

Hermitage Parish Council

Annual Report April 2011

Council meetings. There are one or two members of the public, who regularly attend the **open forum** at council meetings, but every one is welcome to come and raise concerns. Planning issues create the most interest. Vertical litter has been brought to the council's attention by several villagers. They are unhappy about the negative effect on the appearance of the village, others are concerned about possible distraction of car drivers. Posters are regularly left up long after events have taken place

Planning. During the year the council has considered more than 20 **planning applications** including one from Miller Homes, for the second phase of Forest Edge. Objections are made about applications when they appear out of proportion to their site. All but 4 of these have been approved, even if the parish council objected. These 4 were for the second phase of Forest Edge, extra windows in a listed barn, change of use of part of the former Lawrence Farm Equipment site and extensions to a house on the Yattendon Rd. The latter was approved on appeal to the planning inspectorate. The inspector turned down another plan, for 6 houses behind Thistledown and adjacent properties; the reasoning given was even stronger than for the previous refusal. Forest Edge part 2 was refused by West Berkshire, in short because of over crowding and overlooking. Officers have argued, that the density of the extension should be between that of Forest Edge phase one and the existing village.

The application for an incinerator near junction 13 will obviously be considered very carefully when it finally emerges. The council has already sent a letter of objection to the extension of the sand pit at Curridge.

Planning Aid South provided a training session for the council. The basic messages were, get in as early as possible in the planning process and find policies to back up decisions.

Village Vision. The **Village Vision** Group has completed its survey of all who live and work in the parish and the action plan will shortly be formulated. The Greening Hermitage Campaign is part of the Village Vision Group

Highways. On the **Highways** front, the council has purchased a grit bin, for installation on Dines Way. West Berkshire does not allow salt bins on primary gritting routes. We have also met John Winstanley to discuss the bollards on the High Street. The reflective strips have been increased, but not the number of bollards. 2 parish councillors and a member of the public have been trained in the use of the SID (speed indication devise). Our new PCSO, Amelia Sargent, is keen to follow up on those detected speeding in the parish, through the community speed watch scheme.

The environment. Pinewood Park is well used and the young people would like a basketball area. At long last the new play area and the football pitch at Forest Edge are open for use.

The council was frustrated by criticism, that it had done nothing about the condition of the **football pitch**, even though it had been in email correspondence with the WB Open Space Manager for many months and had site visits with him. It did not seem to matter that a football referee judged that the pitch was not fit to play on. Great efforts, which were finally successful, were made to make sure the pitch was not covered with rabbit scrapes, which could trip players up. It was only when district councillors became involved that WB took action. Thanks to all those who wrote letters about this. The gates at the bottom of the drive are to discourage boy racers from the area.

West Berkshire Officers do not seem to be too keen about **communicating** with this council. Our clerk had to ask about the adoption of the pitch and other facilities at Forest Edge. It was not consulted about Newbury FA's use of the pitch.

Car parking at the football pitch is a problem, so enquiries are underway, about the possible use of the car park at the school, when there are matches. The council is concerned that use by outside teams should not prevent village youngsters from using the pitch.

It is hoped to provide an area for basketball at Forest Edge to relieve the pressure on the park. Plans for this have been frustrated by the slow return of quotations. Some money would come from WB through the old parish plan

In the hope of dealing with the **dog mess** problems 3 dog waste bins have been on order for some months, for the end of the footpath from Oare on the Hampstead Norreys Road, near the old railway line at Forest Edge and Pinewood Park.

The Village Vision survey showed community support for **allotments**. There is now a considerable waiting list so the council is working to obtain a site.

Burial Ground. The largest item of expenditure this year has been the extension of the path at the **burial ground**. Getting multiple quotations for this work was another source of frustration. It was paid for from S106 open spaces money. The council decided to adopt the Ely rules for burial grounds because they are clearly written.

Financial matters. In these straightened **financial times** the council has once again kept the precept steady at £26 000. Band D properties in the village currently pay about £30 each a year to the PC; this is middle of the road for WB. It has made grants for the next year to the Preschool, Scout Troup, Horticultural Society, church, for community activities and the community magazine, village hall and Village Vision Group.

After full discussion of the facts, provided by the village hall management committee, council has decided unanimously, that it cannot support the **present** proposal for changing rooms, at a cost to the parish, which we believe to be about £250,000

New changing rooms and allotments, will cost money, more money than the council has. It has been suggested that the gap in the funds should be filled by raising the precept, that is the council's share of the council tax bill, for properties in the village. We do not know if parish councils will be allowed to increase precepts in the future. If the council were to borrow £250 000 it would have to repay £290 000 and more than double the precept. We need to know if villagers would be happy for the PC to increase their council tax bill.

Events. The council has held 2 events during the year, the parish walk or treasure hunt and the lighting up ceremony for the Christmas tree

Councillor's activities. Councillors attended the Neighbourhood Action Group, conferences put on by the district council for parish councils, the Berkshire Association of Local Councils and the WB Safety Advisory Group. Two members of the council have been doubling up as members of the Village Vision Group.

We are pleased that our numbers will be increased by the addition of 3 more Councillors in May Thanks to all who have served on the council in the past 4 years; Bill Goudge, our clerk, Mr Lawrence who looks after our open spaces so conscientiously and John Lawler who looks after the website.

There are many other people to thank,
Volcker Highways for providing traffic lights for the illumination of the Christmas tree
West Berkshire Safety Group for advice, Brad Jennings for turning them on
Sarah Ward and Tanya Honor for help with the Village Vision Consultation,
the 6 volunteers who produced the questionnaire,
Greenham Common Trust and Melissa Elliott who duplicated the questionnaires and dealt with the Survey Server website,
Tim Benson, Tracie Carter, Jude Cunningham and Clare Povey, who did sterling work both delivery questionnaires and getting them back
Not forgetting the 267 people who actually completed the questionnaires. There were a few who enjoyed returning blank forms, with straight faces.