**OAKLEY ANNUAL PARISH MEETING 2021 1.**

Minutes of meeting held virtually on 6th April 2021.

**PRESENT:**

Cllr Phillips (Chair), 8 Parish Councillors, the Clerk to the Parish Council and 1 member of the public.

**1. Apologies:**

Cllrs. Saunders & White

**2. Minutes of Annual Parish Meeting held on 12th May 2020:**

Copies of the minutes of the last meeting had been circulated and there were no matters arising.

**3. Scheme to Improve Biodiversity in Brockwell Meadow**

Following the success of the work to improve biodiversity in Linch Furlong and the Riverside Meadow, Council has agreed to extend the scheme to Brockwell Meadow. The meadow is currently just mown grass with little environmental value and Council would like to turn it into a more environmentally friendly green space. A possible scheme has been prepared and Council was hoping to discuss it with residents last Summer. However, due to Covid this has had to be delayed and we now hope to hold a site meeting this Summer.

The draft scheme includes planting wildflower areas and shrubs or trees, just mowing paths around and through the site and a marshy area. An access will be made to the new Pre-School to encourage the children’s interest in the environment and conservation. Grey water from the new Pre-School roof could also be used for the wet area. Once a scheme is agreed with residents the same specialist contractor, who manages Linch Furlong and Riverside Meadow will manage the site and we hope that we can begin planting in the Autumn.

Chair commented that it was an exciting project which would add another environmental asset to the village.

**4. Impact of Major Infrastructure Schemes – East West Rail (EWR) and Oxford-Cambridge Arc (Ox-Cam Arc)**

Cllr. Sansom made a presentation detailing the issues around the Ox-Cam Arc, EWR and the Borough Local Plan review.

In early 2021 Council had distributed a leaflet to every household to inform residents about these developments. In May 2019, Bedford BC was party to an agreement supporting the Ox-Cam Arc called the Joint Declaration. This would result in the urbanisation of the open countryside between Oxford and Cambridge, the building of 1 million new homes and a population increase of around 1.9 million, which was equivalent 20 cities the size of Cambridge.

EWR finally published details of their preferred route between Bedford and Cambridge in 2020 and the northern Route E was chosen. This was supported by Bedford BC as it could facilitate a new town or towns in North Bedfordshire but their response to the consultation was not published on their website until recently, so residents were largely unaware of their views. Council preferred Route B to the south of Bedford, which would follow the existing transport corridor along the A421 and include a parkway station at Wixams. Route B was preferred by the Wildlife Trust and Routes B and E were equally popular in the EWR consultation.

The Bedford Borough Local Plan 2030 was currently being reviewed and a Call for Sites had been undertaken. The review would incorporate the Ox-Cam Arc proposals and the EWR preferred route and new housing would be in addition to the 500 houses already allocated in each of Bromham, Clapham, Great Barford and Sharnbrook. Cllr. Sansom tabled maps showing the large sites of 6K – 10K homes put forward around Twinwood Business Park and of 4.5K homes around Colworth. Either site would have a severe impact on Oakley because of the additional traffic and the promoters of the Twinwood site had also included a parkway station to the north of Bedford in their proposal.

In response to these issues, Council had invited the Mayor and Mr. Fuller MP to a public meeting and raised our concerns with them. Council had also joined two action groups, BFARe (Bedford for a Re-consultation) and KNBG (Keep North Bedfordshire Green). Both groups had held meetings with Mr. Fuller MP and the Minister for Railways and BFARe had organised a petition to Bedford BC signed by almost 2K residents. Brickhill Parish Council held a special meeting because of the concerns of local residents and subsequently rescinded their support for Route E. An action group to protect the Great Ouse Valley had also recently been formed because of deep concerns about the impact of future development on the river area.

EWR consultation on options for the line within Route would run from 31.03.21. until 09.06.21. Cllrs. Sansom & Olney had attended the briefing on the consultation for which EWR gave only 24 hours’ notice. Council would be responding and would continue to work with pressure groups to protect the local countryside.

Cllr. Sansom confirmed that BFARe and KNBG were working together. Cllr. Fardon asked whether Cllr. Abbott had a conflict of interest as a Bedford Borough Councillor, given that the views of Oakley residents differed from those of Bedford BC. Cllr. Abbott confirmed that he fed back the views of all three of the parishes in his Ward to the Borough Council but personally he supported Route E because of the economic benefits it would bring to the Borough. He would ensure that the Borough was aware of Oakley’s opposition to Route E and would represent the views of all his parishes. He noted that a recording was available of the Full Council meeting 17.03.21. where questions were asked and answered about Route E. He added that a route to the south of Bedford would impact the countryside there, would increase journey times to the station if it was located at Wixams and would affect the RSPB at Sandy. Decisions were being made by the Government and Bedford BC did not exert as much influence as some believed. Cllr. Sansom commented that Route B would not affect the RSPB site. All agreed that it was important that as much information as possible was available to residents.

