

Waltham St Lawrence Parish Council
Chairman's address
Annual Parish Meeting 23rd April 2018

I am delighted to be able to report on the activities of the Waltham St Lawrence Parish Council over the last year, to highlight the major events and ongoing challenges.

This is the third year that this Council has been together and, in this relatively short period of time, there have been some fairly significant local issues to consider which either have had or may have a major impact on this area.

Last year I was very pleased to be able to report that the long term illegal traveller settlement had eventually been moved on although there are still ongoing concerns being addressed about animal welfare and fly tipping together with the general state of the site and lack of remediation.

I commented last year about the proposal to place 20 new homes on the site of Bellman Hanger. A year on this has now been scaled back to a proposal for 18 new homes. Whilst the Parish Council is fully supportive of opportunities for lower cost housing in the Parish it is considered that this site is woefully unsuitable due to the fast and dangerous road running past the entrance to the site as well as the impact on the neighbouring farm. Our Borough Councillors are in a very difficult position in needing to balance political pressures for additional housing with their responsibilities to those that elect them. It is important that, with this pressure, they do not lose sight of their responsibilities to communities and the appropriateness of sites for development.

Which brings me on to the Wokingham Masterplan for a major development which would subsume Ruscombe into Twyford and bring linked up development from Reading to the borders of this Parish. If it gets the go ahead it would completely change the character of this Parish both in being a village within the green belt and in the knock on impact of traffic travelling through the villages. The Parish Council sought input from the community on this issue and I am very pleased to say that the overwhelming opinion was that the Parish Council should make a donation on behalf of the Parish to the collective fighting fund and be involved in challenging the proposal.

On a more positive note, the proposal to establish a Nature Reserve at a 13 acre site along Shurlock Road received approval from the public consultation last year and is now in the process of being formulated in detail prior to being put forward as a planning application. Thanks must go to Councillor Hunt for the time and effort that she put into promoting this opportunity and to Councillor Evans for working with Councillor Hunt to secure the funding for the site. The capital cost will be met by a combination of the Borough Council and s106 development monies due to the Parish. The ongoing maintenance will be the responsibility of the Parish. Suzy Young and Maggi Bevan have put a lot of time and effort into bringing this to where it is today and I hope that the local community make good use of the new facility when it is established.

The knock on impact of the new Nature Reserve and the donation to the Ruscombe fighting fund has been a need to increase the precept to cover the additional costs, estimated at £5,000 in this current year. This is made up of £3,500 for the Nature Reserve and £1,500 for Ruscombe, both of which were flagged when consultations and soundings were sought. On a base precept of only £17,500 per annum this represents a significant percentage increase. Nevertheless the Parish is still at the bottom of the league table of precepts in the Borough. The annual costs of maintaining the Nature Reserve will become clearer when the final specifications have been agreed and the maintenance contract put out to tender. This may result in a need for a further increase next year but the Ruscombe 3 year pledge will hopefully drop away.

In the last year I am also pleased to report that the Local Neighbourhood Plan received approval and has been adopted. Clive Scott Hopkins and John Birkett put several years' worth of time and effort into formulating this, alongside the neighbouring parishes of Hurley and White Waltham, under the Chairmanship of Councillor Hunt.

At Borough Council level there has been an electoral review of the number of Borough Councillors and boundaries. The Borough are looking to reduce the number of Borough Councillors and to equalise the electorate to councillor ratios across the Borough. The expected result is that the Hurley and Walthams constituency will remain unchanged geographically but will reduce from 3 Borough Councillors to 2.

Looking at a more local level, I am pleased to be able to report that you should see a much smarter Pound in the middle of Waltham St Lawrence this summer. The tired structure is being replaced in English Oak by Charlie Belcher and therefore should be in good shape for a few more generations. I am informed that the components have been made and we are just waiting for some drier weather for it to be installed.

We should also shortly be installing a second defibrillator in the villages, the second one to be installed at The Shurlocks. The Parish Council are grateful to the Brownlow Foundation for funding the acquisition of the new defibrillator and I am grateful to Mark Hipgrave for making this happen. Thankfully there has not yet been a call on the WSL defibrillator but they have been proven to save lives and I am keen that we ensure that everybody in the Parish is only a short distance from these lifesavers.

The Parish Council in the last year have adopted the phone box at Milley Bridge after it was decommissioned by BT due to lack of use. Should this be used to house a further defibrillator at the northern end of the Parish or do parishioners have thoughts on alternative uses that could be made of it?

The usual issues affecting the Parish also continued this year with concerns over speeding, pot holes and localised flooding. The Parish Council do not have any powers in these areas but have been applying pressure to the relevant authorities to take action. Mark Hipgrave has been successful in getting manhole covers sealed to seek to prevent raw sewage from overflowing into the roads and to reduce the impact of surface water from overloading the sewage system but there are still concerns that are being raised with Thames Water to protect residents' homes. Suzy Young has also done a tremendous job in liaising with the Borough on the quality of the Parish's roads. Whilst we are all aware of pot holes and areas needing resurfacing, I hope that you will agree with me that our Parish is in much better condition than many other areas of the country. Speeding is difficult to control in a remote country area but the Parish Council continues to apply pressure for effective action to reduce speeds with its last meeting with the Borough and David Evans last month.

When we meet next year for the Annual Parish Meeting it will be only a few days away from local government elections and the formation of a new Parish Council. Last year this Parish had a contested parish election for the first time in many years. It resulted in Councillors who wanted to try to make a difference and, in my opinion, has enabled much more to be done locally to try to improve the Parish. There is still a lot more that can be done and that I would like to see being done. From initial enthusiasm, this Parish Council has worked through the frustrations of bureaucracy and the slow turning wheels, or on occasions inertia, of the Borough and persevered to try to maintain, protect and enhance the Parish in line with Parishioners' wishes. Parish Councillors are unpaid and it can be a thankless task with blame and criticism being easy to give. The powers of a parish council are very limited but there is some influence that can be brought to bear to seek to improve lives within the Parish.

I would encourage you to consider standing for the Parish Council in a year's time. If you would like to know what is involved, please speak to any of the current incumbents. Over the next year we will look to put together a few articles for the Lych Gate to share what is involved and to broaden participation. I would be particularly keen to see more Parish Councillors from Shurlock Row and West End.

Whatever you decide, please look to support and give your time to the local organisations or events such as those that you have heard from at previous Annual Parish Meetings or later in this meeting. It is very easy to sit back and just assume that things happen around you. They don't. People in this Parish work tirelessly to maintain and build this special community life. Please don't just take or criticise, please help make Waltham St Lawrence special.

I must extend my thanks to my fellow Councillors for all their hard work over the last 12 months, to our new Clerk, MJ, who has launched herself into the role with great enthusiasm, and to our Responsible Financial Officer, Serena Bowe.

And my final thanks goes to those within the community who take the time and effort to either attend Parish Council meetings or to share their views and opinions through other means. Please remember that the Parish Council is here to represent the views of the Parish, it is not a straightforward task, but without input and direction we cannot help to lead both the conservation and development of this very special community.