

ABBOTTS ANN PARISH COUNCIL

Newsletter: February 2008

Sustainability for Ever

An energetic pressure group called Local Works, in partnership with a body known as Unlock Democracy, has announced a great victory. I am sure that you all know about the Local Government Act 2007, which generated tons of paper to choke the in-trays of Town and Parish Clerks nationwide, but aroused about as much interest in the newspapers as a small earthquake in Chile. This Act's main provisions seem to be that Parish Councils could now call themselves something else, like "Neighbourhood" or "Community" Councils (wow!), that new Parish Councils could be set up with minimum hassle in places as small as Enham Alamein or as large as London, and that County Councils could vote to become Unitary Authorities by dismembering the Borough Councils, such as Test Valley, for which we all hold such undying affection and loyalty. Hot on the heels of this Act comes the other one about which Local Works is so excited, namely the Sustainable Communities Act, which they declare is the fruit of five years of their tireless nagging of Government Ministers ending with Phil Woolas MP, who surely needs no introduction.

So what is this all about? Um... It obliges the Government to ask every council to submit suggestions of ways to make communities more sustainable. I quote, unedited, the verbal avalanche addressed by Local Works to its supporters: "The usual meaningless consultation? - wrong!. Your council now has a legal duty to set up citizens' [actually they didn't put in that apostrophe] panels (drawn from all sections of the community - not the usual suspects!) and then try to reach agreement with those panels on suggestions you make and then submit them to the government; and the government has a legal duty to co-operate with local authorities and try to reach agreement on what action it will take on these suggestions. This is the first major reversal in the power structure (whereby all decisions are made in Whitehall) that has ever been enshrined in law. This is the new bottom-up process we fought so hard for, so that policies to create sustainable communities will be driven by you and your fellow-citizens, not by civil servants in Whitehall." Any questions? Oh well, bottoms up anyway.

The Shed

The saga continues. The Planning Committee meeting to decide the future of the Andover Airfield site has once again been postponed, because the developers have not satisfied TVBC on such issues as air, light and noise pollution, but mainly because the works are still jammed by the spanner of the Highway authorities, who are still unable to accept the developers' assurances about the impact of traffic on the A303 and other local roads. With the cancellation of the Stonehenge bypass and the registering of an application for another megashed at Amesbury, it looks as if anyone wishing to head South-west (if they can gain access to the A303 at all), will need to take three days' rations, unless Tesco decides that Basingstoke would have been a better location anyway.

What's in a name?

The developers of the old "out of Town" café have won their fight to have the site named "Danebury Mews". Much as they had wished to back up the Parish Council's view that (a) it is not a mews and (b) it is nowhere near Danebury, the Street Naming and Numbering Office of TVBC unfortunately failed to inform the developers of their objection *in writing* within the statutory six weeks. So the developers have obtained the right to the name by default. The letter of apology from the Office of the Chief Executive of TVBC emphasises that the Borough Council "sets great store by the views of Parish Councils in such matters as they have the relevant local knowledge, intelligence and sensitivity." It is nice of them to say so, but "some you lose" is little consolation.

ODPM - the last word?

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister softly and silently vanished away because it coincided with the far from silent departure of Mr. Blair to step, according to some, into the shoes of George Washington and usher in the mind-boggling dream of a United States of Europe. Local authorities have, however, noticed a diminution in the flood of gobbley-gook arriving from ODPM, and the drain on the exchequer will certainly not be missed by the Treasury, which has disclosed that between 2002 and 2006 the ODPM spent a total of £12,121,559 on travel *in Britain*. We know that Jaguars have quite a high petrol consumption, but this money would take two of them to Mars and back several times.

FEBRUARY PARISH COUNCIL MEETING

Congratulations

The meeting opened on a happy note, when a motion was proposed and passed unanimously to congratulate the Chairman on his plan to abandon the bachelor life.

Apologies...

Our Borough Councillors sent their apologies, because this meeting clashed with a rather larger one at John Hanson School where the “STOP Alliance” was keeping up the momentum of its resistance to the Tesco Megashed. Our Councillors must have found this a rather frustrating experience, because the current Code of Conduct effectively prevents them from voicing their opinions on an issue before it is officially debated at a Borough Council meeting. So whatever their opinion may be, and indeed however easy it may be to guess what they think, they have to bite their tongues or risk being debarred from contributing to a vital debate under the dreaded terms of “prejudice”. How this is supposed to enhance democratic freedoms is a puzzlement.

Planning

As always, planning matters take up a good deal of Councillors’ time, not only at meetings, but also at home, as the paperwork of all local planning applications is circulated beforehand. Government-sponsored pressure to get everything distributed electronically is relentless, but there are still lots of Parishes, Councillors and even Clerks whose access to, or affection for, the world of computers is limited or non-existent. There is also the problem that reducing architects’ plans to the size of an A4 page makes rather a nonsense of the word “scrutiny”

This time, as the Planning summary shows, Councillors had to discuss no less than nine applications and eight decisions. They were happy to raise no objection to most of them, including the request to remove the restriction to agricultural occupancy from the bungalow at the Trout Farm, after a respected local Estate Agent had failed to find a buyer. So trout-farming counts as agriculture. It will be interesting to see how many more weeks of nagging it will take to get the brown sign removed from the roadside, counting from mid-February.

A request to extend Water Cottage was debated at length, because this one represented a compromise solution to Test Valley Planners’ refusal of two previous applications, to both of which the Council had raised no objection. However, despite their sympathy with the applicant’s aims, Councillors considered that the compromise did not really work, especially in the context of a listed building in the Conservation Area. It is understood that an Appeal is under way against TVBC’s earlier refusal.

