

HARPSDEN PARISH COUNCIL

Chairman's Report for the year ended 31 March 2021

1. The major feature of the past year for Harpsden as well as everywhere else has of course been the Covid pandemic. While a few residents were unlucky enough to catch the virus, the main impact on Harpsden has been to inspire the development of a WhatsApp Group in the centre of the village and a number of welcome initiatives in and around Woodlands road, all of which have served to raise and maintain community spirit, and for which your parish council is very grateful.
2. The political background to your Council's work remains difficult because of the Government's continual pressure for more housing despite flaws in the planning system that currently leave over a million unused housing permissions. The fact that much of the parish lies in the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) helps of course and we continue to try to get it extended, but I cannot deny a feeling of being under siege from a very unsympathetic planning policy., to be seen at its worst at Thames Farm, a matter to which I shall return.
3. On the wider scene we still face the threat of a third Thames Bridge which could bring large scale development from Reading into South Oxfordshire despite its AONB status. Fortunately there are many hurdles to be jumped before it gets the go-ahead as our very active County (and District) Councillor, David Bartholomew, can explain .
4. Within the parish there has been no let-up in the flow of planning applications that we have had to consider. Probably the most controversial have been the following:
5. a) Crowsley Park Lodge -, where we successfully opposed a bid for a mansion that seemed to us wholly out of keeping with this very rural site in the AONB.

b) Holly House/Little Hill Cottage -, where we helped neighbours oppose a scheme that the SODC Enforcement Officer rated the most flagrant breach of planning law that she had ever seen.

c) Thames Poultry Farm -, where development would in effect extend mass housing from Thames Farm right up to the eastern edge of Harpsden Wood.

d) Crossways at the foot of Woodlands Road, where a bid for 20 houses would extend Thames Farm southwards to Woodlands Road.

Both the latter are on-going battles at the time of writing.

6. Turning to the roads, you will have seen the progress made at last to calm traffic on Gillotts Lane, which owes a lot to the support of our County Councillor as well as to help from particular residents in the Lane. This work will cost us £60,000 but was in our view a wholly appropriate and worthwhile use of our CIL money, a subject we can discuss further later on under Item 3. The other road that I want to mention is the single track with passing places that runs from Harpsden Court down to the

Reading road, known to us as Sheephouse Lane. This will have its edges and passing places cleaned out and resurfaced as necessary while the humpback bridge will be strengthened and cleared to take more water from the pond at Harpsden Court since that is now taking more from the County's drainage works further along the valley

7. This brings me back to Thames Farm because of the drainage problem revealed there during the year. Basically it now looks impossible for Taylor Wimpey to build the 95 houses for which it has planning permission without filling the voids in the chalk under the site and moving the surplus surface water created by so doing elsewhere. Currently Taylor Wimpey want to pump it along the A4155 to the culvert under the road between Tesco and the Bremont factory, where it could obstruct or at least add to the County Council's attempts to improve drainage along the Harpsden valley. Worse still, it is doubtful whether Taylor Wimpey can consolidate their development site without polluting the aquifer underneath it that provides the local water supply. For now I need only say that we have teamed up with Henley and Shiplake to hire expert consultants to advise us on how to protect the public interest. If anybody is interested I will however elaborate on the woefulness of Thames Farm and what I regard as the disgraceful provision in the NPPF that led to planning permission being granted.
8. Two other matters call for comment before we come to our Open Forum. First, damage to our woods from ash die-back is now noticeable in several places, including Harpsden Wood where the Woodland Trust have marked trees for felling later this year. Don't be worried by those marked in orange/red: those have been inspected and found to be healthy; but there are , I am sorry to report, quite a number that will come down.
9. Damage to the Wood outside the gates of Harpsden Court happened after the end of March and so strictly belongs to next year's report but I can assure you that is something about which your Parish Council is greatly concerned. The new owner of the Court, Ian Wason, who is doing a splendid job restoring the nearly derelict manor house that once owned the whole parish, seems to have misjudged public affection for the Wood outside his gates and started to clear it without consulting us. There is little doubt that it needed clearing of the rubble and other rubbish accumulated there before replanting could sensibly begin and we are assured that a lot of replanting will take place, but also with an empty space in the middle for a car park, which came as a very unpleasant shock to us as well as to local residents. We shall do all we can to persuade Ian to think again.
10. Finally I should like to thank my colleagues for their support in an increasingly frenetic year and say how sorry we all were to lose the services of Hilary Andrews, a most judicious councillor. Thank you too to our Clerk, Anne Marie Scanlon, who has worked hard to keep up with the pressures put upon her.

