

# **Berkswell Parish Council**

## **Report of the Chairman for the year April 2013 to March 2014**

### **1. Introduction**

This has been another busy year for the Parish Council, with considerable activity on a wide range of matters affecting life in the Parish. As a small organisation, we are dependent on voluntary work – both by our seven councillors and other local people – and by the commitment of our one part-time member of staff.

We have continued to undertake improvements in our administration throughout the year in order to ensure that the Council performs to the best of its ability and that we have appropriate processes and procedures in place.

Councillors have invested considerable time and energy on community matters resulting in many positive outcomes for residents and visitors to the Parish. Much of our time is absorbed combatting the seemingly endless string of threats to our way and quality of life, but we remain determined to serve the community to the best of our abilities and to ensure that the Council delivers value for tax-payer money, transparently.

### **2. Councillors**

Councillors Richard Lloyd, Graham Lock, Ken Meeson, Kay Howles, and Don Hitchcock served throughout the year providing much-needed consistency. Andrew Burrow resigned in November, and we suffered a huge loss with the death of Sandie Benton in December. Alison Cabbage was co-opted in January as Councillor and is proving to be a valuable member of the Council, and has assumed the role of Responsible Finance Officer as an interim measure. The Chairman was Cllr Lock; Cllr Howles was the vice-chairman.

The Council had a full complement of seven councillors for part of the year, although the recruitment of new would-be Councillors is an on-going priority.

### **3. Staff**

The Clerk to the Council was Mrs Sheila Wyldbore-Smith who retired during the year after 34 years' service. Her replacement is Mrs Sharon Butterworth, who took up her position in January.

To make the Council more accessible to residents "open surgeries" have been organised by the Clerk each week at the Village Stores Tea Room and Balsall Common Library.

### **4. Meetings**

We have increased the number of ordinary meetings to take into account the extraordinary number of significant issues the Parish has been confronted with. In 2012/13 we held five ordinary meetings, in 2013/14 this has increased doubled to ten. The number of extraordinary meetings held has also increase from two to six. Where ever possible planning meetings are held at the same time as ordinary meetings, with additional planning meetings called when required – but this still resulted in an additional six planning meetings. Twenty two meetings in a period of 12 months is an exceptionally high number, but merely reflects the number of issues the Council has had to deal with.

Our annual Parish Assembly was again held "in the round" in May, this time in association with the Berkswell Society AGM. Each meeting enjoyed a great deal of support and participation from over 50 residents. Issues of most concern to residents were HS2, Church Lane Parking, anti-social behaviour in the library car park and litter. A donation of £75 was made to Zoe's Place in return for the refreshments provided by Mrs Smitten.

## **5. Objective**

The objective of the Parish Council is to maintain and improve the amenities and environment of the parish for the benefit of present and future residents.

## **6. Strategy**

Although the Council has the legal power to undertake a wide range of local government functions, many of these are the responsibility of the Borough Council and other agencies. In principle, the Parish Council will fund work in these areas only when it produces a better or faster result than would be provided ordinarily.

However, the Council will cooperate with these agencies and other bodies to ensure local needs and wishes are understood. To do this, the Council relies on representations made by members of the community at its public meetings, by correspondence, or in person.

We have recently adopted a strategy of providing seed funding to community projects to encourage their development, with the objective that they become self-funding once established. The Berkswell Society's Flower Box project is a recent example of success.

## **7. Activities**

### **7.1 Communications**

The Council circulates news during the year via regular contributions to the Bugle community magazine, which is published and distributed to every parish household 4 times a year and via the Parish magazine circulated monthly to many households across the Parish.

The Council's website has now been incorporated into a new pan-Parish [www.berkswell.org](http://www.berkswell.org) collaborative website which is updated regularly and contains news and Council matters such as meeting information, minutes, financial reports, standing orders and regulations.

### **7.2 Heritage**

Maintenance of the Council owned Village Green, the Well, and the Spinney in Berkswell falls to the Council.

Financial assistance was provided to

- Berkswell Museum and its new archive room
- Berkswell Stores
- Balsall Common and Berkswell Football Club (Hornets)
- 2nd Balsall Common Scout Group
- Balsall Common Village Hall
- The Bugle community magazine
- Village Green Christmas lights and tree
- Balsall Common Christmas light
- Flower box project
- Repair of village stocks

### **7.3 Community activities**

The Council continues to fund the Balsall and Berkswell Jubilee Project in Balsall Common.

The Council hosts and funds the annual Parish Barbeque in the grounds of Berkswell Hall.

We learnt that the Museum is under threat of closure, but continue to support the voluntary committee until a final decision is taken about the future of the only museum in Solihull Borough.

