

BPPC Chairman's Report 2015/16.

This is my third and final report as Chairman of Bentley Pauncefoot Parish Council and I would like to start by saying that it has been a challenging and, at times, rather frustrating experience but an enjoyable and rewarding one nonetheless.

When I took over as Chairman three years ago it soon became clear that the biggest challenge we were going to face was the process of engaging with and commenting on the Bromsgrove District and Redditch Borough Councils Local Plans.

I think it's fair to say that no-one would have anticipated that these plans would include the proposal to construct what amounts to a new town principally in our parish but so it proved to be. The last year saw us make further submissions to Bromsgrove and Redditch's planners pointing out where we felt there were inconsistencies and inadequacies in their proposals and the evidence base that they relied upon to support them.

These comments, as has happened previously, largely fell upon deaf ears however they were restated and reiterated to the Planning Inspector, Mr Hethrington, during his continuing examination of the Plans where they appear to have been given considerably more credence.

As at the time of writing we await his final judgement on the Local Plans but we do know that, whilst he has not dismissed them altogether, he will require Main Modifications to be made if he is to find them to be sound and approve them in full.

Obviously, we remain hopeful that the issue of site selection is one of the issues that he will want to be revisited as this was the principal matter of discussion at the public hearings.

Despite the background of this long, complex and expensive process of consultation the land developer Heyford Developments has prepared and submitted a detailed outline planning application to build the houses. The Parish Council has submitted its view that such an application should not have been made prior to the outcome of the Inspector's deliberations being known not least because this land is covered by the terms of the green belt and should not lose that designation simply because a developer wishes it so.

Clearly, in the absence of an approved Local Plan, we would expect the councils to refuse this application although, given their actions so far, this is by no means certain. I am hopeful/happy to see that our local Councillor Peter Whittaker will be here tonight to provide some insight on this.

I am grateful to the officers of the village action group BAAG who, alongside the Parish Council, have worked tirelessly on this subject over the last year. Together with BAAG I am confident that we have presented the best possible argument against this ill-conceived proposal despite the fact that the scales have not always seemed to be fairly weighted at times.

Planning Applications/Enforcement

During the year we have commented on several planning applications and also raised areas of concern with Bromsgrove planners where serious breaches of planning regulations may have taken place. I am pleased to report that a constructive dialogue has taken place with planning officers and that a commitment to continue this process has been made by all concerned. The process of enforcement can be a long drawn out process but the Parish Council plays a key role in this and this is acknowledged by senior officers in the local planning department.

Roads, ditches and trees.

This year our Parish Lengthsman contract was due for renewal and after a review of service against cost on offer we have appointed a new lengthsman who has already begun work. The new lengthsman will also take on the work of liaising with local and county council services where these are required to carry out repairs or take action on footpaths, finger posts, road surfaces, principal drainage systems etc.

Cllr Boss will expand on this during our main meeting no doubt.

Communications.

The last year has seen a great deal of focus on the need for better broadband speeds in rural areas such as ours. For a village that could hardly be described as "remote" we are blessed with a service level that ranks amongst the worst in the entire country so we were pleased to hear that Central Government intended to introduce legislation to ensure that a proper level, defined as 8mbps or faster, of broadband must be made available to everyone regardless of cost. I am considerably less pleased to read that this commitment is now being back tracked upon only a matter of months after it was made.

The Parish Council believes that a good broadband connection is essential to the viability of our community and that our current level of service is completely unacceptable. We have spent considerable effort in the last year lobbying influential bodies in an attempt to improve matters and will continue to do so.

The council is indebted to local resident Mr Harry Gibbs for both his technical and practical help on this matter.

Newsletter and Bugle.

2015/16 has seen the production of a regular and informative electronic newsletter which has been circulated to the residents of the parish. We have tried to make this both informative and engaging and, I'm pleased to say, this has been very well received and I would like to thank Cllr Roz Bewsher for her work on this.

December 2015 saw the publication of another edition of the annual Bentley Bugle. This combination of parish council and local news, history and amusement seems to get better each year and I thank Cllr Janet Winslow for its production.

Village Hall.

In the Spring of this year the external wooden deck of the Village Hall was in a dangerous condition and has now been replaced with new substructure and slabbing with the assistance of grant aid from Worcester County Council. We are grateful to County Councillor Kit Taylor for his support on this matter and to the Village Hall Committee for managing the project efficiently.

The Parish Council has agreed that its policy is to rotate the position of chairman every three years. This, it was agreed, enables the incoming Chairperson to bring new ideas and new energy to the role as well as the knowledge that in taking the position they are not make an open ended commitment.

For my part I have thoroughly enjoyed my period of office and I am hugely grateful to all my fellow councillors both past and present who have served with me and supported me over the last three years.

I should like however to make special mention of the work of Cllr Janet Winslow on the matter of the housing growth development and Local Plan to whom I am greatly indebted both for her intellect and tenacity in grappling with these highly complex matters.

My considerable thanks also go to our Parish Clerk Anne Dyson for her work in keeping us in order and managing the extensive paper trail that a Parish Council creates. Much of this work goes unseen but it should not go unacknowledged.

So, it has been another busy year for the Parish Council albeit a lot of our energy has been focussed once again in responding to the Housing Growth Development Plan and associated matters.

It is my hope that the coming year will see us able to focus our attention on more parochial matters again such as traffic calming measures and broadband provision.

I have also been encouraged by the fact that the public profile of the council has been greatly enhanced over my term as chairman albeit that this is may be somewhat due to the housing growth issue. Nonetheless I would hope that this trend continues and that all our residents will view the Parish Council as a body that they can participate in. Whether that is using us for advice on planning matters, help with road or traffic problems or just using our communications channel to

publicise an event. We have a great pool of skills and knowledge amongst our residents and it would be marvellous to access some of these talents to improve and enhance our village to the benefit of all.

Finally, I would like to thank all the residents who have taken the time to attend our bi-monthly meetings. It is always a pleasure to welcome visitors to our meetings and to hear their views during public consultation time. I do hope that more residents will come and join us in the years to come and maybe even consider becoming councillors themselves.

Subject to the approval of tonights meeting I would like to welcome Cllr Andy Boss to the chair and I offer him my full support during his term of office.