

Minutes of the Annual Parish Meeting of Sonning Parish Council held in the Pearson Hall Sonning on Tuesday 21 May 2013 at 7.30pm.

PRESENT.

Mr P J Doyle (Chairman), Mr A Evans (from 8.00pm), Mr A E Farnese, Mrs T Hicks, Mr S Liddiard, Mrs M Pownall, Mr I Runnalls, Mrs L A Bates (Clerk). By invitation Cllr M Haines (WBC). 10 members of the Public.

APOLOGIES.

Mr Evans would be delayed until 8.00pm. Mrs L Green (Head Teacher Sonning Primary School).

INTRODUCTION AND WELCOME.

The Chairman, welcomed those present, and said that he and other Councillor's would make their reports and parishioners would then be given an opportunity to ask questions during the Open Forum.

MINUTES OF THE 2012 ANNUAL PARISH MEETING.

Mrs Doyle proposed accepting the Minutes and Mr Brooker seconded. The Minutes of the 2012 Annual Parish Meeting, having been circulated, were taken as read and signed by the Chairman.

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT.

The Chairman made his report (see annex 1).

COUNCILLORS REPORTS.

Finance. The Chairman presented the 2012/13 accounts, which had been circulated.

The Chairman asked Mrs Pownall to make the Sports and Recreation Report.

Sports and Recreation Report. Mrs Pownall presented the Sports and Recreation Report (see annex 2).

Environment. Mr Farnese presented the Environment Report. Mr Farnese said that street lighting in Sonning was the responsibility of Sonning Parish Council and two new lights had been installed during 2012/13, one in Charvil Lane and the other in Pound Lane. Lighting was an expensive item each lamp cost between £1500 (basic simple light) and £2000 (the 'victorian' design used in the Conservation Area. SEC had recently painted both new lamps after the intervention of the Chairman.

The Council were also responsible for installing the bollards at the junction of Pound Lane and Liguge Way. Mr Farnese read out a letter from Mrs Green (Head Teacher Sonning C of E Primary School) outlining the dangers created by drivers reversing into pedestrians, including children, from the area, which had now been cordoned off. There had been several near misses, one of which Mr Farnese had witnessed. Mr Farnese said that if the bollards, which could be dismounted if necessary, proved to be a success the Council might consider replacing them with a permanent 'victorian' version more in keeping with the Conservation Area. An initial problem was that parents were parking on Pound Lane, even when the car park was empty, and obstructing residents' access. Parents and children were being encouraged to walk or cycle but the level of traffic on Sonning roads was a concern. If residents had any comments Mr Farnese would be pleased to hear them.

The Wharf was a well used and attractive area owned and maintained by the Parish Council. The footpath had recently been re-laid and extended providing a good surface for walkers and the occasional Thames Water vehicle. The debris under the Willow tree would now be cleared returning the Wharf to its previous excellent condition.

Highways report. In the absence of Mr Evans the Chairman made the Highways report (see annex 3).

The Chairman asked Mrs Hicks to make the Web Site Report.

Web Site Report. Mrs Hicks made the web site report (see annex 4).

The Chairman thanked Mrs Hicks and asked Mr Evans to make the Police and Neighbourhood Watch Report.

Neighbourhood Watch Report. Mr Evans said he would report on two items. Item one was the Neighbourhood Watch. Although there were several groups in the Parish more were required in order to expand the cover to the whole Parish. Benefits of membership included reduced insurance cover and access to information, such as ways of securing homes. Members of Neighbourhood Watch were able to access Thames Valley Alert, which provided up to date information on local crime, and it was possible to feed information into the police intelligence. Information about getting more involved was on the web site.

Mr Evans said that item two was the Community Public Access Defibrillator. The Parish Council were hoping to put a defibrillator in the old telephone box outside the Pearson Hall. BT would pay for the electricity supply for the first seven years, which was the anticipated lifetime of a defibrillator. Defibrillators were being installed all over the country to be used in case of cardiac arrest, it was vital for someone undergoing cardiac arrest to be attended to within five minutes. Information on the nearest defibrillator could be provided to anyone dialling 999 and a code for accessing the defibrillator would be provided. The operator would talk through the procedure with the caller so the procedure was something that anyone could carry out. Mr Evans said that he had received training in the use of a defibrillator and he was grateful to Ms Reeve for all the research she had carried out. The Council hoped to obtain funding from the Sonning Fire Brigade Trust. The cost was £1900 and there was very little maintenance, a nominated person would undertake to carry out a weekly check. The defibrillator at Reading station had been used three times since its installation.