The Council responded to Centro's bus service consultation in an attempt to preserve current services.

#### **7.4 Environment**

The operation of Birmingham Airport has an effect on many parts of the Parish. Aircraft over-fly parts of Balsall Common during landing and take-off, and noise during the take-off run can be audible in parish and beyond.

Work at the Airport to extend the runway is now completed. It is not yet clear what permanent impact this will have on the community, but we remain vigilant to ensure that any adverse effect is challenged.

The Council is a member of the Open Spaces Society

HS2 – the Government's High Speed Rail project is continuing to plague the Parish residents with major fears over property blight, noise, construction issues and the very physical effect of dividing the Parish in two, let alone the devastation to the environment and loss of amenity our rural Parish faces.

The Council provides grants to the local action group, HHAG, who maintain contact with hundreds of residents affected by the plans.

The Council has held a number of informal and formal meetings with HS2 and with SMBC, as well as making representations at the SMBC HS2 Working Party meetings to ensure residents' concerns are addressed. Comprehensive responses have been drafted and submitted to HS2 consultations during the year – Compensation, Draft Environmental Statement and Environmental Statement.

In preparation for the Petitioning process the Council agreed to appoint BDB as our Parliamentary Agents in order to ensure we put up the best possible fight for meaningful mitigation. Significant funds have been set aside to fund this activity, and a public meeting was arranged to provide further petitioning support to residents.

Such is the scale of the impact of HS2 I do not propose to reiterate it in this report, as it is well documented elsewhere.

#### **7.5 Highways and Rights of Way**

On the suggestion of a resident a new footpath has been identified between Berkswell and Hampton-in-Arden, named Packhorse Way. Funding has been provided by the Council for the waymarks.

The parking problems in Church Lane led to an unsuccessful enforcement trial by SMBC, leading to parking tickets being issued to residents. Council intervention resulted in an abandonment of the scheme and a reimbursement of fines placed on residents.

The Council joined the Greenway Trust, and continues to work with other parties to ensure a proper access from Berkswell is created.

As a result of some intense activity from Councillors Burrow and Lloyd attractive finger posts at Carol Green have replaced a myriad of unsuitable municipal signs.

#### **7.6 Planning**

Much of the parish is within the Green Belt, and the Council continually presses Solihull Council to ensure adherence to the guidelines for development. Stricter guidelines apply within the now enlarged Berkswell village conservation area.

Cllr Benton was Chair of our planning committee until her sad loss in December. The committee convenes as required to comment with local planning applications. A register of all applications and their outcome is maintained on the Council's website.

Cllr Howles (interim Chair of planning committee) is the lead on our Neighbourhood Development Plan which has not been progressed as rapidly as we had hoped due to the insistence from SMBC that joint plan be developed with Balsall Parish.

Perhaps the most controversial planning issue faced during the year was the proposed redevelopment of the former factory site at Duggins Lane. The Council assisted residents in their fight for sensitive housing development and provided access to professional help to ensure they had as much support as possible.

A second developed proposal emerged for the land adjacent to the Blessed Robert Grissold Church in Meeting House Lane. Due to public outcry this proposal was withdrawn, but we remain on-guard for its possible return.

The development of the Kenilworth Road Service Station into a Sainsbury's created much anxiety for local residents.

### **7.7 Public safety**

The Council continues to support part of the cost of the CCTV system monitoring the centre of Balsall Common.

The Council continues to fund the Speed Visors that remind drivers of the speed limits.

## **8. Risks**

The Council endeavours to mitigate risks arising from its land in Berkswell village by commissioning regular surveys of its trees and carrying out necessary works, and by insurance.

The Council commissioned a Health and Safety Assessment of Parish owned assets such as the Well and War Memorial. The report identified a number of issues which the Council has either implemented or is in the process of implementing them. Perhaps the most serious was the condemning of the play equipment in Pound Close which has had to be removed.

The Council reviewed its Standing Orders, Councillor Code of Conduct, Financial Regulations, IT, Communications and Equipment Policy. A working party was established to investigate potential cost-savings, many of which have been adopted.

Regular training is undertaken to keep Councillors and the Clerk aware of their fiduciary responsibilities.

## **9. Financial review**

The precepted income for 2014/15 has been set at £51,300. This represents a slight increase from 2013/14 of £1,300.

The Council believes that the costs associated with the programme of work described in this report are in line with residents' interests and wishes. Unallocated reserves of £32,000 are seen as adequate, but may be eroded due to the demands of HS2 petitioning costs.

For further details, please refer to the audited Statement of Accounts.

Graham Lock

24 May 2014