Chair thanked Cllr. Sansom and commented that it was disappointing that more members of the public had not attended to hear the presentation.

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**5. Communication and Engagement with Residents**

Chair commented that councillors all felt strongly about maintaining good communications with residents. Council had effective means of engaging through agendas and minutes, the Newsletter and the website and Facebook page. Use of online communications was increasing, including recording this meeting and discussion tonight indicated that Council considered it an important issue. The flyer distributed at the beginning of the year was an example of how Council wouldl take additional steps as needed to keep residents informed but Council was open to other ideas for communicating if residents had any suggestions.

**6. Report of the Parish Council:**

1. **Chairman’s Report**

No-one really needs reminding what an unusual 12 months we have had. For the whole year our meetings have taken place virtually and from our experience it has been ‘business as usual’: we follow the same procedures and the public are provided with access details and those who do join us I would like to think are made very welcome.

At this early stage in my report I would like to thank Ann Paice, our Clerk, for her constant hard work dealing with all put before her. My thanks also to fellow Councillors for all they do for Oakley. The time that Councillors commit to Council business should never be underestimated which of course includes day to day business, plus additional demands such as the Neighbourhood Development Plan and our valued Village Directory to name but two. Thanks also to Bill Chalker, our Newsletter Editor who continues to do a sterling job and our litter picker who turns out in all sorts of weather to pick up ‘our’ litter. A number of residents who have volunteered are also worthy of thanks for their contributions such as litter picking, dealing with dumped dog poo bags, filling in tyre marks on grass verges, monitoring vehicle movements and delivery of publications, plus all those other tasks that go unnoticed. We would be in a sorry old state without the help of volunteers and to each and everyone of you thank you very much.

The year seems to have been a busy one with many of the usual subjects arising such as litter bins, play equipment inspections and repairs and highways matters, which include parking matters and the new ‘no verge parking scheme.’ We adopted a Tree Policy and considered crime, police matters and speed watch, which includes the effectiveness of the average speed cameras. From the regular figures we receive it is clear that the cameras are having a positive effect on speed and safety.

In April our Neighbourhood Development Plan became a Statutory Planning Document and in May we marked VE Day appropriately on the 8th and then three months later on 15th August we marked VJ Day, but sadly the weather was not particularly kind to us. In November Remembrance Sunday was respected, but in a much lower key way than normal. A Ceremony took place at the Memorial, with a small and respectful presence.

The Council took the decision, with considerable regret to remove the bottle bank from the rear of the Village Hall and not relocate it. During its time there it had been misused and abused. Its removal was necessary albeit unpopular with some, but very little was said when we publicly asked for help in trying to find an alternative site. Not long after its removal, the Borough Council sited a bottle bank on their land at the entrance to the Stevington Walk in the Parish of Bromham: it will be there for a trial period during which time its use will be monitored.

We are very proud of our open spaces particularly Linch Furlong, The Community Orchard and Riverside Meadow and with the guidance of Patrick Knight a couple of summertime walks took place when Patrick was able to share his vast knowledge. We are very conscious of the need to improve biodiversity and much planning has taken place this year so that later this month we will be sharing ideas with near residents on what can be achieved at Brockwell Meadow.

During a normal year we receive many consultation documents, but this year we seem to have had more and of considerable importance, three of which were the Oxford/Cambridge arc East West Rail route and Bedford Borough Plan 2030 Review. Because of the importance of these matters we felt a need to inform residents with a separate flyer, hoping that residents will familiarise themselves and comment appropriately. Whilst we cannot stand in the way of progress, we have to think about what is right for our village. The Mayor Dave Hodgson and Richard Fuller MP joined us at separate meetings when we were able to discuss these and other matters. Their attendance was well received and we will do the same again as and when the need arises.

The way we communicate with residents is constantly on our minds and we will listen to any ideas on how we can improve our lines of communication to all. Everyone has a right to hear and be heard and we will continue to do our best to bring matters to attention by means of our meeting agendas and minutes, the village web site, The Parish Council Facebook Page, the quarterly

Newsletter and delivery of flyers when required.

One of the last decisions we made was giving approval for the 6 to 8 year old football teams of AFC Oakley to train on the Village Green until the end of June if there are no other facilities available. The football club must inform residents and there must be strict compliance with Covid and parking regulations to minimise disruption to nearby residents.

Thank you for listening and thank you for your support.

1. **Parish Precept 2021/22:**

The precept for this year has been set at £54,700 and the band D rate has increased by 1.9% from £55.68 to £56.73 p.a.

**c) Draft Accounts for 2020/2021:**

In 2020/21 income amounted to £76,430.41 and expenditure to £77,100.33. Income decreased by approximately £59,994.23 largely because Bedford BC paid double the amount of precept of £52,800 in error in 2019/20. VAT receipts decreased by £5,947 because of a reduction in capital expenditure in 2019/20 (£39,166 was spent on new play equipment in 2018/19 and the VAT reclaimed in 2019/20) and Community Infrastructure Levy income reduced from £5,317 in 2019/20 to none in 2020/21. This was offset by an increase of £1,205 in glass recycling receipts as a result of lockdowns during the Covid pandemic and additional allotment income of £1,201 largely because of the Ward Fund grant of £1,125 for work to clear the ditch.

