

THE CLERK'S COLUMN

JULY 2011

Delegation

I'm not sure whether anyone in the Government knows that there is a single word that seems to cover all the rather hazy thinking and talking about Localism and The Big Society. It's a clunky word which used to be favoured, for instance, by the drafters of Vatican documents until they decided that it wasn't such a good idea after all. It's *subsidiarity*, and it means the principle (says the Oxford Dictionary) that a central authority should only perform those tasks which cannot be performed effectively at a more immediate or local level. We have just received a document from no less a potentate than the Rt. Hon. Greg Clarke MP, Minister of State for Decentralisation, called *A Plain English Guide to the Localism Bill*. It starts as it means to go on, with "We think that power should be exercised at the lowest practical level – close to the people who are affected by decisions, rather than distant from them," which tallies pretty well with the dictionary. So why not call it "delegation"? Well the trouble is that this rather splendid word has got pushed down-market and tends to signify getting someone else to do what you ought to be doing, while sitting back and watching them make a mess of it.

They have made a start by abolishing the regional planning quangos, whereby someone in Guildford could decide how many houses could be dumped on communities anywhere from the Wash to Weymouth, so now it's up to Test Valley, which is a bit nearer home, to decide how many green fields should be built over at Picket Twenty. And in passing (though we never really understood what it meant before) they have given a new meaning to *The General Power of Competence*, changing it from something like *Local Authorities can only do what the Law says they can* to *They can do anything provided they don't break the Law*. This makes quite a difference, and Mr. Clarke hopefully adds that it will give them increased confidence to do creative, innovative things to meet local people's needs.

Among these things we find the right to challenge excessive Council Tax rises, easier ways of running local referendums, the right to buy and manage local amenities threatened with closure or sale into private use (such as village shops, pubs, green spaces or sports facilities) and more say in matters of planning and housing. If you want to read all 24 pages of the document you can download it at www.communities.gov.uk.

Communication

So, since the Parish Council seems to be allowed to do what it likes, it seemed a good idea to find out what the Parish would like it to do. That's why we called the meeting on June 29th to get a Community Consultation started. Gratifyingly 30 people turned up and 19 of them signified their willingness to offer practical help. So come September we will have a good number of volunteers to form a steering committee, hold meetings, help with planning or distributing a questionnaire, and generally putting together a survey showing how you all see the village as it is and as you would like it to be. This will provide a much more solid basis for decision-making than conversations in the pub or the shop. One very useful spin-off will be in the area of fund-raising; we will have the answer to bodies that distribute funds when they ask, as they do, "How do you know that you need/want this?" We have certainly made a better start than the local constabulary in Paulsgrove, who laid on a public meeting to discuss how they could better communicate with local people. They stayed in the hall for two and a half hours, but not a single member of the public turned up for them to communicate with.

Parish Council Meeting, July 7th

County Affairs

We were glad to see our County Councillor, Andrew Gibson, who dropped in on his way to Salisbury (by bicycle). He had to report on the £5million being cut from the Council's budget, involving the loss of 750 jobs, but assured us that front-line services will not be too severely affected. So he found himself bombarded with questions about highways and byways. We ask a lot of him, and greatly appreciate his interest in our local affairs. He finally pedalled off undaunted, loaded with requests to look into things for which the County is responsible, including:

- the reason for closing Monxton Road and the chaos that would follow if this happens before Red Post Bridge is opened
- a request for a grit-bin at the Bulbery bungalows (as if winter is just round the corner)
- an inquiry about dropped kerbs for mobility scooters - not at present such a feature of village life as they are in Andover, where their speed and silence require pedestrians to have eyes in the back of their heads
- the recent three-car accident at St.John's Cross (how many more of these before we get a roundabout there?)
- tarmac for Footpath 5 (Manor Close playing field to Duck Street); gravel for Donkey Path and Pitts Path. You'll find these on the Village Map; the updated version is now ready for the printer, thanks to the highly professional work of David Downey
- the danger for pedestrians on the Salisbury Road beyond the Garden Centre, where, in the frightening absence of a footpath, people are teetering along a narrow, sloping grass verge.
- The Clerk's application for funding for the Village Map, which seems to have got lost in the corridors of The Castle. He indicated that this would be OK, provided the Clerk provided all seven pages of a new application.

The road-repair programme called "Operation Resilience" is still getting extra funding, and the pothole-menders have been told to improve their technique, because so many pot-holes keep re-appearing. With any luck the focus will be more on re-surfacing than on patching. Reminds me of a BMW-owner, living in Hammersmith, who said that these cars were vandalised so often that the initials stood for Break My Window. At least one local owner would change that to Break My Wheel after an encounter with the mother of all pot-holes outside the Church car-park, as would a gentleman from Billericay. He put in a claim for £42 when a wheel of his BMW was damaged by an Essex pot-hole; in return the County Council sent him some 200 pages of documentation rejecting his claim. The *Daily Telegraph* followed this up in their campaign against barmy bureaucracy, but all they got back was an apology. Hampshire would surely do better than that.

Housing

Three representatives of HARAH (Hampshire Alliance for Affordable Housing) came to the meeting, and a very valuable discussion ensued. This tied up neatly with the plans for a survey of local wishes, though perhaps their emphasis is more on local needs. One of the visitors was the Rural Housing Enabler, from CAH (Community Action Hampshire), who explained, encouragingly, that her department would take on most of the donkey-work involved in a Housing Needs Survey. So Councillors were asked to have a look at the literature she provided and to think hard about the possibility of getting the professionals to run such a survey alongside the Community Consultation. As there are 30 applications on TVBC's housing list for our parish, there seems to be little doubt that people want to live here.

Education

One very good reason for people wanting to live here is the existence of the Abbots Ann Nursery School, which recently earned the rare distinction of being declared “outstanding” by Ofsted inspectors. It has come a long way since its foundation by Veronica Stokes and Penny Scriven, who have happy memories of its opening with five pupils in January 1983. And we have just heard that the nursery school in Burghclere Down has also been graded as “outstanding”. There can’t be many parishes with two such excellent starting-points for their children’s education.

Yet another good reason for living in Abbots Ann is, of course, the Primary School, though we’ve just heard some less cheerful news, since its Head Teacher, Mrs. Turnbull, has announced that she will be retiring next year. If you want proof of her outstanding contribution to our Parish, just look around the school now.

Minutes and Meetings.

Though, unusually, there were no planning issues to discuss, there was a lot of other business to deal with which can be found in the Minutes, and the Councillors were not allowed to run out of steam until 9.30 p.m.

Future meetings will start at 6.30 (No Comment). There will be no meeting, or, come to think of it, Clerk’s Column, in August.

For the next meeting we’ve invited our friend Mr. Steven Lugg, Chief Executive of the Hampshire Association of Local Councils, to come to have his well-stocked brain picked for advice on various issues, but particularly on fund-raising for a new pavilion. This meeting will be on July 28th in the (old) Pavilion.

Adrian Stokes, Clerk