

## **Turville Parish Annual Meeting**

### **Chairman's Report**

In this report, I will deal with three issues: planning applications; broadband and mobile phones; the council's finances.

#### **Planning applications**

Over the last year, the council has responded to 16 planning applications. In 12 cases, the council had no objections. Wycombe permitted 11 of these 12 applications, refusing only one. The exception was, not surprisingly, an application relating to trees in a garden; the Wycombe tree officers continue to adopt a much more restrictive approach to such applications than they do to other tree applications and planning officers do to other planning applications.

The parish council objected to four planning applications. Wycombe permitted three of these applications, two (Tumblewood in Northend and the Mill House in Turville) after they were referred to the planning committee. The approval of Tumblewood ignored the conservation issues that Wycombe had felt important on a recent application for the adjacent Hollowfield farm. On the Mill House, planning officers played down the importance of the conservation area study for Turville (and the importance of conservation area studies in general). District councillors were dismissive of the needs of the conservation area and the Turville conservation area character study. They argued that 21st century living requires large swimming pool buildings and, therefore, that the plans should be approved.

At first glance, it might also appear that Wycombe approved the fourth application to which the parish council had objected. The truth, however, is very different. Both the parish council and CPRE Oxfordshire objected to the proposed new access to Juniper cottage. As a result, the applicant submitted revised plans which omitted the proposed new access. Wycombe approved the revised plans – not the plans to which the parish council had objected. We should be very grateful that the applicant responded to our and the CPRE's concerns about the AONB. I hope that other applicants will respond in the same way in similar circumstances.

I referred last year to the parish council's concerns about inconsistencies and other flaws in planning decisions made by Wycombe district council. In September 2015, Wycombe's development manager Alastair Nicholson came to the parish council meeting to allay the council's fears but his presentation and Wycombe's subsequent actions give me few grounds for comfort. For example, I remain troubled that Wycombe readily accepts that 21st century living requires a 131m<sup>2</sup> swimming pool building but appears not to accept that 21st century living might require the felling of a large tree that dominates a small cottage garden.

## Broadband and Mobile Phone Reception

The parish council has continued to work with our district councillor, Chris Whitehead, to pursue the provision of superfast broadband in the parish. This has not been easy as both Buckinghamshire County Council (through its Connected Counties project) and BT have been very secretive and evasive about what was and is happening. For example, until the very last minute, Buckinghamshire County Council denied that Ibstone was due to receive superfast broadband via the Turville Heath exchange notwithstanding that it was common knowledge this was the case around Turville and in Ibstone – and, of course, it is now the case that superfast fibre passes Turville Heath exchange on its way up the hill to Ibstone.

Several areas of Oxfordshire receive their telephone service, and hence broadband, via the Turville Heath exchange. There is a remarkable difference between the approaches of Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire. Oxfordshire is open about which areas which will receive superfast broadband via the Turville Heath exchange and BT has recently been laying the fibre necessary to provide this service. In contrast, Buckinghamshire refuses to provide any information and, in a recent email, appeared to be celebrating its success in delaying progress by BT.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Rick Scannell, a new Northend resident, for his hard work in pursuing these issues. I urge everybody to read his article which was circulated today on [turville.net](http://turville.net). It is a further example of where local residents appear to be far more successful than the parish council in getting information and getting through to the right people. Last year, it was the turn of Ben Sturges, a Turville resident to get the maps and other information that the parish council was unable to obtain about the undergrounding of overhead cables in the Turville valley. Sadly, in spite of Ben's efforts, the council failed to get some of the worst infrastructure undergrounded.

The parish council also failed to get improvements to mobile phone reception in the parish but, in this case, the failure was caused by a different problem. I was delighted with my initial conversations in October 2014 with the consultants dealing with a government funded project to improve mobile phone reception in not-spots such as Turville. Then in late June 2015, the parish council learnt that the consultants had been focussing their efforts on Ibstone which does not have a mobile phone reception problem. Ibstone parish council had in fact discussed proposals from the consultants at its May 2015 meeting that would have benefited Turville. Turville parish council had met the following day but, in spite of the close connections between the two council, was told nothing about the Ibstone discussions. As a result, we lost the opportunity to address a real concern in the parish. With hindsight we probably could have handled the project better – we should have found a local resident to “champion” the project - and we should have ensured that Turville and Ibstone were working together and sharing information.



## Budget

The parish clerk will present the council's financial report but I want to say a few things first. Two years ago, the then council acknowledged that it was accumulating an ever increasing surplus which was both unnecessary and, strictly speaking, illegal. After extensive discussions, it agreed to keep its precept unchanged but to reduce the surplus over a three year period to an acceptable level of about £3,000 (approximately half its annual precept). It agreed to spend £2,000 over two years to replace some stiles with gates and to spend £7,500 over three years to help eradicate Himalayan balsam on Turville Heath. Both these decisions have been implemented.

For some inexplicable reason, these decisions caused problems in the council's budget process for 2016/17. However after a delay, the 2016/17 budget approved in January shows that the council is still on course to reduce its surplus to approximately £3,000 by March 2018. I believe that this is still the case.

The government has also made several changes to the financial regulations affecting parish councils. Assuming that the council's income and expenditure both remain below £25,000, the parish council will no longer have to have its accounts audited from 2017/18 onwards. Unfortunately this will not save any money. The council will still have to appoint an external auditor to deal with questions raised by parishioners. The council will also have to comply with the Transparency Code for Smaller Authorities which requires the council to publish far more information on its website including information about every item of expenditure over £100.

On the other hand, the council should be able to save £300 a year from new legislation that allows parish councils to send agendas and agenda papers out to councillors by email. In prior years, the hand-delivery of agenda papers has cost the council about £300 a year, in other words about 5% of its annual budget. The combination of email and first class post should save almost all of this. On the other hand, these savings could be replaced by the costs of complying with the ever-increasing burdens imposed by Wycombe district council and Buckinghamshire county council – the parish council must find ways of resisting these burdens.

Lastly, in 2015/16, the council received its first tranche of community infrastructure levy (CIL) money. CIL is paid by those who construct new properties or extend existing properties by more than 100m<sup>2</sup> but there is an exemption if those responsible for the development live in the new or extended property for the ensuing three years. The parish council receives 15% of the CIL money paid to Wycombe district council and, in practice, has a degree of freedom about how the money is spent. The parish council has yet to decide how it should be spent. I hope that it spends the money wisely – and that before doing so, it consults parishioners.

David Cairns  
11 May 2016