

Minutes of the Annual Parish Meeting of Sonning Parish Council held in the Pearson Hall Sonning on Wednesday 22 May 2012 at 7.30pm.

PRESENT.

Mr M Green (Chairman), Mr P J Doyle, Mr A E Farnese, M/S V Reeve, Mrs L A Bates (Clerk).
By invitation Cllr M Haines, Mr K Peters, 14 members of the Public.

APOLOGIES.

Mrs L Green (Head Teacher Sonning Primary School), M/s S Robinson, Dr G Robinson, Mr I Runnalls, Mr G Jones (West Drive).

INTRODUCTION AND WELCOME.

The Chairman, welcomed those present, and said that he and other Councillor's would make their reports followed by Mr Doyle's presentation on the Conservation Area Assessment. Parishioners would then be given an opportunity to ask questions during the Open Forum.

MINUTES OF THE 2011 ANNUAL PARISH MEETING.

Mr Gilmore proposed accepting the Minutes and Cllr Haines seconded. The Minutes of the 2011 Annual Parish Meeting, having been circulated, were taken as read and signed by the Chairman.

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT.

The Chairman said that he would make his report (see annex 1) and then hand over to Councillors.

COUNCILLORS REPORTS.

Finance Report. The 2011/12 accounts had been circulated. The Chairman said the precept had been kept down. More money had been generated due to higher occupancy of dwellings in Sonning. Mr Brooker asked about the Council's investments. The Clerk explained that £50,000 was in a Santander account attracting 3.5% interest and the remainder was in National Savings. The Chairman said that Mr Chapman's input would be missed.

Sports, Recreation and Environment Report. The Chairman presented the Recreation Report (see annex 2). Anyone wishing to join the group, as a volunteer would be very welcome

Police Report. The Chairman then presented the Police report. The Chairman explained about the Community Speed Watch, which he hoped could be introduced in Sonning. The speed gun had to be calibrated and volunteers would have to undergo training. Unfortunately the local police seemed unable or unwilling to progress this. Mr Peters said that an alternative would be a flashing sign, which cost £5,000. Unfortunately these could only remain in one place for two weeks at a time. It might be possible to 'share' one with another parish. Mr Atkins said that he had seen the police using speed guns in Twyford, Mr Peters said these might have been traffic officers. Cllr Haines said that there was a police base in Hampshire. Mr Argent suggested, in the absence of police support, that volunteers, wearing yellow jackets and using a camera instead of a gun, would act as a deterrent but the Chairman said that this had been tried elsewhere and the police had put a halt to it although it wasn't an offence. Cllr Haines said that one of the problems could be the threat from offended drivers. The police would also look unfavourable at anyone impersonating them.

The Chairman asked Mr Peters to present the Highways Report.

Highways. Mr Peters presented the Highways Report (see annex 3).

Mr Atkins asked about the RBCS parking in Sonning Lane. Mr Peters said that this did slow traffic down and made it safer but the volume had increased and cars were now parking further up Sonning Lane. Mr Atkins asked if SPC would support an application by RBCS for on site parking and Mr Peters confirmed that they had already informed RBCS that they would. Cllr Haines said that this only involved sixth formers and RBCS were already subsidising parking in RRFC but students were not subscribing to this. Mr Peters said that the drivers were causing problems when moving off. Mr O'Callaghan said that everyone was being sucked into the ethos of traffic engineers, this should be reversed, making Sonning safer should be the aim. Walking and cycling should be encouraged. There were no accidents in Charvil Lane because no one used it. The Chairman said that this was something that could be brought up with WBC, quoting the Dutch experience. No one was brave enough in the UK to change the way things worked. Mr Peters said that traffic didn't necessarily want to be in Sonning but once they were there was no way out. Mr O'Callaghan suggested a pavement in Charvil Lane and making it one way. The Chairman said that this could increase tailbacks and Mr Peters suggested that Mr O'Callaghan might join the Highways W.G. Mr Atkins asked if the lack of support with regard to the students parking on Sonning Lane was due to the head teacher. Mr Peters thought not but said that parents knew that cars had a right to park on roads, the students could have tickets for RC&HC but preferred to park on the road. Mr Gilmore said that the signs that lit up did appear to slow vehicles down.

The Chairman thanked Mr Peters and asked Mr Doyle to present the Planning Report.

Planning. Mr Doyle presented his Report (see annex 4).

