

Princethorpe Parish Council – AGM 11 May 2017

Chairman's report

Last year I reported at some length on the changes in procedures and workings of the Council following the election of a broadly new Council in May 2015. Those procedures are now firmly in place. There are three headline areas on which I would like to report and note ongoing priorities: (i) flooding; (ii) traffic; (iii) finance, future and infrastructure.

1. flooding

(a) Flood risk assessment was one of the areas on which we judged Rugby Borough Council's Local Plan as 'unsound' in our consultation response submitted November 2016. The Local Plan, which provides for up to 12,000 new homes in the Borough, includes provision for a development of approx. 70 new houses in Stretton. The Local Plan documentation includes assessment of surface water flood risk in Stretton but does not address the watercourse flood risk to Princethorpe that is consequent upon such surface water flooding.

(b) We now have agreement with County that they notify the Council prior to maintenance inspection visits on the condition of brook so that we can be represented during such visits. Representatives from County Flood Risk office and County Highways visited the village on 12 April 2017 to walk the brook and assess maintenance issues. This visit enabled more detailed discussion of point (a) and we were assured that with regard to surface water flood risk, County requires developers (with developments of 10 or more houses) to ensure that surface water run-off from the development does not exceed the flow prior to development. This requires developers to construct holding ponds and/or tanks to manage surface water flows.

(c) Discussions during the April '17 inspection visit also revealed that County officers are in the process of preparing some modelling data of flood risk within Princethorpe and offered to share these models with the Council in due course.

2 traffic

(a) The Council commissioned a further traffic data survey in November 2016 to follow up from the one commissioned during the same week in 2015. Headlines from that data include: numbers of large HGVs (>11.5m) on the B4453 have increased by 13.5%; vehicle flow through the B4453/Fosse Way/A423 junction at peaks hours during the week are slightly up on last year and 3,500 vehicles between 07.00-09.00 on weekdays; three routes within the village have speed data showing 85% of vehicles at average speed of 'speed limit + 10% + 2' mph (i.e. in 35 mph or more in a 30mph zone, 46mph or more in a 40mph zones, etc...). These routes are, Fosse Way northern approach, A423 and Leamington Road. All these routes therefore satisfy the criteria for deployment of Police mobile camera enforcement vans. All three sites are being inspected by the Police to assess options for deployment.

(b) following training by four villagers on use of a hand-held speed gun, the village will shortly be subject to lay-speed controls jointly run with neighbours

from Stretton. The Council has agreed in principle to jointly purchase a speed gun with Stretton Council to enable more frequent deployments of speed-gun controls and to make it easier to train more volunteers in the use of the gun. At present, Stretton Council are undecided on the purchase.

(c) The Council's response to the County Plan for mineral extraction argued for the need that HGV routes for the proposed extraction sites on the Straight Mile and at Longhall be restricted to the A45. The Council was pleased to note that in the second phase consultation exercise, the routing for HGVs to both sites is now restricted to the A45.

(d) In consultation with our County Councillor, Howard Roberts, the Council has been considering options with regard to the dangerous driving at the bend approaching the village near Hill Top Park where a number of vehicles have left the road by taking the bend too fast. We have agreed with Cllr Roberts to try to get an 'advisory speed limit' sign erected on the approach to that bend.

(e) Pedestrian refuge on the A423. In response to the County's proposal for a pedestrian refuge on the A423 west of the junction with Sheep Dip Lane for young families en route to Our Lady's School, the Council continues to have concerns about the safety of this proposal when the road has a speed limit of 40mph and with 85% of vehicles averaging 50mph or more. Our MP, Jeremy Wright, visited the village on 31st March 2017 to see the proposed siting of the refuge. He supports the Council's concerns re the siting of the proposed refuge. At the site visit, Jeremy Wright asked to inspect the congestion at the B4453/Fosse Way/A423 junction.

(f) B4453/Fosse Way/A423 junction. Traffic volume through the village can only increase, not decrease. The congestion at this junction already generates considerable delays and illegal driving behaviour. An obvious option for managing traffic flows would be to have a roundabout built for this junction. This would also control the speed on the A423 and make the proposed pedestrian refuge a safer option. The Borough Local Plan includes provision for 5,000 new homes on a major development between Cawston and Dunchurch. Much of the commuter traffic from this is likely to head south down the B4453 to our village. A section 106 agreement to get financing for a roundabout from the developers could be our best chance for this improvement. Jeremy Wright gave his support for this option during his visit.

