

PARISH OF MAPLEDURHAM

REPORT OF THE CHAIRMAN OF THE PARISH COUNCIL, 2021/22

May I please submit my twentieth report as Chairman of the Parish Council, covering my twenty-first year in office - there was no Annual Parish Meeting in 2020, mainly because of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, readers of the previous 19 reports will observe that the issues addressed by your Council have not changed much over those 2 decades! Planning and the roads are, I think, still the top issues, although, in a Parish like Mapledurham, the activities of, and relations with, the Mapledurham Estate are of significance. On the latter point, your Council has opened fruitful informal discussions with William Sleeman of Savills, who has a major role with the Estate.

Only 6 planning applications have been considered by the Council over the past year, the most significant being

- the repair of Thatch Cott, Chazey Heath, and the mobile home stationed there;
- the conversion of 3 Chazey Close, Chazey Heath into 2 separate dwellings.

It is good to see that a start has at last been made on the renovation of Thatch Cott, which has been empty, and deteriorating, for many years. The mobile home should disappear from the site upon completion of the works to the cottage, as it only has a temporary planning permission.

Turning to 3 Chazey Close, your Council, supporting the views of many residents, objected to the application. I addressed the District Council's Planning Committee, in opposition to the application, on 27 April. I am pleased to say that, despite the advice of the Planning Officer, which was to approve the application, the Committee decided, after deliberation, to refuse permission for the conversion of the house into 2 dwellings.

The Council has not had to report apparently unauthorised development in the past year, a first for some time. We noted, last summer, that the restoration work to the openings in the "listed" walls at the Old Laundry in Mapledurham village had been undertaken, albeit not to the highest standards. Incidentally, that property, which has been the cause of much discussion at Council meetings over many years, was sold in 2021.

It was, nevertheless, interesting to note that the District Council updated its planning enforcement statement, in the light of the increased incidence of allegations of unauthorised development across south Oxfordshire.

All planning applications are determined within a framework which starts with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), set by Government, and then via the Local Plan, which is adopted locally. As I said last year, the Government seems constantly to tweak the NPPF and expanding the scope of development for which

planning permission is not required - in other words, permitted development. To be honest, these national changes have still yet to have had any impact in the Parish.

Although the South Oxfordshire Local Plan is only a year old, the District Council is already embarked on developing the next version, this time jointly with Vale of the White Horse District Council. You will not have failed to notice that the current Plan is already under pressure, with inspectors allowing appeals against refusals of planning permission for developments. The appeal in respect the Little Sparrows site in Sonning Common is a case in point, where the appellants successfully convinced the inspector that the District Council's plans did not include sufficient housing development potential to meet demand. How this could impact on the Parish remains to be seen, notwithstanding the inclusion of much of the Parish in the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty: those areas not included are, for the most part, used for golf courses presently.

Turning to roads, I have reported on the poor condition of the roads in Parish virtually every year of my tenure of the Chairman's office. I think the County Council, the highways' authority, have been doing a better job of recent years. There is a swifter response to defects reported via their "Fix My Street" on the website - www.oxfordshire.gov.uk -, and I urge you all to continue to report the potholes you see. Reports from the public are now a vital part of the County Council's maintenance programme.

Clearly, the road network is far from perfect, and the nature of the topography in the Parish and the narrowness of some of the carriageways does not help. There are still issues about drainage and flooding. Mud inevitably still gets deposited on the roads after field cultivation. Other debris washes down the hill towards Mapledurham during wet weather. Your Council continues to try to engage with the authorities or the Estate on these matters.

I mentioned last year that the Estate was giving greater attention to highway verges at strategic locations in the Parish and to prominent roadside hedges. This is to be welcomed, I feel.

Traffic management is allied to the condition of the roads. Our neighbours in the Parish of Kidmore End asked, in response to requests of residents, that the County Council reduce the speed limit in Tokers Green from 30mph to 20mph. The Kidmore End Council was prepared to pay for the exercise. Vehicle speed surveys were carried out in Tokers Green, including Rokeby Drive, and the results indicated that a 20mph limit could be installed, without any road modifications.

You will, of course, appreciate that the parish boundary crosses Rokeby Drive just west of the former chapel, the west end being in this Parish. The County Council was not prepared to start the reduced limit at the parish boundary, wanting the whole of Rokeby Drive included. Your Council agreed to this, provided that no cost fell on the Council - we are no way as wealthy as Kidmore End!

