

Eynsham Parish Council

Chairman's report 2016 – 2017

It has been a great pleasure to serve as Chair of the Parish Council for more years than I now care to count, but I think I can say without hesitation that this has been the most challenging year to date. I normally present at this time a summary of the various matters which have been dealt with during the year, but on this occasion I intend to deal with three topics which have impacted not only on the Parish Council but on all residents in the village.

Neighbourhood Plan and Garden Village

Work on the Neighbourhood Plan continued throughout the year, and the final document has now been submitted to West Oxfordshire District Council (WODC) to commence the next stage of the process. I would like to thank the Group who have worked so hard to get us to this stage, particularly, as WODC has at times been less than helpful. Clearly one of the biggest changes during the year has been the dumping of a Garden Village on our doorstep. WODC prepared their Expression Of Interest to central Government without any consultation with the Parish Council or even our locally elected District Councillors. The proposed scheme does not appear to meet the requirements of the Government for a Garden Village and certainly the guidance makes it very clear that there should be local consultation and support. In addition it is now very clear that WODC have made little attempt to understand the area they propose to allocate, and their document dismisses many of the objections which we and others have to this scheme.

Many of you will have attended the Public Meetings we held in November and December. In fact the turnout of between two and three hundred to each gathering shows the level of concern. At the December meeting the Leader of WODC sat on a panel to hear your questions, and despite us chasing on a number of occasions, we are still waiting for the answers. I know that many of you drew your own conclusions about the performance of Mr Mills on the evening, and I thank you for letting me know by email, telephone and stopping me in the street. It has become very clear to us that WODC are prepared to push ahead with the Garden Village and to ignore any residents concerns, and this appears to be confirmed by their total silence since the December meeting.

We will now take our objections to the Local Plan enquiry which will commence later in the year. At the same time we will continue to press WODC for answers to the many questions raised by residents and I would urge you all to continue to raise matters of concern to the Garden Village proposal.

The A40 and Park & Ride

This has been the second major challenge during the past year. Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) proposed that they would like to spend £37m on a scheme to provide a Park & Ride and one way bus lane in the direction of Oxford. The car park will initially have spaces for 500 cars, although they do have land to expand. We raised a number of objections to the scheme, have had a number of meetings with officers from OCC, and have lobbied hard to no effect. OCC had an on-line consultation which was clearly designed to get the result they wanted, and they now appear to be using some of the statistics in a less than honest manner.

In February OCC decided at their Cabinet Meeting to gamble £3.2m of public money on pressing ahead with their plans, despite the fact that their own papers admit that they are at risk of not getting this money back. We have asked, them on a number of occasions, to produce now the Business Case they will need to submit to Central Government to release the £37m. It seems to us that this scheme is so poor that there is a very good chance that these monies will not be forthcoming, and in any event who spends £3.2m without having a sound Business Case.

We still believe that the proposed Park & Ride is in the wrong place, that a one way bus lane will make little or no difference to the traffic flow from Cassington to the Wolvercote roundabout, and in fact the scheme will make matters worse west bound, that the removal of the cycle path on the south will discourage cycling, that with more than 18,000 new homes planned for West Oxfordshire the scheme will be unable to cope even before it is built, and that the scheme is extremely poor value for money.

Again many of you will have formed your own impression of Mr Hudspeth at the meeting in December, but at a time when OCC claim to be short of money is this a good way to spend £37m?

Unitary Authority for Oxfordshire

At this stage the Parish Council have not formed a final view of the proposals that are being promoted by the various parties, but it does appear that both versions are flawed, and agreement is going to be difficult to reach. Across the County it appears that almost £500,000 has now been spent on trying to get support for the various ideas. My comments above will undoubtedly raise concerns about the competence of both WODC and OCC, and it appears that the current battle is almost a turf war between the two groups. The one thing which is very clear, is that neither party, has provided enough facts on which residents can make an informed decision, and this has been confirmed by the latest opinion poll. Again we seem to be facing a debate where both parties are trying to scare us in to supporting their view, and we all know that may well not end well.

Finally

I want to try to end on a positive note. Despite the three matters I have focused on our various committees and voluntary groups have continued to deliver some great benefits to the village. Thanks to Footpaths, Fishponds and Play Areas we have seen continued improvements to facilities during the year, Joan Stonham has continued to work miracles on the Web-site and Eynsham News. So many thanks to all who have contributed during the year.

At this stage I must also record my thanks to our Clerk, Rachel. She will be taking up a new role as Clerk to Kidlington Town Council at the beginning of May, and we have already appointed Katherine Doughty as her replacement. Katherine is currently the Clerk at Minster Lovell and we very much look forward to working with her in the future. We also wish Rachel every success in her new role, and thank her for all her work during her time with us.

Your fantastic support during this difficult year has been appreciated more than ever, the turnout to public meetings has exceeded all expectations. Please keep us advised of your thoughts on the matters raised in this report and anything else which we may be able to help with. If you feel that you have the time and skills to assist further then please drop me an email or give me a call.

Gordon Beach