

THE CLERK'S COLUMN

January 2011

Localism.

We have to keep a straight face when referring to Mr. Eric Pickles, because, as Secretary for Communities and Local Government, he is now one of the Powers that Be. He is charged with the implementation of the Government's "Big Society" decentralising agenda at the level of the "grass-roots", a corny old phrase meaning us. So just before Christmas he unwrapped the mighty Localism Bill, trumpeting it as *a groundbreaking shift in power, overturning decades of central government control*. And incidentally introducing a new buzz-word. The full text of the Bill is 35 pages long, but he has kindly supplied it in what Whitehall calls a "nutshell". It's quite a meal for a squirrel at 2,500 words, but its main idea seems to be to give local people and their Councils rather a lot more to do if they, or their communities, want to do it.

For instance the Bill provides a sort of answer to the question "What is meant by the *General Power of Competence?*" which has baffled many a Clerk for years. The nutshell defines it as *providing local authorities with all the same powers that an individual has, which will enable them to do anything apart from that which is specifically prohibited*. Wow! Helpfully listed are examples of the sort of things that won't be prohibited any more, such as developing property, running new services, owning assets and even setting up banks. Perhaps it will lead to councils being more relaxed about going ahead with bright ideas, like this from Leicestershire, where a parish has found a use for its de-commissioned telephone box by installing a cPAD; you would never guess that this stands for a community Public Access Defibrillator.

Large chunks of the Bill concern planning and housing, with decision-making devolved to those directly affected. This involves the abolition of the faceless regional boards which could impose thousands of new houses on neighbourhoods whether they wanted new neighbours or not. Incidentally, Mr Grant Shapps, who turns out to be Mr. Pickles's No 2, has added his pennyworth on neighbours by announcing measures for the easier removal of the "Neighbours from Hell" who provide so much colourful copy for the Press.

Talking of abolition, there are lots of other major annoyances that are set to disappear. The Standards Board is axed, after it turned out to be over-used by people with grudges bringing "petty and vexatious complaints" about Councillors. Now it is hoped that only serious misdemeanours by Councillors will be dealt with, and this will happen in courts of law. Also abolished will be the right for councils to charge "bin taxes", because it is reckoned that refuse collection is already paid for by Council Tax. A victory for common sense will be the removal of the "pre-determination" rules which prevented Councillors from expressing views or voting on issues because of alleged bias. This had led to ridiculous situations: councillors who had been elected on the basis of dealing with a particular issue, such as opposition to a wind-farm, were barred from speaking or voting on the matter, thus depriving their electorate of a voice. Attempts were even made to bar councillors from discussing car parks if they had a car, or phone masts if they owned a mobile phone.

An innovation, among dozens more, is that apparently people will be able to instigate referendums (shouldn't that be *referenda*?) on local issues, including imposing a veto on excessive council tax rises. I wonder if they have thought of the fact that referenda are expensive, so there might have to be a Council tax rise anyway. Still, on the whole it looks like a fair stab at a Common Sense Act.

Bun-fight? Here's an idea for celebrating the Royal Wedding. Do you remember
George the Third said with a smile
1760 yards in a mile?

Since the accession of that rather eccentric monarch, the burghers of Abingdon have been celebrating royal occasions in an equally eccentric way, by throwing buns from

the old County Hall roof. If they can get past the H & S rules, someone will have to provide 4,000 buns in time for Kate to become Princess Catherine. I'm sure our award-winning Village Shop could oblige.

PARISH COUNCIL MEETING; 6TH January 2011

The Parish Council greatly appreciates the attendance of our County Councillor, Andrew Gibson, and our Borough Councillors, Graham Stallard and Maureen Flood, at so many of our monthly meetings. Of particular value are the chances to exchange information and the tasks they willingly undertake for our benefit. All three were present this time, though after a while Cllr Gibson had to hurry off to cheer up the Councillors of Barton Stacey.

Bins.

Five grit bins appeared just in time for the snow and ice. Actually we had asked for seven, and of the five, we found only one in the place we had suggested. We were puzzled, for instance, that the bins at Abbotts Hill and Hillside were not at the top, but near the bottom, of the hills, until it was explained that it was rather like someone who had lost his spectacles and couldn't see to look for them until he had found them – i.e. until the slope was gritted, the lorry couldn't get to the top. Cllr Gibson promised to see if three more bins could be supplied, at Bulbery, West Hill and Abbotts Close. All residents were asked to understand that the grit is intended for use **only on public roads and paths.** It may even be an offence in law to use it on private driveways.

Street Lights.

This Council operates a policy of minimal street lighting; we only own six lamp-posts. But there are two of these luminaries that no-one seems to own, so if a bulb goes phut it's a problem, and who pays for the electricity is an enigma. These are in the part of our Parish which village residents tend to forget way down in Floral Way, where residents may also forget that they belong to Abbotts Ann until they apply for planning permission to put up a conservatory. Luckily this area is in the Anna Ward of Test Valley, so we were able to look meaningfully at Cllr Stallard, who volunteered to seek a solution.

Pot Holes again.

We were assured that the County is doing its best to deal with the eruption of pot-holes caused by the weather. It is important that these are reported as soon as they appear, and the procedure is very simple if you open up the HCC website (www.hants.gov.uk/road problems) and click on the picture of a particularly ugly pot-hole. Human nature being what it is, the more reports that are received the more likely the hole is to get mended quickly. So please don't just eave it to the Clerk.

Planning.

An indication of the ageing of the population is the prosperity of Stannah Ltd, makers of stair-lifts. They have plans for a pretty big development on the old airfield site, and Dr. John Moon had condensed their 2-inch thick dossier into one A4 sheet for us. The plans include a tower which they apparently need for testing their lifts. Councillors thought this might represent quite a dominant visual intrusion on the surrounding landscape, and suggested that at least a couple of storeys could be put into a hole in the ground. Dr. Moon did not think that this development would make traffic problems any worse.

Much closer to home is the proposed development of the site of the old village school, and the Council was disappointed, to put it mildly, that the Diocese of Winchester had turned Nelson's telescope to our view that this would be a golden opportunity to provide some low-cost housing in the centre of the village. Unfortunately objections have to be based on planning grounds according to the rules, and the Council was left with what only felt like a handful of niggles. We had pointed out the fact that the old toilet block was built out of flints taken from the Roman villa on Abbotts Ann Down; fortunately the applicants were not proposing to demolish this odd piece of historical heritage. Our objection, therefore, could only refer to the lack of detail about materials, concern for the preservation of the yew trees and a reminder that the railings, having been cast by Taskers, should stay put. So the diocesan coffers will, it seems, be nicely topped up by the sale of four quite substantial dwellings allowing for something like nine cars which will have to emerge into Duck Street through the old entrance.

The fact that we don't want what the applicant wants can't currently form the basis of an objection. We hope that the Localism Bill will put this right.

Lots of other things were discussed, as can be found in the Minutes, including the mysteries of the disappearance of the Jubilee Room Clock, the meaning of *Participatory Budgeting*, and the point of repeatedly damaging the gate at the bottom of the footpath from Manor Close to Duck Street.

The next meeting will be on 3rd February.

Adrian Stokes, Clerk