the imagination. They open up windows to the world and inspire us to explore and achieve, and contribute to improving our quality of life."
10. ...and J. K. Rowling said: "When in doubt go to the library."

Sarah – Beale Park

1. The Tookey Wood path has been part of the footpath network for many years and that it was closed 12 months ago following changes in how the grounds are being used. The parish

council has made a number of attempts to get them to reopen it but, so far, Beale park hasn't been very responsive.

2. Following 2020's interest in outdoor activities Church Lane receives a very large number of visitors, which has resulted in various problems – parking, litter, etc. We have asked Thames Valley Police to visit as often as possible in the good weather.

Oliver –Playgrounds

1. The past 12 months have seen our communal outdoor spaces continue to be used by a large number of residents. This is exactly what they are intended for and it has been wonderful to see them being used so much but it has led to an inevitable increase in wear and tear and the need for attention to keep them safe and in good working order.
2. At Wakemans we carried out some repairs early in the year on the advice of the safety survey we have carried out each year. These involved replacing rotting wooden timber on the small climbing frame, relaying rubber matting beneath the large climbing frame to replace the old matting which was shifting and leaving trip hazards and a space for weeds to grow. We have had the remaining matting around other equipment jet-washed to remove mould and moss which rendered them dangerously slippery when wet. Finally, the entrance gate has had its surface made good with the installation of a concrete slab which makes it more even and easier to negotiate with pushchairs, bicycles and wheelchairs.
3. Whilst the Village Hall play areas are managed by the Village Hall Trust, the two bodies work hand in hand and the Parish Council has paid for and organised the repair of one of the self-closing gates and has lined up further remedial work for the second gate over the coming weeks.
4. We have also agreed that further investment should be made across both sites to continue to focus on these village facilities over the coming years. Wakemans will be receiving a suspended 360 degrees swinging basket whilst at the Village Hall there will be an integrated basketball hoop, football goal and cricket stumps installed in the eastern corner of the field just behind the tennis courts. These new pieces of equipment are intended to complement existing kit whilst offering entertainment for a variety of ages.
5. Finally in order to support West Berkshire's 'Respect our Parks & Open Spaces' campaign that was launched in June, we are proudly displaying a banner at each playground. A small gesture it may be, but a large reminder of the importance our open spaces have provided us all over the past couple of years.

Elaine – Footpaths and PROWs

1. In the parish of Basildon, there are 26 public rights of way (PROWs), with a total length of 17km.
2. West Berkshire District Council is the highway authority, and legally responsible for the upkeep of the PROW network (all PROWs are highways). The Parish Council possesses certain powers, e.g. to maintain or improve paths.
3. The District Council holds records of outstanding problems on the network. At present, there are outstanding cases to do with surface condition, gates, and signposting.
4. The District Council's priority in the summer is vegetation clearance, and over the winter months it has the capacity to resolve signposting and other issues.

5. Members of the Ramblers' Association are involved in a volunteer scheme to replace stiles with more easily accessible gates. The District Council must authorise all new structures on PROWs.
6. During the autumn and spring each year, letters are sent to landowners, reminding them of their duty to restore ploughed or cropped paths, and to keep overhanging vegetation cut back.
7. During the summer of 2021, the District Council consulted on the review of its Rights of Way Improvement Plan, which attracted over 1800 responses. The final Plan is due to be published in the spring 2022.
8. In 2026, any pre-1949 footpath or bridleway which is not officially recorded on the Definitive Map of Public Rights of Way will be extinguished. Various bodies and individuals have approached the District Council with evidence to support the existence of such old highways - the District Council has a duty to assess this evidence.

Geoff – Basildon Parish Transport

1. The Parish Council continues to financially support the 143 service to and from Reading. Understandably, Covid saw a reduced number of passengers using the service in the early part of the year, but passenger use has picked up since. In addition to the 143 service Lower Basildon is serviced by Go Forward buses on a Tuesday into and from Reading under the same terms as the 143 utilising the existing bus stops and pick up points. The volunteer service run out of Pangbourne is available for those difficult visits to the surgery.
2. The Government has published a white paper on Public Transport and making £5billion available nationwide via local councils. We have presented our case for a regular shuttle service to and from Pangbourne to meet up with the train service and buses into Reading and London/Oxford. The suggestion is for the 143 to be replaced by a smaller electric vehicle eliminating the 143 travelling through the narrow lanes of the village. It is proposed that this service is available from early morning until evening. This proposal has only just been submitted for consideration and we have yet to hear back.

Melanie – Village Groups

1. Having joined the Parish Council earlier in the year, I've been asked to explore the Parish Council's support for various clubs and societies within the Parish as I'm already involved with both the local football team and girl guides group. To kick things off I've written to the Country Neighbour outlining the Parish Council's commitment to help and requesting that interested parties apply to the Parish Council to request grants for particular projects or to help get new organisations off the ground. Feedback to date has been relatively slow and we'll look to make the offer again and back it up with allocated funds in the upcoming budget. We'll then report progress via our monthly minutes.