Mr Atkins said that the government appeared to be relaxing planning regulations. Mr Doyle said the regulations were not being relaxed but the government were trying to change things. Mr McCulloch asked about the proposed lighting on Sonning Bridge. It was named the Jubilee Community Project, why then had the community not been consulted. Mr Doyle said that this had been discussed at a number of Council meetings (main and planning) over a number of months. Anyone attending these meetings would have been aware of the proposal. Mr McCulloch said this was not good enough. The Chairman said that members of the Society were always welcome to attend Council meetings and funding would come from the community not from SPC. Mr McCulloch asked again why there had been no consultation; the bridge was the most iconic structure in Sonning. The Chairman said that everyone would have the opportunity to comment on the planning application. Mr McCulloch said the project should have been inclusive. Mr Argent asked if any other project had been considered. Mr Doyle said additional street lighting had, amongst other items, been considered but the Bridge project was considered to be a practical idea. Mr Argent asked if there was any evidence of there being a need. Mr Doyle said he had spoken to the Mill and had been told that a lot of visitors and staff used the Bridge. Mr Doyle said that the original estimates had been in the region of £18,000 but it was hoped to reduce this. The proposal was a major public work; the last one had been the Charvil Lane footpath. Mr Argent asked if this was an appropriate use of public money. Mr Hine asked about a community consultation, this would give everyone a chance of assessing the project. What were the findings of the risk assessment. Mr Doyle said that consultants had been instructed to carry this out. Mr Hine said that Mr Doyle's article suggested that the work was urgently needed but there was no proof of this. Mr Doyle said that there had been many site visits to the Bridge and standing there in the traffic was not a good experience. Mr Argent said people should be encouraged to carry a torch and asked if there had been any incidents. The Chairman said the Council were trying to prevent an accident rather than waiting until one happened. Mr McCulloch said there was no demonstrable need. Mr O'Callaghan said that a lot of work was involved and there was no proof of any danger, if there were people would not walk

over the Bridge. Mrs Peters said that she had walked over the Bridge and had felt very uncertain about her safety; she would take a torch with her in future. Mr Argent said a lot of money was involved. Mr Doyle said this was a major public works and would last for generations. Mr Argent asked about maintenance and Mr Doyle said there would be none; each light could be changed individually. This was a sustainable activity. Currently he was looking at ways to reduce the ground-works and therefore the costs. WBC had suggested that the work be carried out at night but another contractor, licensed by WBC, would prefer to work during the day. This would reduce the need for signing and it would be easier to work during the day. Mr O'Callaghan suggested that the Mill should pay and Mr Hine said that Oxon should also contribute. Mr Doyle said that Oxon had no funding and would not be asked to contribute nor would SPC or WBC; all the money would come from public subscriptions. Mr O'Callaghan asked why there was no listed building application. Mr Doyle said that Mr Stephens and the SODC conservation officer had both agreed that a listed building application was not required. Mr Hicks said that the proposal would not affect the fabric of the Bridge only the tarmac footpath.

Mr Brooker said he approved of Mr Doyle's suggested use of the old telephone box as storage for information sheets providing a list of interesting routes around Sonning. Mr Doyle said he would be happy to do the artwork if the Society would provide information on the routes. Mr Hine said that he would like to commend the latest SPC Newsletter. However, under planning Mr Doyle encouraged people to object to planning applications. SPC should not just encourage people to object but to also support applications. Mr Hine said that for effective communications it would be more constructive not to say object to everything. Mr Doyle said he had not said this and suggested that Mr Hine read the article; Mr Hine said this was the way the article had come across. Mr Doyle said that SPC did not just encourage people to object, it was important for people to comment on applications. Regrettably there had only been two letters on the Augustfield application. The Chairman asked who had commented on the RRFC application for the Park and Ride and four people raised their hands. Mr Doyle said that the deadline was 23 May, the proposal was to provide a Park and Ride for 150 cars for Thames Valley Park. Coaches would then take the drivers to TV Park. Hardstanding for the car park had been put down without planning permission (an additional sixty car spaces were not part of the application). This amounted to an additional 1500 car movements in Sonning Lane per week and forty-five coaches per day. When leaving the car park some vehicles would turn left heading for Pearson Road/Pound Lane, as the exit onto the A4 was not sustainable. Mr Argent said that TV Park had tried to increase on site parking but WBC had refused. Mr Doyle said that the application did not include a transport plan. The applicants own survey showed that 70% of those going to TV Park had driven to the RRFC car park alone in their car. The Chairman said that Mr Peters had carried out a twelve-hour survey. Mr Peters said that the application was for 150 spaces but there were over 200 spaces on the site, how could this be monitored. Mr Doyle said this proposal, if approved, would set a precedent, which the RC&HC and Berkshire Sports Club could follow. Mr Atkins said he understood that the Park and Ride at Loddon Bridge had been extended and Cllr Haines said this was correct; it had been extended until 2013. Mr Peters said that on the survey day only 90 cars had used the RRFC car park. 43% of traffic travelling to the A4 amounted to 534 vehicles. Of these 153 came from RRFC. If 200 spaces were allowed to be used 72% of vehicles would use the A4 exit resulting in a tail back to the RC&HC and cars then using other roads in Sonning. Cllr Haines said that RRFC offered a good service but generating additional traffic was another matter.