On the subject of Appeals, it was noted with some satisfaction for Councillors, though obviously not for the applicant, that the Inspector had dismissed the Appeal against the refusal to allow the existing dwelling at 9 Farm Road to be replaced by something considerably grander; her report echoed, almost word for word, the Council’s grounds for objecting to the plan. Some you win...

A free copy of a 145-page document, priced at £10, had thumped on the Clerk's doormat, with the appealing title "Test Valley: Core Strategy - Preferred Development Options" with a distribution list of some 200 interested parties, alphabetically, as it happens, from Age Concern to Youth Clubs. Other bodies to be consulted, apart from all Test Valley Parish Councils, include, to name only a few, British Wind Energy Association, Butterfly Conservation, Campaign for Real Ale Ltd., Empty Homes Agency, Gypsy and Traveller Law Reform Coalition, Hampshire Biodiversity Information Centre, Herpetological Conservation Trust, HM Prison Service, Rural Deans of Andover and Romsey - and these come only from the first two pages of four, which also include CABE, CPRE, CAH, CLE, DEFRA, DCLG, DfES, E.ON UK plc, EA, GOSE, GOSW, OUTC&A. Not wanting to be left out, the Councillors asked for the massive document to be circulated, together with the consultation response form, which demands a separate copy for each specific issue. The Clerk suspects that responses are likely to be more or less polite renderings of "Phew!"

Play Equipment

The swings, slides and skate park have to be inspected annually by experts to ensure their safety standards are maintained. The Clerk reported that this year they seemed to be rather obsessed with "trip hazards"; these can be mitigated either by their removal or by making them so conspicuous that only Johnny Head-in-Air would fall over them, in which case it would be his fault and not the Parish Council's. Two particular problem areas were picked out: (1) the perimeter of the Skate Park, where the kerb around the tarmac is a little higher than the surrounding grass, and (2) the exposed root of a tree behind the War Memorial Hall. The second remedy was recommended, so do not be surprised to find the skate park kerb and the offending tree-root painted in a "vibrant contrasting colour, such as bright orange."

Litter

A boring subject, I know, but a recurring problem. Cllr Stallard had kept his promise made at last month's meeting to try to find out if or when TVBC carried out its responsibilities regarding clearing of litter from roadsides. After a baffling interchange of emails with various members of the Borough's staff, he was told that the Abbotts Ann area is "done" on Tuesdays. But no-one on the Council could recollect ever seeing a litter-clearing team operating on a Tuesday or, low be it spoken, on any other day of any week. They would be delighted to hear from any parishioner who has observed this phenomenon.

The Council plans to revive the Village Clean-up Day, which will be March 15th. The appearance of a small army of volunteers would be much appreciated.

Footpaths and Highways

Short Path.

The Council had been asked to see whether the surface of Short Path, leading to Church Path from Church Road (shouldn't that be Manor Road?), could be improved. The Clerk will start nagging.

Dunkirt Lane.

Complaints about the sea of mud at the far end of Dunkirt Lane have not gone unnoticed. The mess was caused by several lorry-loads of slurry, from an unmentionable source, being imported onto a field. The contractors had tried to reduce the amount of damage by laying down metal tracks; these did succeed in preventing the rather literal bogging-down of lorries, but necessitated the parking of a caravan to house a watchman to keep an eye out for scrap-metal merchants who might take a fancy to the metal tracks. Anyway, the farmer has promised that all will be made good, so perhaps it should be treated as part of an everyday story of country folk.

Street Lighting.

One day, or rather night, we will have all four lamp-posts working on Church Path. The County Council has had three goes at making the dud one work, but now say that it needs a whole new lantern costing an arm and a leg. Gone are the days when Mr. Paravicini kept the old lights going with a ladder and a screwdriver. But that was when people took responsibility for their own health and safety.

Speed.

While on the subject of safety, inspired by the demonstration at Longparish, the Council has come to share the Chairman's enthusiasm for the idea of obtaining our own Vehicle-operated Speed Indicating Device which could be planted at different locations around the village. As well as flashing up your speed, it can count cars and register their speeds; an expensive version can even read number-plates. Watch various spaces.

Parking.

We regret that the Parish Council has no legal powers to enforce parking regulations, but it can draw attention to Section 244 of the Highway Code (Road Traffic Act 1988 amended 1998) which forbids parking on pavements in such a way as to obstruct the free movement of pedestrians, and their dogs, and their buggies. The Code also prohibits parking on the roadway in such a way as to obstruct vehicular traffic, even in the absence of yellow lines. There are places in the village where it is difficult, if not impossible, for a driver to obey both these rules at the same time, except, just possibly, by observing the rule of consideration and common sense rather than the rule of law, and parking in such a way as to leave room on one side for pedestrians, and their dogs, and their buggies, and on the other side for the odd passing car. For anything outrageous, it would be appreciated if parishioners would contact the police themselves.

Vacancy for a Councillor

The statutory notices have not produced a demand, or candidates, for an election to fill the vacancy, so the Council is legally obliged to co-opt a new member without undue delay. If any elector is keen, or just willing to have an arm twisted, he or she is urgently requested to contact the Chairman or the Clerk before the next meeting.

Minutes and Future Meetings

Full Minutes are available in the Village Shop, on the Website and from the Clerk.

The next Parish Council meeting will be on 6th March and the Parish Assembly will be on 15th March; this provides an opportunity to listen to the Clerk explaining how wisely the Council has spent your money and to hear from, speak to, or even heckle your Chairman, your local Councillors and those noble souls who run village organisations. All residents are welcome.

Adrian Stokes, Clerk