The Chairman thanked Mr Evans and said that the Council were in the process of writing to the Fire Brigade Trust in the hope of obtaining funding for the defibrillator. The telephone kiosk was a grade 11 listed building, so care would need to be taken. The Conservation Officer was keen for the kiosk to be used and the Council hoped the kiosk would also become an information centre. This would provide details of local places of interest etc. Two walks had already been identified for inclusion in the kiosk.

The Chairman said he would present the Planning Report.

Planning. The Chairman presented his Report (see annex 5).

The Chairman asked Cllr Haines to make his report.

## Borough Councillors Report.

Cllr Haines thanked the Chairman and his team who worked so hard on behalf of the community. Having recently shown some Australian visitors around the Parish he was delighted that they had been impressed. The bus shelters, King George's Field and the pond area and the Wharf were excellent examples of the Council's management and Cllr Haines said that he would like to commend the Council to parishioners.

Cllr Haines said that WBC were responsible for so many things it was difficult to talk about all of them but he had decided to speak about affordable housing. There were a number of families in Sonning, which included Warren, which he also represented, who were desperate to find a home. Cllr Haines was aware of one family who were about to move for the fifth time in seven years and the same issues existed across the Borough. In the 1980's many council's sold their council houses off to tenants and very few were built to replace them. Recently WBC had bought 2500 council houses back from the government for £94.5 million, which meant that, in future, it would benefit from all the income from the council houses and, in time, WBC would recover this outlay. A lot of maintenance would need to be carried out and some properties might have to be demolished. Sonning was in a limited development area and not in one of the four SDL's (Strategic Development Locations), which were north Wokingham, south Wokingham, Arborfield garrison and south of the M4. When completed there would be 13000 additional houses in those areas. The peak period of development would be in 2017. The first set of outline plans for 900 houses south of the M4 had just been submitted and the application consisted of a huge number of documents. A significant proportion of the development would be affordable homes, some council housing, some share to buy and some rent to buy. In addition there were independent builders with their own schemes. The demand for affordable housing was high, in a scheme of thirty, share to buy, properties in Woodley there had been eleven applicants for each property. The government were looking for 11% affordable housing but the reality was that the demand was for 20 to 30%. Wokingham were working with a number of developers and Cllr Haines had been impressed with Lifestyle Homes, who had built affordable homes for the disabled. They had built in imaginative details such as kitchen wall cupboards, which could be lowered for wheelchair users.

The Chairman thanked Cllr Haines and said that the proposed development at the Fire Station had been resubmitted showing a reduced plot size. The WBC policy was that S106 payments were applicable on plots over 1.61 hectares. The original plot size was 1.87 hectares but this had been reduced to 1.51 so it no longer attracted the S106 payment saving the developer £150,000. Cllr Haines said that WBC were aware of this but it was not yet clear what they proposed to do.

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

## OPEN FORUM

Mr Trefor Fisher said that Cllr Haines had mentioned development on the Berkshire side of the Bridge, was he aware of anything planned for the Oxfordshire side. Cllr Haines there was nothing planned directly over the boundary but there was the issue of extending the gravel extraction. A lot of development was planned in Didcot and Bicester.

Mr Brooker asked what the criteria was for getting onto the WBC housing list. Cllr Haines said the disabled and those with children were at the top of the list as were key workers. It would also depend how well off the applicant was. Owning another property would rule an applicant out.