The Chairman thanked Mr Doyle and asked Cllr Haines to make his report.

Cllr Haines thanked the Chairman and his team who all worked hard on behalf of the community. Looking forward Cllr Haines said that WBC had taken stock. They were the lowest funded Local Authority per head. The Town Centre Regeneration Project would include work on the station, library and the health service. Some responsibility would be on Borough Councillors and a lot would be on the police. In November there would be elections for the new Police Commissioner. There was no extra funding available to organise this.

The National Planning framework had been reduced to fifty two-page document but was still a hefty document and it took a long time to read and work out how everything was to fit.

The Southern parishes had called for a judicial review on the Arborfield Development site, as they did not consider that WBC had not carried out a full consultation.

Cllr Haines said that he would urge Sonning residents to support the Parish Council. Mr Peters had done some fine work on highways but was now leaving the Council and SPC could do with additional support from parishioners. Cllr Haines said he liked to hear from people not just from those who had been elected. It had taken a long time to obtain the 20mph limit but he thoroughly supported the initiative. Mr McCulloch asked if Cllr Haines was uncomfortable over the RRFC proposal, had he opposed it. Cllr Haines said that he was not opposed to Rugby but was against anything that increased traffic. McCulloch said this was not a Rugby matter.

Mr Atkins said that there was a bush growing on the pavement in the High Street, which prevented people walking on the pavement. Mr Farnese agreed to investigate.

The Chairman thanked Cllr Haines and asked Mr Doyle to present the Conservation Area assessment.

Conservation Area Assessment.

Mr Doyle said that everyone would be aware of the Conservation Area Assessment, he had asked via the Parish magazine, for surveyors. Essentially this was an update of the SPC Design Statement. The surveyors had met for the first, very successful, briefing and training on 19 May. Surveyors were divided into groups, each group taking on one of five routes around the Conservation Area. Each surveyor had been given a survey sheet, which they had been asked to analyse. From the 16 June the survey would be underway. The Chairman said that he had met Richard Peaks (English heritage) and he had said that he was looking forward to seeing the results. Mr Doyle said that there would be a public exhibition, probably in October/November) as part of the public consultation. The completed document should be ready by March 2013.

The Chairman thanked Cllr Haines and invited questions.

OPEN FORUM

Mrs Morgan said that the new bus shelter in Pound Lane, which had been paid for by the Scarecrow Committee, had a seat. The old shelter further along Pound Lane did not, would it be possible for one to be built. The Chairman said that he would look into this.

There being no other questions the Chairman thanked everyone for coming and said that the Council welcomed parishioners to the meeting and were trying to ensure that everyone was aware of the dates. If residents had any questions would they please ring him, any Councillor or come to a meeting.

The meeting closed at 9.25pm.

Signed.....Dated.....

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT APM 2012.

It has been a busy year for the Parish Council and its associated working groups and committees. More in depth reports will be presented later and without stealing their thunder I do just want to comment on a couple of areas.

A lot of excellent work has been undertaken by the Planning Committee especially with regard to the applications for Augustfield and the old Fire Station site. Recent changes to planning legislation and the slow implementation of new policies do nothing to boost our confidence in the planning system however the Parish Council through its Planning Committee will continue to oppose inappropriate development within the Parish.

The persistence of the Highways Working Group with their HGV surveys has had a major success and we are now starting to see successful prosecutions taking place of drivers who ignore the 7.5 tonne environmental weight limit within the village.

It is with much regret for us that Ken Peters has decided to step down as a Councillor. In his five years with the Council he has worked tirelessly especially in his role as Chairman of the Highways Working Group. I would personally like to thank Ken not just for all the work that he has put in but also for all the support he has given to me in his role as Vice Chairman. He really will be missed although he tells me he is not leaving entirely and is still willing to support the work of the Highways Working Group.

At the election last year Ian Holt was elected to the Parish Council. Unfortunately Ian found that he wasn't able to commit the time to the position that he would have liked and unfortunately he stepped down. He was replaced by Mena Pownall who is doing great work on both the Planning Committee and the Recreation and Environment Working Group.

