

THE CLERK'S COLUMN

July 2010

Coalition and Communities

The Government seems to be bent on doing less governing, with decentralisation as the name of the game. Their website (try www.programmeforgovernment.hmg.gov.uk) tells us that *it is time for a fundamental shift of power from Westminster to people*. Note, just people, not *the* people. They continue: *We will end the era of top-down government by giving new powers to local councils, communities, neighbourhoods and individuals*. There follow no less than 27 sentences beginning with "We will..." Here are a few:

- ...rapidly abolish Regional Spatial Strategies and return decision-making powers on housing and planning to local councils. [Another quango bites the dust]

- ...maintain the Green Belt and other environmental protections and create a new designation to protect green areas of particular importance to local communities.

- ...promote "Home on the Farm" schemes to encourage farmers to convert existing buildings into affordable housing. [*Affordable* barn conversions?]

- ...freeze Council Tax [not sure yet about the Parish Precept]

- ...abolish the Standards Board regime [i.e. dismantle the Inquisition]

- ...ban conversion of counties into unitary authorities [too late for Wiltshire, but a reprieve for Norfolk, Suffolk and Devon]

- ...stop plans for regionalising the Fire Service [or any other services, we hope]

- ...introduce new powers for local communities to save services and facilities threatened with closure [including red phone boxes?]

- ...provide protection against aggressive bailiffs.

- ...give Councillors the power to vote on large salary packages for unelected officials. [they already vote on the small ones for the likes of Parish Clerks]

- ...abolish the Comprehensive Area Assessment [I don't know either]

- ...give councils a general power of competence.

Words, words, words.

I still don't know what that last item means. Surely competence is a characteristic of people who do a good job; do they need to be given the power to do it? Another "power" that keeps cropping up in Government hand-outs is the "power of well-being"; if this has something to do with being well, why offer it to Parish Councils rather than your friendly local GP? I hope it means that those people who know what they are doing, and are best placed to make the right decisions for their local area, will be allowed to get on with it without having to tick boxes or hit targets.

Do you remember the conversation between Alice and Humpty Dumpty? H.D. simply announced "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less." Well, I don't think Mr. Dumpty works for Hampshire County Council, and I thought I knew that a trigger is part of a gun, a tool is something like a spanner or screwdriver, and both are items of hardware. That is, until the postman delivered an Older Person's Well-being Trigger Tool. Far from being some kind of gadget that had to be kept out of reach of children, it turned out to be a slender leaflet. On the front are three pictures: an elderly lady looking a little anxious, an electric socket with six frayed leads plugged into it and a reassuringly cheerful chap approaching her front door. Helpfully the first item inside was headed "What is it?" Actually it turns out to be something very worth-while. It's *a list of the contact details of a range of agencies and organisations that may be able to assist older people*.

Exercise: Produce an immediately recognisable title, in not more than five words, for *a list of the contact details of a range of agencies and organisations that may be able to assist older people*.

If you want to know more, there is a DVD and free training sessions, which will enable you *to cascade* the training to your colleagues and *signpost* the older person to sources of help. Lewis Carroll would be very much at home in a world where nouns can turn into verbs and hardware into software without anyone falling off a wall.

March of the Lollipops

Is there anyone here who hasn't had a scary experience on the stretch of the Salisbury Road between the Garden Centre and St. John's Cross? If you haven't, then maybe you regard the new lollipop-crowned islands as an urbanising eyesore; if you have been overtaken by some idiot driving too fast on the stripy area, let alone been crashed into from behind while waiting to turn into Foundry Road, you won't mind a bit that they hardly lend enchantment to the view. Admittedly their arrival came as something of a surprise, partly because we have been nagging away for years at Hampshire Highways, particularly about the hazards at St. John's Cross. But thanks to pressure from our County Councillor, Andrew Gibson, backed by the petition organised by Mrs. Forrester, the Highway Safety people suddenly came up with a new idea, and asked if we would like them to install a row of islands, and would it be convenient if they did this by the end of the next week. We said "Yes, please", and I'm afraid you will get no more than a polite acknowledgment if you complain to the Parish Council, because the Councillors are unanimously in favour and traffic discipline already seems to have improved. Nagging will continue, as we would still like to see a lower speed limit and there's at least one more thing we want done about St. John's Cross, namely the moving of the telegraph pole that so effectively blocks the view westwards for people coming from Red Rice, not to mention traffic calming in Duck Street

