

Parish Council Chairman's Report – October 2019

It's amazing how quickly a glorious summer can turn into a very wet autumn. I still have many fond memories of the hot dry summer and hope everyone made the most of it as I tried to. It was excellent conditions for mountain biking and I even had the opportunity for a couple swims in the Thames.

While the work on the Traffic and Parking improvements and new Pavilion is continuing, in September and October the Parish Council turned it's attention to some improvements needed around the village in the shorter term.

I had a walk around the village with Oxfordshire County Council OCC Highways department and we are already seeing some results from this visit:

- **Manor Road repairs:** OCC agreed that there are many aspects of Manor Road that need improvement. This is largely due to wear and tear from the lorries visiting the sewage plant at the end of the road, but there are also spots on the pavement that need attention. Work on this has already been announced for October.
- **Fixed Bollard:** The bent bollard on the lower narrows has finally been replaced after several months of being in a state of disrepair.
- **Hardwick Road repairs:** While inspecting the Hardwick Road gas works repairs, we agreed the work was of good quality by the recent OMJ contractor, but identified areas where previous gas road works was in need of repair. While a complete resurfacing would have been preferred, the worst parts of the previous gas works have now been repaired.

Drainage and flooding comes to mind in the current weather.

- **Drains Czar:** Maintenance of the drains in the High street and elsewhere in the village is an on-going concern. Drain clearing is the responsibility of OCC, but they often need prodding and the process for raising a concern to them is via the Fix My Street website. While some in the village have worked to chase OCC in the past, the Village Plan identified the need for someone to be the focal point for this and take responsibility on an on-going basis. A Drainage Czar, as it were. I am pleased to say that Warren Beard has agreed to take on that role. He is just getting started so I am sure he will have more to share soon.
- **Clearing Whitchurch Hill drainage:** We also identified the need for the drainage ditches, or offlets as OCC calls them, on the verges leading up Whitchurch Hill to be cleared. With the heavy rains, we believe that this is a cause of debris runoff down into the High Street. OCC has committed to clearing these for us by the end of October.

Other improvements that are planned:

- **Repainting Telephone Booth:** The PC approved use of a local contractor to repaint the telephone booth that housed the defibrillator on the high street and remove the old storage box that is no longer in use.
- **Increased Weedkilling:** We agreed to increase the frequency of weedkilling in the village from once a year to 4 times a year. The area of weed killing will also be increased from just the High Street to also include Manor Road and Swanston Field. Cllr Steward is leading this effort and assures us that poison will not be used, instead it will be a form of strong vinegar.
- **New Village Green Benches** - Cllr Steward is also leading the effort to replace the three benches on the Village Green with a much sturdier design. As you may be

aware, two of the benches were recently badly damaged from vandalism. In retrospect, the design of the previous benches installed on the Village Green was probably not robust enough for an outdoor public space. Jon is reviewing two design options for the new benches with key stakeholders in the village. Please feel free to contact him if you have any thoughts on the new bench design.

- **Manor Road Salt Bin:** We have ordered the replacement of a damaged Salt Bin on Manor Road and changed its location as the damage also appears to have been caused by lorries from the sewage plant.
- **Manor Road Pillar:** I would like to apologise for the delay in getting the damage to the pillar repaired on the corner of Manor Road. This was damaged by a lorry rental firm in April, and due to the specialist nature of the material, it has taken the contractor some time to plan the repair. They say they have the material now and I am personally chasing this.

Village Hall Roof Maintenance: Work on the Village Hall improvements continues, and I am pleased to say the much needed maintenance of the roof was recently completed thanks to efforts by the Village Hall Team.

Village Green Vandalism: We are all concerned about the recent spate of vandalism in the area of the Village Green. We are looking into a number of options to address it, including a revitalised Neighbourhood Watch programme where we could ensure that someone visits the area on a nightly basis which is when the damage seems to happen. Your thoughts on the matter would be appreciated.

Green Team: I am pleased to introduce Alexa Duckworth-Briggs who is leading the new Green Team. She is working to coordinate and communicate some of the good work that is already happening with volunteers from WOTHabs and MOWS and others in the village. MOWS will now merge into Green Team. Alexa is also working to improve documentation of maintenance policies and ownership responsibility for each of the open spaces in the village. A key principle for village maintenance is in looking after what we have, but the Green Team will also support improvements for new Open Spaces if requested. One new area they are involved in is development of the Polish Church Memorial Gardens behind Manor Road. There is a short article with contact details and dates for upcoming working parties later in the Bulletin. I hope you will consider participating. It can be a rewarding experience!

The following two significant planning applications have been a priority for the Parish Council in recent months:

- **Eastfield House** – Ross Healthcare’s appeal of SODC’s refusal of their planning application has been dismissed by an Inspectorate for the Secretary of State. This is good news for the village as it means their proposal to demolish Eastfield House should now be at an end. They still have the option of proceeding with their earlier permission, granted under appeal in May 2016, to demolish the building except for the retained front façade and create a 45 bed care home. However, we can’t predict their next move as they had since said that this plan was not viable. Unfortunately, we are still some way off securing a sustainable future for Eastfield House, but it looks like all the efforts of so many in the village to stop its demolition have succeeded.
- **Coombe Park Fence** – The Parish Council objected to several aspects of a second planning application of a new security fence for Coombe Park estate. This application concerned an area running from its entrance on Manor Road, behind the Village Hall and behind some residences on Manor Road. Our key request was that

the owners consider use of a wooden style fence that is more sympathetic to the local residential area and AONB instead of the metal industrial style fence in the proposal. This feedback following a walkthrough with SODC and Coombe Park planning representatives that Cllr Steward and I participated in along with several local residents. This application is separate from the other application for the fencing on Hartslock Bridleway that is still under discussion between the SODC Planning team and representatives from Coombe Park.

I would like to note that we are still in search of a replacement Clerk for the Parish Council. There is an advertisement later in the Bulletin and on the web-site. I would be pleased to hear from you if you feel this is a role you would be interested in or know if someone would be.

Cllr Keith Brooks and Dave Bowen have recently resigned from the Council. I would like to thank them for all their work for the village as councillors. Dave has been a councillor for over 4 years, and Keith over 10 years, including 3 years as Chairman. I am grateful that Keith plans to continue his work for the community through activities such as the Village Hall Committee and Green Team.

We are always looking for new Parish Councillors so please feel free to contact me at any time if this is something you may be interested in. We need people with a variety of skills and viewpoints on the Council. There is no specific experience needed to qualify other than an interest in the well-being of the community and a willingness to get involved.

Jim Donahue
Chairman
Whitchurch-on-Thames Parish Council