I am often asked "what's the Parish Council doing about this?" or have people saying to me "I didn't know that was happening" and people often seem surprised when I say to them that they are always able to attend Parish Council meetings and ask questions directly of their councillors! Our Council meetings are held on the second Tuesday of the month normally here in the pavilion. We are just in the process of updating our website so more up to date information is available on there as well as opening a Facebook page.

We have an exciting summer of event ahead of us here in Sonning and I hope that as many of you as possible will be able to attend at least one of the many events that are happening to celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of our Queen.

Finally I would like to thank all of our Councillors who give so willingly of their time and effort to support Sonning.

RECREATION AND ENVIRONMENT REPORT APM 2012

After a very busy year for the Recreation and Environment Working Group in 2010/2011 this year has proved to be a little quieter! The building of the new tennis club hut was completed satisfactorily along with the installation of the new 'eco loo'. I would like to thank all the members of the Sonning Lawn Tennis Club for the time and effort they put in during the planning, preparation and installation of the hut especially Hilary Moss the past Chair of the club. This new building is being very well used we could just do with slightly better weather to encourage more members to play!

King George's field is extremely well used by many different groups and as a result the surface takes quite a bashing especially over the winter. As the cricket and football seasons now overlap there is very little recovery time for the grass in between. This year we have invested in a program of rolling, solid tining and weed and feeding to try to improve the playing surface for all the users. Plans to re-turf some of the more worn patches were not carried out when Thames

Water imposed the hosepipe ban however as you are aware it just about rained ever since so we probably would have been successful if we had gone ahead with it! We are also using a new company now to cut the grass and they are doing a good job.

The Pavilion is also well used and the new kitchen that was fitted last year is proving to be very popular. The Pavilion is getting on in age now and we have discovered areas where renovation work may be needed. As a result we intend to have a complete survey carried out into the condition of the building during this year.

The Wharf continues to be source of pleasure to the many walkers and users of the river who pass through. However there has been some damage caused to the wharf by both a blocked drain and by contractors vehicles being driven onto it. We are currently looking into ways to rejuvenate the wharf and more details about it will be available shortly.

It is not only councillors who carry out work at King George's Field I would like to thank Sid Liddiard for the work that he has done on repairing the fencing along by the car park and also Steve Chapman who has carried out an enormous amount of work at King George's field planting trees, mowing the edges and generally helping to make KGF the pleasant environment that it is. He will be sorely missed however we are always looking for volunteers so if you feel you are able to spare an hour or two a month to help out at King George's Field please do let me know.

Due to the resignation of Ken Peters as a councillor I am now taking over the Chair of the Highways Working Group and I am very pleased to announce that Councillor Mena Pownall will be taking on the role of Chair of the Recreation and Environment Working Group.

I would like to thank all the members of the working group for all the hard work that they have put in over the past year.

HIGHWAYS REPORT MAY 2012

The past year has generally been a successful one for Highways. We have at last established a good working relationship with a weight-enforcing agency that is resulting in prosecutions for those HGV vehicles that ignore our environmental weight limit. The newly formed joint trading standards service with Wokingham and West Berkshire has been very supportive by helping us set up the correct legal processes. Statements from members of our Lorry Spotters Club will now result in a prosecution if an HGV has no legal right to be within our environmental weight limit. So far there have been 4 successful prosecutions at Reading Court and a further 8 are waiting to be processed. When we first started these surveys in 2009 the average sightings per survey of overweight vehicles was approximately 17. Over the last 4 surveys the average has been 5. This is an excellent result and it is rewarding all those hard efforts of the members of our survey team. It is important that we continue these surveys and if at all possible increase the frequency. To do that we need more members and if you are interested please let us know and you will be made most welcome. We are not going to eliminate heavy vehicles entirely but together with good publicity it will become known that Sonning is a no go area for these unwanted visitors.

Our Highways Working Group has been involved in some other key activities which have not progressed as far as I would have liked mainly due to the time taken in trying to achieve an HGV result with other authorities that proved unsuccessful.

The reduction in unnecessary traffic signs is ongoing. Our initial meetings with WBC on this subject were most encouraging particularly the data we provided which was very thorough and detailed beyond anything Wokingham have documented. It is important that this initiative is followed up.

Another important activity has been tackling the problem of excessive speed. On virtually every road within the Parish there is constant evidence of transiting traffic exceeding the speed limit often to dangerous levels without thought for safety or respect for our environment or residents. Despite constant pressure on the Police to act in reducing speed little has been done. We are not alone, most other councils within the borough, are also experiencing speeding problems. The Police with their limited resources are up against an impossible task. If anything is to be done we will have to use what community opportunities are available to us. We have been trying for sometime to take advantage of Thames Valley Police's own initiative 'Community Speedwatch' but we have been advised by them that there are insurance issues as well as equipment training difficulties. We must not accept this any longer. With the 20mph zone now a limit, which is enforceable, and our success with our community weight enforcement team, surely with this Police initiative and our community resource we can work together to reduce the speeding problem effectively.