Highways and Byways (again)

There's more news about roads... Work is going ahead on Hundred Acre Corner, and will probably continue long after the cows have come home. Nothing is going to happen at Red Post Bridge until 17th January 2011, but they should finish the job in about six weeks by pre-fabricating most of it. People from Hampshire Highways have been measuring the roadway at Manor Close to see how much traffic it can take. And we have been asked to issue a reminder that it is illegal to park on the pavement.

Byways and footpaths are still liable to be obstructed by overgrown greenery, so people with boundary hedges are again asked to look at the outside and get out their clippers if necessary, as it is their responsibility rather than that of the Council. Our Footpath Officer (Honorary and unpaid) keeps an eye on the paths, but it isn't his job to clear them. Sadly David Downey has resigned from that post after many years of vigilant service, for which the Council passed a resounding Vote of Thanks. Luckily Paul Kelly has volunteered to take over; long may his boots last.

If you get lost in Hampshire, no doubt you will receive polite and helpful advice. You can't rely on this elsewhere, as found by one walker who asked "Where does this road go?" and received the reply "Don't go nowhere. Stays right 'ere." Another, coming to a fork in the track, asked a passing local "Does it matter which path I take?" "Not to me," he grunted.

Welcome.

Abbotts Ann is determined to do better than that. Cllr Alison Barham has produced an excellent Welcome Pack for newcomers to the Parish and with Cllr Penny Wilkins has already delivered one. The pack contains lots of information about who's who, what's what and where's where in the parish, and aims to help people to settle in quickly and feel welcome. There's no central source of information about new residents. The Electoral Register can help, but it can be months before new names are added. Therefore we must rely mainly on other residents to let us know of new arrivals, so please tell Cllr Barham or any other Councillor, or even the Clerk, about new neighbours.

Planning

The Council's right to be consulted about all planning applications is taken seriously, and the TVBC Planning Service is well aware of Councillors' determination to protect the parish's unique character. An eagle eye is kept on the many aspects of planning, and this time Test Valley's Enforcement Officer was alerted to no less than three possible breaches of regulations: in one, it looked as if builders were adding on an extra bit not in the original plans; in another a farm outbuilding appeared to be in use for accommodating people rather than cows or tractors; another involved a misleading, and possibly unauthorised, roadside notice. Men with surveying instruments have also been seen around the old village school, and we are politely asking the Diocese to keep us informed of their ideas for the future of this site at the heart of the village

Applicants have to show that they have given due consideration to the effect on wildlife of their proposals. In one recent case, building work had to be delayed until the local slow-worms woke up from their hibernation. Another developer had to convince the authorities that a raised roof-line wouldn't obstruct the flight-path of the local bats, and a riverside development involved keeping a look-out for water-voles. After all, though they don't pay Council Tax, these creatures have been local residents at least as long as we have. So eagle-eyed Councillors wanted to know why no-one had ticked the box marked "Otters" on the application form to extend the premises of Andover Garden Machinery, despite some evidence of their presence around the Pill Hill Brook.

Biodiversity

This word continues to buzz and to remind us again that we aren't the only inhabitants of Abbots Ann. Now we hear that the Big Lottery wants to fund projects connected with "bringing local people together to discover, enjoy and protect wildlife in their area" Not sure about protecting rats, rabbits or magpies, which seem to be quite capable of looking after themselves, but there is up to £10,000 on offer, and the Council would welcome any ideas from individuals or groups. So please have a think...

Minutes etc. Everything else that the July meeting dealt with will be in the Minutes eventually, but there will be a gap in this line of columns in August.

Next meeting. There used to be no August meetings, but if we didn't have one nowadays, September's meeting would be a nightmare. So we meet, with a shortened Agenda, on August 5th.

Adrian Stokes, Clerk