Mr Bell asked what was the WBC budget for road repairs. Cllr Haines said road repairs was a problem across the country and pot holes were continuously opening up. The budget was there and it was extended during bad weather. Mr Bell asked if Shepherds Hill was a WBC responsibility and Cllr Haines said it was. BT had carried out work and found a lot more work than had been anticipated. As a motorcyclist he was well aware of how dangerous this road was and there had been a number of complaints. Mr Farnese said that he and the Chairman attended the WBC Major Projects meetings, which all the utilities attended along with WBC highways staff. It was obvious that in some cases one utility company was unaware that another utility company would be working in the same area. There was a need to join up to avoid this as the result was that roads were constantly being dug up. The Chairman had spoken up about this and had been congratulated on attending the meeting as very few Town and Parish Council's were represented at these meetings. Mr Farnese said that the roads in Sonning were outdated. Cllr Haines said that WBC were responsible for 800 miles of roads and there needed to be a method of co-ordinating works, but all services had a right to dig up the road. Network rail had carried out work to the Duffield Road Bridge, which did not require planning permission, and the result was some very ugly metal parapets. A coat of paint would be of benefit but it appeared that Network Rail had coated the parapets and it could not now be painted. Mr Runnalls asked why there was no weight limit on the new bridge and Cllr Haines said the bridge had been raised ready for electrification and the new bridge was sufficient for its needs. There was a lot of concern over the parapets from the Golf Club and residents on the other side of the bridge. WBC had written to 250 household's to explain the situation.

Mr Jeremy Gilmore asked if the SPC Highways working group had any plans for rearranging Sonning roads. The Chairman said that everything was on the back burner. WBC were rethinking their Highways Strategy and there was no point in approaching them until this had been completed. . Cllr Haines said that nothing could be done to one road that adversely affected another road. The Highways WG ideas had not had total support from residents. Any scheme would require a united view. The Chairman said that the Sonning and Sonning Eye Society had proposed widening pavements in the Parish to allow better access for pedestrians but WBC were required to build new pavements to current standards which required pavements to be just under 7ft wide, which could not be achieved. Cllr Haines said that consideration had been given to a variety of things including the introduction of bollards at the top of the High Street and removing all signs etc similar to the Dutch scheme. Unfortunately, with such heavy traffic, most schemes just took traffic from one area and put it in another. The idea of a third bridge had first been mentioned in 1915 and the anticipated cost of a new bridge today was in the region of 80 to 100 million. Other factors would include obtaining SODC's support for the idea. Cllr Haines said that WBC were involved with LEP (Local Enterprise Partnership) a partnership of local council's and businesses. There had been lots of discussion but nothing was moving forward. Mr Runnalls said there had been a rumour that some businesses might pull out of the area if a solution couldn't be found but Cllr Haines was unaware of this.

Mr Brooker said that something should be done about the RBCS students parking in Sonning Lane. The Chairman said that the school was restricted by WBC's refusal to allow additional on site parking. Mr Liddiard said that the parking had narrowed a lot of the road effectively reducing it by one lane and it was understood that the school intended to develop further. Mr Farnese said the intention was to increase the number of students. The Chairman said there was a facility available to the students at £6 per week per vehicle but the uptake was minimal. There was a need to keep pushing WBC and the school, which was in the Conservation Area.

Mr McCulloch asked if SPC had a publication scheme and this was confirmed. Mr McCulloch asked that it be included on the SPC web site and said that the SPC web site had lapsed but had been brought up to date in the latter part of 2012, however the most recent minutes and those from August 2012 were not on the web site. Mrs Hicks apologised and said that they were now

up to date, it had been an oversight on her part, as she had brought the web site up to date since taking over in November 2012. Mr Gilmore was developing the web site to allow additional information to be included.

There being no other questions the Chairman thanked everyone for coming and said that it would be good to have more residents attending Council meetings. Sonning Parish Council worked hard on behalf of residents and planning applications were likely to increase over the summer months.

The meeting closed at 8.45pm.

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

#### **ANNEX 1 CHAIRMANS REPORT MAY 2013**

Your Parish Council's workload is not only undiminished, it increases by the day. Unfortunately, our former Chairman Mark Green resigned due to professional commitments and a brief health problem, fortunately now sorted. Our Highways guru Ken Peters sadly also left after establishing greater community-wide highways awareness. In spite of those departures, you have never had a more totally motivated and highly competent Parish Council. New Councillors are Tracey Hicks, Sid Liddiard and Alex Evans, with more to come bringing us up to full strength.

What would we all do without our Clerk Lesley, what would become of us all, and me particularly.