So, consultation was held on the whole of Rokeby Drive being included in the 20mph area. The result of consultation was overwhelming support for the reduced limit amongst those who took part. As a result, the order was made, and came in to operation in March this year.

You may have noticed that, following the change in political control at County Hall, the County Council supports the “20 is plenty” campaign, and is fostering 20 mph limits in villages where there is local support for this. I doubt that such a limit will be required in the other “built-up” part of the Parish - Mapledurham village - 20mph is barely achievable down there!

As a result of the consultation about the 20mph limit in Rokeby Drive, a resident of Chazey Heath repeated her request for the speed limit on Reading Road, Chazey Heath (the A4074 road) to be reduced, citing a number of accidents at the junction of Reading Road with Rokeby Drive. We have again asked the County Council to consider the reduction of the speed limit on Reading Road through Chazey Heath.

Your Council is responsible for some of the infrastructure in the Parish, notably the Parish Hall, the Rokeby Recreation Ground, the bus shelters at Chazey Heath and the former telephone kiosk in Mapledurham village.

Dan Miles will report later about the Parish Hall, which, although owned by the Council, is managed by a charity - the Parish Hall Committee.

The former telephone kiosk was repainted last year, and now houses a defibrillator.

The Rokeby Recreation Ground is a very popular, and well used, facility in Chazey Heath, and is much enjoyed by people from Tokers Green. While we have an annual professional inspection, on a day to day or week to week basis local residents keep the premises and the play equipment under review. We replenished the bark in the equipment pits earlier this year. The Kidmore End Council makes a financial contribution towards the upkeep of the Ground, each year, and we have asked them to look at increasing their contribution, going forward. We also get a donation each year from the organisers of the Chiltern Wonderland 50, who use the Ground for their event in September.

The Council has been delighted to support the creation of a community orchard on the southern portion of the Recreation Ground. This part of the Ground cannot be used for formal recreation - there is a restrictive covenant - so the orchard seemed a good use of the land. The project has been led by residents, mostly from Tokers Green. 30 trees were planted last November, paid for by local residents and more are proposed. A bench is also to be installed, again at no cost to the Council or you as Council Tax payers.

On the subject of recreation facilities, all residents of the Parish are beneficiaries of the charity which manages the Mapledurham Playing Fields, off Upper Woodcote Road, Caversham. Prior to the county boundary change in the late 1970s, the Fields were in this Parish.

The Council pays a grant annually towards the upkeep of the Fields, and I serve on the Management Committee for the Fields and the Pavilion. The Pavilion was extensively refurbished last year, but not all users have been impressed by the results!

Your Council monitors the condition of the footpaths and bridleways in the Parish. They are generally in good order, many of them being concrete estate roads.

The estate roads are, of course, used extensively during the Reading Festival, towards the end of August, as the route to car parks and the campsite. The Festival took place in 2021 - the pandemic ruled it out in 2020 - but I have not heard widespread complaints about it.

Although not necessarily related to rights of way, may I, personally and on your behalf, thank Robert Watson of Nuney Green for the excellent and thorough job he does in collecting litter from the roadside verges in the Parish, and beyond.

Finally, your Council's activities are funded from the Council Tax, collected by the District Council. Although the Council kept its precept at £5,455 for the year 2022/23, its share of your bill has gone up to £42.31 for the year. That said, you will see that that is still only 81p per week. In that connection, it is worth pointing out that the average parish or town council tax bill in South Oxfordshire is £104.06 for the year: your bill is less than half of that!

That said, I have to acknowledge that the Council has received a number of donations, during the past year, from companies carrying out filming in the Parish, mostly, of course, in the village. One of your councillors, Lord Thurlow, has been tenacious in securing community benefit donations from the film makers, which donations have, for instance, helped to finance the installation of the defibrillator.

There has been no change of personnel at the Council since my last report. In conclusion, may I take this opportunity to thank my colleague councillors, on your behalf, for their support for the Parish and its communities over the past year? I should also thank our county and district councillors, Kevin Bulmer and Peter Dragonetti, particularly the latter, who has attended all but one of our meetings in the past year.

Jane Bowen
28 April 2022