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Expenditure decreased by approximately £67,822 again mostly due to the double payment of the precept of £52,800 by Bedford Borough Council in 2019/20. In addition, there was no spending on the Neighbourhood Plan, now it has been completed, compared to £5,395 in 2019/20, capital expenditure reduced by £8,273 largely due to the cost of the bollards at the Green and Grange Green in 2019/20, the VAT refund due on expenditure in 2020/21 reduced by £3,078 and the cost of grass cutting by £3,961 and the Christmas lights by £2,180 with the appointment of new contractors. This was offset by an increase of £4,245 in the cost of tree works, an additional £1,329 spent on the allotments and an additional £810 spent in Linch Furlong largely on a new information board. Donations totalling £7,000 were made to the Pre-School, the Village Hall, the Youth Club, Autism Bedford, Transitions UK and the RBL for a poppy wreath.

**d) Planning**

During 2020/21 the Parish Council was consulted on and commented on a total of 47 planning and related applications, compared to 49 in 2019/20. Most were for relatively minor works but Council objected to 6 applications on the grounds of impact on neighbours, overdevelopment, impact on the character of the local area and dangerous access. As a general policy Council asked for trees not to be removed unless they could not be saved and, if they had to be felled, for replacements to be planted in their place.

Council objected to the proposals for development on land off Pavenham Road on the grounds that it would not comply with the Borough Local Plan 2030 or the Oakley Neighbourhood Plan as it was outside the Settlement Policy Area and the site was not included in our Neighbourhood Plan. Council was also consulted as a neighbour on the application for 500 houses off Milton Road, Clapham and objected on the grounds that the Borough does not need 500 houses in each of Bromham, Clapham, Great Barford and Sharnbrook.

The Pavenham Road application was refused by the Borough but the applicant has appealed. Council has reiterated their objection and we await the outcome of the appeal. The Clapham application has yet to be decided by the Borough Council. Council has also continued to object to the resin parapets on the Highfield Road bridge as they are completely out of keeping with the surrounding area and again, we are awaiting a decision from the Borough Council.

Last Autumn, the Government consulted on a Planning White Paper which would zone land into Growth, Renewal and Protected areas (with automatic outline permission being given for Growth land), would impose centrally set housing targets, create local plans that would allocate sites but not set local policies and introduce a new National Model Design Code with a fast track for “beauty.” Council was very concerned and had commented that zoning would open all greenfield sites up for development and there would be no protection for the Great Ouse river valley. It would take decision making out of local hands and residents should be involved in decisions on sites and development schemes. The role of Neighbourhood Plans would also be reduced. A standard housing calculation was insufficiently flexible to take account of individual local authority needs and a central design body should not just focus on beauty but also place making and character of the area. Following a backlash from MPs the standard housing calculation has been revised and it was not yet clear what the Planning Bill, due later this year, will contain.

**Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP):**

Cllr. Olney reported that the Plan was “made” on 02.04.21. and was now a statutory planning document. All Oakley planning applications would therefore need to conform to the policies within it. The Parish Council had asked the NDP Group to continue its work to monitor and review the NDP. The Group had also made representations to Bedford BC about the new Local Plan 2040. Bedford BC was currently assessing the land put forward in the Call for Sites but most of the policies in the Local Plan 2030 would be carried forward into the new Plan. The draft Local Plan 2040 would be considered by the June Borough Executive Meeting and was expected to be issued for consultation later that month until September. Bedford BC was also revising their Landscape Character Assessment and it had been suggested that the Ouse Valley, particularly the section between Oakley and Sharnbrook, should be designated as an important nature corridor in the Local Nature Recovery Strategies to be introduced in the Environment Bill. Concerned residents in Stevington had contacted Cllr. Olney and a group had been formed to preserve and enhance the Ouse Valley. An initial meeting had taken place and the Group would be formally constituted and would then contact landowners and parish councils in the area.

No planning applications had yet been put forward for the development sites in Oakley but Council and the NDP Group had asked to be included by Bedford BC at an early stage in discussions about the sites. Both Council and the NDP Group had objected to the application for 20 houses off Pavenham Road. This had been refused by Bedford BC but the applicant had appealed and the appeal had yet to be decided.

The NDP Group would continue to monitor and make representations on planning applications as appropriate, input into the Local Plan 2040 and work to enhance the Ouse Valley. Cllr. Olney thanked the members of the Group for their ongoing efforts and the Clerk for her support. Chair thanked the NDP Group on behalf of Council.

**7. Questions from the Floor:** There were no questions so Chair thanked everyone for attending and closed the meeting.