Our long term Highways traffic strategy has also not progressed as fast as I would have wished. This programme was set up to investigate if there was a better way of managing the transiting traffic to minimise the effect on our environment and residents, particularly the core centre of our village. We have reached a stage where we know what the authorities will accept or not. The next stage is to collect vital traffic survey data to determine volumes and speed at key points throughout the Parish. We must also have a closer understanding of the traffic light sequencing on the bridge. Without repeating here our presentations in 2010 and 2011 we have agreed that before progressing further we should hold a residents meeting to report progress in detail. I regret, due to unfortunate delays we haven't been able to hold it earlier, but I am keen that it is held to give all residents the opportunity to understand the problems, our options and to be able to ask questions.

Whilst this programme was initially prompted because of the bridge traffic and its adverse effects, I have to report that another problem, not associated with the bridge issue, is growing rapidly. This is the commercial, school and sports generated traffic in Sonning Lane combined with the greater restrictive nature of the junction with the A4 which means increasing traffic is being forced through the village along Pearson Road to exit onto the A4 via Pound Lane. A recent survey shows over 4,000 vehicles a day use this junction and it could increase dramatically. The 'improvements' to the A4 junction may have improved the safety aspect but it certainly has not improved the frustration level in fact the complete opposite. If nothing is done to assist exiting traffic onto the A4 more drivers will choose to exit through the village along Pearson Road.

With all plans for an additional bridge now but a dream our Highways Strategy programme needs to be stepped up and take account of all the traffic issues.

As some of you are aware I have decided, that after 5 years as a Councillor, I am stepping down this month. I would like to take this opportunity of thanking all those members of the Highways Working Group and the Lorry Spotters Club for all their support and hard work with valuable input which shows what can be achieved if a community pulls together. If I may, I would like to single out one person who has been invaluable to both the HGV and Working Group for all his help, unique planning skills and attention to detail namely Bob Hulley. Thank you, Bob.

It is imperative that this work continues for the benefit of our community and it will be a shame if it does not, after all the hard efforts of those involved. As I have previously stated during my 5 years trying to deal with the authorities I have likened to 'swimming in treacle'. This is not a deliberate ploy to be difficult but their priorities are different to ours. Highway safety governed by accident statistics comes first with little support for environmental issues in this continuing difficult financial climate. Fortunately we have little or no accident statistics to support us despite all the speeding and the excessive volume of traffic transiting our small community. So if

we want improvements we have to provide the ideas and arguments for change, authorities working together with well organised community groups is the future. If we don't do it no one else will.

Thank you.

PLANNING REPORT MAY 2012

During the past twelve busy months your Planning Committee dealt with just under sixty Planning Applications of all shapes and sizes. From thoughtfully creative to the potentially destructive, from the well considered to the just plain daft. They were all properly investigated, examined and assessed by our hard working and thoroughly resilient committee members, my colleagues.

As a reminder, your Sonning Parish Council Planning Committee meets here at 7pm on the Monday of the week before Parish Council meetings and the Wednesday of the week after. Those meetings are open to everyone, you can see how we go about our business and listen to what we say.

We carry out site visits, talk to neighbours who may be potentially effected by proposed development. At Wokingham we talk to the case officers, whether they want to or not, their bosses, conservation officers, the highways department, tree officers and enforcement. Make no mistake, your views are so important.

We take into account Local and National Policy that has bearing upon potential development, from our historic fabric, to bats, solar panels, signs, driveway vision splays, trees and their roots, flints and brickwork, to the overbearing and obtrusive. We are also invited to submit our views upon emerging policies and guidance documents from our Local Authority, and we attend their various training courses. We use our miserable three minutes in front of Wokingham's Planning Committee to convince them that Wokingham Borough Council is sometimes totally wrong about proposed development and we are absolutely right. And it works most of the time.

We give our time and effort for free, our telephone charges, stationary and printer cartridges, and our petrol. So anyone who suggests, or even makes the inference (never directly to us of course), that we make it up as we go along, impose our own personal views or extend some kind of favouritism as the whim takes us is just hopelessly wrong. I don't mind saying that they do a massive disservice to our efforts for this community and should know better, or even try this sometime.

This is a fifty-two week job as the steady flow of planning applications is relentless, Wokingham seem to be wilting under the strain.

And we all love every minute, don't we? As Mae West would say, why not pop in and see us sometime?