

Annual Parish Assembly

Report for the period April 20th 2016 to April 26th 2017

Presented by Alex Cother – Chair, Beenham Parish Council

It is unfortunate that I start my annual report in a similar manner as last year by remembering a former Parish Council colleague. Shortly after our Annual Parish Assembly last year, we learnt of the passing of Bill Goudge, Clerk to this Council for many years who had provided wisdom and stability to this and many other Parish Councils.

2016 also saw the resignation of Jane Liming whose support as Vice Chair has been sadly missed but the Council notes her continued contribution to the Parish Plan refresh process which is proving invaluable.

The recruitment of replacement and further Parish Councillors has remained an issue throughout the year and it is hoped that recently received applications from new recruits will allow the Council to return to full strength and 'new blood' be introduced.

I would like to thank all Council members for their contributions during the year, one which has proved challenging at times particularly against a background of funding cuts, increased pressure on WBC finances and a devolution agenda from national government.

With the likelihood of a significant increase in Council tax by West Berkshire Council in May last year, the Council took the difficult decision to set the Precept at the 2015/16 level to keep the burden on households to a minimum. This meant that the Council was forced to implement a frugal approach to the budgeting process and reduce spending to a minimum.

Pressure on the budget has remained a feature throughout the year, notably with several unexpected demands being made on the Council's funds for repairs necessary to the Community room and services. Some of the decisions made have proven unpopular but under the steady guidance of Councillor Johnson, finances have been kept under control and the Council moves into 2017/18 in a good position.

As advised in last year's report, maintaining a satisfactory level of reserves was considered important by the Council as, combined with an increase in the Precept, we wanted to be able to support the plans proposed during the Parish Plan refresh exercise.

This Parish planning process is progressing well with well thought through proposals being presented for improvements to youth facilities, transport arrangements and initiatives intended to tackle social isolation. Concerns raised during the consultation exercise in respect of the proposed improvements to the recreation ground facilities remain under consideration whilst the Council seeks guidance on planning issues.

In addition, the Council has set aside money to contribute to WBC's plan to provide alternative funding for the library service as from user analysis, it is clear that this is a resource used by Parishioners.

As a rural Parish, as in previous years, the Council has considered a steady flow of planning applications. It has, on several occasions, been necessary to remind Parishioners that the Parish Council are not the planning authority and that the Council considers applications in the context of the impact upon the Parish, as a whole. During the recent Parish Conference, it was concerning to note that WBC advised of the limited resources available for planning enforcement and that this is a discretionary service provided by the authority.

During the year we have repeatedly heard about the severe cuts to services being made by WBC as a result of a reduction in funding received from Central Government. The results of cuts made has become more evident but lobbying by Parishioners, including those from Beenham, has helped maintain a reasonable bus service and library service. It is understood that further cuts are to be expected meaning that the pressure on services will continue for the foreseeable future. As mentioned earlier, it is clear that local authorities, encouraged by Central Government, see Parish Councils taking over the running of some services, especially those that could be delivered by other means e.g volunteers. This Council has, for example, taken responsibility for grit bins and their replenishment with the asset being transferred to the Council.

Throughout the year, the Council has been in regular dialogue with the School and users of the Community Room and School Hall. This is an opportunity to remind Parishioners that the Parish Council entered into a lease for the Community Room and has a licence to use the school hall at specified times. Use is subject to a charge payable to the School. The costs of operating this facility are a cause for concern as there has been a negative impact on the Parish's finances with revenue from bookings being less than the charges imposed. The Council has yet to accept the School's invoice for use of these facilities and will not until a full analysis of the costs has taken place.

There is also concern over the future of the Community Room and Parish use of the School Hall should the School choose to Academise.

Mid way through the year, Councillor Johnson took over responsibility temporarily for Community Room bookings. The Council is grateful for her contribution in this regard and acknowledges the need for a permanent replacement in due course.

Some progress is now being made with the adoption of the Persimmon development at the Wharf by WBC and the Council is hopeful that this matter will be resolved within the next few months having been outstanding for nearly 20 years.

The Village website continues to develop and be regularly updated. Many thanks to Michael and Jackie for their stewardship of this important resource.

Whilst supporting the contract Superfast Berkshire/WBC entered into with Gigaclear to extend Superfast Broadband, the Council notes the disruption to Beenham residents caused during installation works and is hoped that Councillor Boeck, Executive member responsible for Culture and the Environment, will be able to share Parishioners concerns and learn of Gigaclear's plans for remedial works to the verges and hedges destroyed.

Sincere thanks go to the Beenham Village Events Committee who have continued to provide a valuable thread running through village life.