As you know, we meet regularly on the second Tuesday of every month except August and then only in an emergency. Over the last twelve months we received a total of twenty visitors.

As you know, our work is wide ranging, which you will hear about in greater detail, from financial responsibility for street lighting maintenance and renewals, planning and highways, management and the wellbeing of King George's Field, overseen by our Recreation Group, the playground and alongside Sonning Bridge the Wharf, a place for just sitting by the river and maybe a picnic. And of course the Wharf now has its long overdue restored path created for us by Dave Collier with its refurbished farm style gate, in the care of Sid Liddiard, who was also responsible for installing the seat and artistic frameworks in the bus shelter in Pound Lane opposite the school.

We deal with the awkward problems of oversized hedges narrowing our paths and pavements, broken branches from oversized trucks crossing our bridge plus the ever present problem of litter and its removal.

Twice now our ancient sewer in Thames Street has needed unblocking and pumping out, last time to the tune of 44 thousand gallons. Drain and manhole covers work loose under the wheels of all those cars, the constant clank clank eventually remedied by Wokingham Borough Council. We're working with The Scarecrow Committee as they take on the painstaking task of restoring

the old iron water pump in the High Street, a Grade 2 listed structure no less. Your Parish Council has exciting plans for the decommissioned telephone box as an information kiosk just outside here that it now owns, also Listed Grade 2. More of that later.

This report is intentionally brief as there are others to follow. We appreciate you all being here and trust that the content of this Annual Parish Meeting will meet with your united approval.

#### **ANNEX 2 RECREATION REPORT MAY 2013**

I can't believe that it's been a year since I took over as chair of recreation and environment and I would like to take this opportunity to thank Mark Green for all the work he has put into it.

It has been a steep learning curve.

My thanks also go to David and Stuart Collier for the great work they do in keeping the hedges in such good order, Tim Pascall who gave up his time to help with the mowing last Summer, Sid Liddiard for the numerous jobs he has completed around the recreation ground, Pat Doyle and Tony Farnese for their support and Lesley Bates also for her support, advice and patience to my endless questions!

After the seasonal transition from football to cricket we have once again completed the program of the feed and weed, rolling and tining, a necessary job which enables sports players and other users of King Georges field to be able to play in the best conditions.

The current project which I outlined in the last parish council newsletter is the outside Gym equipment. It's something that the government are encouraging to give people a gentle nudge into fitness and it is an idea that has become very popular, the equipment being found in many recreation grounds.

I was quite surprised to learn that the recommendations from the Dept of Health are that children (5-18) would benefit from moderate to vigorous intensity of physical exercise from 60 minutes to several hours per day to strengthen muscle and bone. For adults (19 yrs and upwards) 150 minutes to two and a half hours is encouraged.

Since the Olympics 2012 there has been an increased interest in becoming fit and healthy, however membership at a gym is not something that is affordable to everyone and not everyone feels comfortable in that environment. Our outdoor fitness area would be free to use for our community as a whole giving everyone the opportunity to improve their health. We feel that this project is needed in order to motivate people.

8 units will be installed consisting of 12 work stations. Resistance is provided by the users own body weight, so it is suitable from age 7 upwards and it will be sited in an easily accessible location.

We believe the project will have an extremely positive effect on both young and old, tackling a number of health issues like fitness, obesity and mental health.

Whilst our recreation ground is well used by several different clubs, this project will add a different dimension and enhance village life by attracting more of the community into this public area. Families can exercise together, parents promoting themselves as good role models to their children and introducing them to a healthier life style.

I am pleased to let you know that I have just received news from The Big Lottery Fund informing us that our application was successful! We are now in a position to arrange for the equipment to be installed this Summer.

#### **ANNEX 3 HIGHWAYS REPORT MAY 2013**

Alongside Planning, the matter of how we plan for and intend to cope with the ever increasing numbers of vehicles in and around and commuting through these narrow streets of ours has been the subject of endless study.

On street parking is unavoidable in the absence of garage or of street space in a village that was never intended to provide those facilities, particularly to households with more than one car. Reading Blue Coat School could do better than narrow Sonning Lane to a single track in the school year. Chaos that ensues when school is out needs sorting by Blue Coat's administrators before there is a bad accident. They are a business that should make proper provision to deal with the traffic it generates.