(g) Our second phase consultation on the Borough's Local Plan argued that the plan was 'unsound' for lack of strategy to its traffic management plan that only addressed how the Cawston – Dunchurch development would access the A45. It did not address where the traffic would flow off the A45 heading south. We made the outline case for a §106 agreement for investment in the B4453/Fosse Way/A423 junction.

(h) In response to illegal driving behaviour reported by residents (vehicles avoiding congestion at the B4453/Fosse Way/A423 junction by mounting the curb at High Town to access the A423 via the carpark of the Three Horseshoes, and vehicles travelling the wrong way down Sheep Dip Lane), monitoring of these areas was made a police priority for three months at the Community Forum Meeting in February 2017.

3 finance, future and infrastructure

finance

We increased the Parish precept by 15.9% for 2017/18. This increase enabled us to set a balanced budget for 2017/18 that covers essential expenditure.

Council spending has increased by more than 25% since 2014/15. Prior to 2014/15 the Council's precept had not been raised for many years, but towards the end of that financial year the Council took the step to employ a clerk qualified to, or in training for, the CilCA qualification for council clerks. That has a significant impact on recurrent expenditure, but no measures were put in place to secure the extra income required. The new Council from 2015 made a precept increase for 2016/17 of 6.5% on undertaking our first attempt at detailed financial planning. The increase made for 2017/18 is based on analysis of our first complete financial year (2015/16) with a salaried Clerk and we believe that the recent increase should produce a balanced budget for 2017/18.

No Council can operate in the current climate with the burden of financial and administrative legislation and consequent demands without the support of properly qualified Clerk. The council is, of course, bound by all the normal HR demands on proper employment regarding pay scales, annual review, offer of a pension, registering with HMRC, using the PAYE system, etc. The proportion of our precept that goes to salary costs raises serious questions about the financial viability of a small Parish Council such as ours.

Here are some points to consider:

We currently have no provision for generating reserves

We have asset liabilities that could wipe out our present modest reserves (approx. £10.5k)

If we lost the support grant we receive (£2.5k) for grass cutting, we would have no way of paying for this other than by a 25% increase in precept or by raiding our present reserves (the latter option viable for one or possibly two years).

It is likely that we will lose the grass cutting grant in the near future

The precept contributess approximately £50 p.a. for an average (band D) council tax bill, so although the percentage figures for the latest increase are large, in absolute terms the sums are modest.

A strategic response?

(a) We dissolve the Parish Council and merge with another village?

(b) We try to make some savings?

(c) We raise the tax base of the Council by expanding the village?

The Council has, as yet, taken no view on the above options. Some obvious observations:

The initiatives taken over the last two years on, e.g. traffic and flooding would be difficult to pursue if our voice was absorbed into a wider council in which we would most likely be the smaller part.

The savings option has limited scope, although there is a case for moving to bi-monthly Council meetings that would make some modest savings.

A development of, e.g. 25 houses, would inject new life into the village and produce approximately £1250 additional precept p.a.

the future and infrastructure

Last year, the Council said it was willing to spend some of its reserves to support investment in the environment.

And although money is tight, there is a case for thinking 'big' now, rather than modest. We have recently completed the first asset register for a number of years and there is a case for some minor works to improve the assets we already have – e.g., the benches in the village (the one on the B4453 has recently been repaired), cleaning and painting of the pump by High Town, etc. (Note: Thanks to BR for the bus shelter)

But thinking 'big' would include: thinking about how we might get investment for a village hall. A village hall is a big investment, but it could be manageable.

For example, plans are now afoot for a village 'Fun Day' in September. The sense of community within the village is growing. Thanks to various individual initiatives, we now have a vibrant book group and a history group and we have a group preparing the next Fun Day. With a strong response and support from the whole village, it is conceivable that the Fun Day could aim to generate a surplus that could start a village hall fund. If we increased the Council tax base with housing development, we could plan to put some Council reserves into such a fund. If we had a development we could seek developer contributions to a village hall fund. And if we generated a reasonable proportion of funds from such sources, we might be positioned to apply for grant support for a percentage of costs from WREN Community Action Fund.

Thanks

I would like record thanks to:

my fellow councillors who share the journey of trying to understand the place and options open to a small Parish Council

our clerk, Helen Stewart, for guiding us on the legitimacy of our options and detailed analysis of their implications

our County and Borough Councillors who regularly attend our meetings and have offered invaluable advice, information and assistance with wise counsel on what we are doing.

Michael Luntley
Chair, Princethorpe Parish Council, 11 May 2017