

# **Berkswell Parish Council**

## **Report of the Chairman for the year April 2012 to March 2013**

### **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 councillors and other local people – and by the commitment of our one part-time member of staff.

We have undertaken some significant administrative tasks 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 also invested considerable time and energy on community projects 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, Sandra Benton, and Don Hitchcock served throughout the year providing much-needed consistency. Andrew Burrow was co-opted at the Annual meeting and has served a full year as Councillor, proving to be a valuable member of the Council. The Chairman was Cllr Lock; Cllr Howles was the vice-chairman.

The Council has a full complement of seven councillors.

### **3. Staff**

The Clerk to the Council was Mrs Sheila Wyldbore-Smith.

### **4. Meetings**

Ordinary meetings were held in May, July, September, November, and February. Two extraordinary meetings were held in June and January. Planning meetings are now held at the same time as ordinary meetings, with additional planning meetings called when required.

Our annual Parish Assembly was held “in the round” in May and enjoyed a great deal of support and participation from residents.

A joint public meeting was held with Balsall Parish to identify areas where the two Councils could work better together. Many residents participated, and the event was regarded a success.

### **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 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 is also 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 Village Green, the Well, and the Spinney in Berkswell falls to the Council.

The Council successfully lobbied for the extension of the Conservation Area, providing funds for a new appraisal two years ago. SMBC adopted these plans this year.

Cllr Burrow contributed to the siting of a new bench on Station Road

Financial assistance was provided to

- Berkswell Museum and its new archive room
- Berkswell Stores
- Balsall Common and Berkswell Football Club (Hornets)
- Balsall Common Village Hall
- The Bugle community magazine
- Jubilee street party celebrations
- Village Green Christmas lights and tree
- Balsall Common Christmas light
- Flower box project

### **7.3 Community activities**

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

The Council hosts an annual Parish Barbeque in the grounds of Berkswell Hall, and pays for the cost of necessary services.

Balsall and Berkswell Hornets Football Club continue to receive an annual grant from the Council to help them meet the costs of a lease from Solihull Council for the field between Lavender Hall Lane and Hallmeadow Road. With Council support and encouragement they have recently successfully negotiated a longer term lease which will enable them to invest in better facilities and to secure their future.

### **7.4 Environment**

The operation of Birmingham International 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 Berkswell Village and beyond.

Work at the Airport to extend the runway is now well advanced. Planning permission for this was granted in 2009, but the changes to aircraft flightpaths weren't sorted out at that time. Aircraft landing from the south will be aiming for the end of the extended runway, so inevitably will be a little lower. The departure routes for aircraft taking off southwards have been more controversial. The Airport Company wanted to eliminate the "Hampton Turn" which directed aircraft away from Balsall Common. After strong representations, it looks as if aircraft will continue to be routed away from Balsall Common. Aircraft coming south, and then heading north, will continue to overfly Berkswell village, but with little change.

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, keeping them up to date with latest developments, compensation matters and dissemination of the very detailed information contained with technical maps and associated documentation.

The Council conducted an exhibition and survey among residents to assess the impact of the scheme on the community. The results demonstrated the severe concerns among residents, which has now been relayed to Solihull Council and HS2 Ltd.

A tunnel has been suggested as a possible means of providing optimum mitigation, although progress on this idea has been slow and the Secretary of State has not indicated his willingness to support the tunnel plans.

## **7.5 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 is Chair of our planning committee which 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 is the lead on our Neighbourhood Development Plan which is being progressed with the assistance of external expert advice.

## **7.6 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. An additional unit will be procured.

Road safety remains a top concern, and the Action Group in Lavender Hall Lane has successfully ensured the creation of a trial "Village Gateway", which are familiar in other areas, but not Solihull. The Council seed-funded feasibility work, Solihull Council provided the balance of funding. A report from SMBC is awaited to assess the effectiveness of the project.

## **7.7 Highways**

The bad weather of 2012 caused many problems for both roads and footpaths, and the Parish Council was active in identifying these to Solihull MBC. Many roads suffered from bad potholes which were repaired, but remain susceptible to further damage.

The Parish Council produced a report in November that detailed a number of long-standing issues. Some of these were due to deterioration or chronic flooding, others due to the obstruction of the lawful right of way by fencing. Some improvements can be reported, but more remains to be done. Walkers will find that more stiles have been replaced with gates, making the paths much easier to use. This last year has also seen the surfacing of the Kenilworth Greenway, eliminating the deep mud which was a serious deterrent. Unfortunately, no progress has been made to link the Greenway through to Berkswell Station, so it remains a dead-end for cyclists and horse-riders. Sustrans is the body responsible for the route, and the Parish Council will continue to encourage them to develop a solution.

There have also been several new gates to replace stiles provided as a result of Parish Councillor interventions along with new improved wooden bridges and the unblocking of paths and ditches.

The Parish Council owns several wooden bus shelters, and undertakes maintenance as necessary.

## **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 has commissioned a Health and Safety Assessment of Parish owned assets such as the Well and War Memorial. A report is due for Council consideration in May.

Financial risks are managed by the auditing and control procedures. The Council commissioned an interim audit of its financial procedures in 2012. The comprehensive report highlighted a number of areas for improvement. A working party has been formed to assist with the implementation of all recommendations.

The Council created and adopted new Standing Orders, Councillor Code of Conduct, Financial Regulations, and an IT, Communications and Equipment Policy

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

## **9. Governance**

Solihull Council commissioned a consultation on a proposed boundary change to Berkswell and neighbouring Balsall Parishes. After a huge expression of public opinion the matter was resolved and no changes to Berkswell Parish were implemented. This unwanted exercise actually helped galvanise the community and we appear stronger as a result, although at the time many residents were deeply troubled by the proposals.

## **10. Financial review**

The precepted income for 2013/14 has been set at £50,000. This represents a slight drop from 2012/13 of £2,000, which is made up by a further contribution from SMBC of £2000 to offset the impact of changes in Government benefits policy. Net income therefore remains the same, although the Council's budget will be under pressure in subsequent years as the level of discretionary SMCB support reduces.

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 £28,000 are seen as adequate.

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

9 May 2013