With Ken's departure our Highways coverage is diminished temporarily but not so our awareness of the constant difficulties that we face and the ever present real threat to pedestrian safety.

We have known for some time that our ancient brick bridge is failing structurally, no small wonder from a use for which it was never designed, forty ton trucks and 32 ton dirt lorries were not invented then.

The Sonning & Sonning Eye Society has produced a draft 'wish list' document outlining what needs to happen to ensure that our system of roadways and paths are put to more environmentally friendly use. Where safe walking and even cycling take precedent over the motor car and white van. This document averts the gaze from just how many more cars can we squeezed through here to the emphasis on how many can be persuaded to go elsewhere.

Realistically, until such measures can be implemented, if at all, we face the unwelcome responsibility of providing one of the three major Thames crossings on this section of the river with consequent negative safety and environmental impacts.

Your Parish Council identified a major pedestrian safety problem for those using the pedestrian pathway on Sonning's brick Bridge over twelve months ago. It devised a lighting system with Scottish & Southern Energy to install sixteen LED light units in the tarmac pathway on the bridge to enable pedestrians to actually see where they are walking in the dark and thus cross the bridge without having to guess where the edge of the pathway is or wait for car headlights or even use torches to illuminate their way.

Reading's Peter Brett & Associates undertook a full Road Safety Audit, their report not only confirmed our existing fears about pedestrian safety when using that path, they highlighted the potential of motorists being unwittingly involved in an accident. The report also criticised the road layout, structure and conditions on the bridge, which are of course unavoidable due to its age and width.

It is essential now for the Parish Council to deal with a known threat to pedestrian safety, not to wait for another winter to pass, to initiate the project. In spite of consistent appeals for private funding, that have met with a measure of success from very generous local donors, this funding route considered feasible at the time has not proved sufficiently successful. In round figures we are short of £8000 from the total required of £13500. For the project to move ahead and enable the Parish Council to comply with its obligation to a duty of care, the Council is considering funding the shortfall until additional donations become available. From an operational standpoint, the project does not involve costly bridge closures. An independent pedestrian traffic light system over-ride will operate while work is in progress. Daily excavations will be backfilled to an even compacted surface to enable the pathway to operate normally until the installation work is completed. Works will then receive a tarmac layer.

This vital project demonstrates our commitment to pedestrian safety just as we have addressed the persistent danger from vehicles driving and parking on the pedestrian area fronting the school in Pound Lane. Bollards not the most elegant of solutions, but one preferable to the death of a child or parent.

As readily identified in the Sonning & Sonning Eye document and our own awareness of traffic intensification, the pedestrian environment must take precedent over the car whenever and wherever possible, this may not always be achievable but at least we can try our very best.

As I'm sure most of you are aware, the Parish council does have its own dedicated website. This was created some 6 or possibly more years ago now and has been a fantastic resource, particularly for those wanting to find out more information about what the parish council has been up to and for checking on agendas and minutes of both Parish Council and Planning meetings without having to leave the comfort of one's armchair!

The website also enables you to find out about the individual councillors and the various working groups that we belong to.

If you are not already aware, there is also a section to the website which focuses on life within the village with more general news of upcoming events, local news items such as what is going on at the nature reserve/Sports clubs and organisations and links to other sites of potential interest.

Another function of the website is to enable you to contact us via the 'Contact the Council' page. Any messages will come through to our lovely clerk, Lesley, who will then forward your message on to the relevant councillor. Similarly, under the 'Highways tab', there is also an online facility for contacting the highways team here on the parish council. This is specifically to report to us any overweight vehicles that you see illegally crossing Sonning Bridge. As this is an ongoing problem, we would encourage as many of you as possible to do this. It's very easy to do, you just need the registration number and description of the vehicle and the time and date of the crossing. A photo snapped on a mobile phone would be even more helpful but is not essential.

For those Facebook users amongst us in the parish, earlier in the year we added a link to Sonning Parish Council's very own Facebook Page. You can get to this by either clicking on the Facebook icon on the homepage or by doing a Facebook search for 'Sonning Parish Council'. By adding our page to your list of 'liked' pages, any posts that we make will automatically appear on your page. Initially we are only using Facebook as a reminder to people about council meeting and events but we are open to suggestions of how else we may use Facebook to connect with the people living in Sonning.

Going forward, we are also hoping to give the website a bit of an overhaul this Summer .With advancements in software technology over the past 6/7 years and the way people use the web we are hoping to re-vamp the Parish Council Website to make it easier for any of us councillors to manage the content, helping to keep it current and up to date. The more up to the minute news and information that we can get up there, the better able we will be to stay connected with you. So all being well by the late autumn, you should see a fresh 'new look site' – watch out for it!

#### **ANNEX 5 PLANNING REPORT MAY 2013**

This process remains one of most emotive and complex disciplines in which your Parish Council operates. It requires a committee of Councillors to meet regularly, not only twice every month but also to undertake site visits, talk to neighbours who might be affected by a potential development, check and write up appraisals, attend and speak as necessary at appeals and occasionally go before Wokingham Borough Council's Planning Committee to fully state our case and convince them that we are right, otherwise we wouldn't be there.

We attend briefings by the Local Authority and undertake excellent training.

Sadly, due to the cuts, those wonderful supplies of tea, coffee, fruit juice, sandwiches, pizza slices, chicken drumsticks, Chinese vegetable rolls and cakes no longer grace those occasions, but we still attend regardless.

During the last twelve months your Planning Committee dealt with sixty two planning applications of varying sizes, eleven less than the previous twelve months, from simple extensions, and by Sonning standards, major development. We recommended eight for refusal,

the local authority agreeing with our views on seven occasions.

A long running series of applications for development that still occupy a great deal of our time are sited at very significant locations in our Conservation Area, 'August Field', alongside Charvil

Lane opposite the Farm, and the former Fire Station site in Pound Lane. An application on ‘August Field’, very enthusiastically supported by Wokingham Borough Council, was refused by their own Planning Committee following a strong case being put by your Parish Council in December 2011 aided by some sly lobbying at the site visit. The appeal against that refusal was dismissed in December 2012, again following our strong and very logical case being put to a lady inspector who chose to listen to what we said.

We have submitted a comprehensive case for refusal of yet another application by Alfred Homes Ltd on the ‘August Field’ site, linked to a request to again go before Wokingham’s Planning Committee should the case officer recommendation be for approval.

The current application to develop the old Fire Station site should rightly be refused when set against Local and National planning policy and particularly crystal clear National and Local Authority Guidance on Road safety. The notion that such safety measures should be flagrantly compromised by Wokingham Borough Council when dealing with traffic from a site in Pound Lane that carries over 7,000 vehicle movements each and every day is a mind boggling course of action that we will confront on due course.

Some of our points of reference are, The Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, the recent National Planning Policy Framework, already in line for “an update”, The General Permitted Development Order, Wokingham Borough Council Core Strategy and Borough Design Guide, Local Plan Saved Policies, of limited life, together with vital National and Local Highways Guidance that focuses on vital measures to ensure pedestrian and road-user safety.

Our own adopted 2004 Sonning Parish Design Statement while attractive and current, is outdated, having been overtaken by actual development trends plus changes in policy and reliance on a Local Plan that no longer exists. A brand new, comprehensive version must logically be set alongside our forthcoming Conservation Area Assessment document to give updated coverage planning guidance for Sonning’s extensive parish outside its relatively small conservation area, an environment where development continues at an alarming pace, a place that includes one of our most important Listed Buildings, saved from obliteration by alert members of this Council.

We take pride in a working relationship with our Local Authority where both parties are fully aware of their positions and objectives. Their working conditions have changed dramatically as they prepare to unleash the massive developments South of the M4, the Strategic Development Locations, the SDLs, traffic from which will surely impact upon us here. The SDL die is cast. We remain fully committed to our job and even look forward to a time when, if we so wish, determine our future via Neighbourhood Development under Localism legislation that came into force in April 2012.

We can create our own Neighbourhood Development Plan, Neighbourhood Development Orders, and Right to Build Orders under initial guidance and support from our Local Authority. I can’t wait.