

Waltham St Lawrence Parish Council
Chairman's address
Annual Parish Meeting 25th April 2017

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 my second year on the Parish Council and it has been an interesting experience. Whilst I knew before standing that a Parish Council has limited powers, I have found this lack of ability to act and make a difference incredibly frustrating but we are constrained by the slow turning wheels of due process. Nevertheless I have found there to be greater influence than immediately apparent and therefore it is down to building relationships with other community organisations and powers of persuasion. I am therefore pleased to be able to present later in this meeting a number of people with an active role within our community through the Royal Borough and the Police who are able to share with us their approach to working alongside communities, and in particular Waltham St Lawrence Parish.

Looking at events in the last 12 months, once again it has been dominated by the illegal Traveller occupation on Shurlock Road. I know that the local community, is delighted that the site was eventually vacated in March and we are all grateful for the full support of the Royal Borough during this 7 year period. I know that we have been extremely frustrated by the very slow progress made and the unreasonableness of the legal system but we should now look forward to better times ahead. There are undoubtedly lessons to be learnt to prevent repeat experiences across the country and I hope that the Royal Borough and other local authorities will work to share their experiences for the common good.

There are still ongoing matters to be addressed surrounding the site clear up, with land still at an elevated level, buried hardcore and waste and filled in drainage channels causing flooding to neighbouring land and gardens.

Thanks go in particular to Clive Scott Hopkins who has worked tirelessly over the 7 year period, together with Carwyn Cox and the other Ward Councillors, to maintain focus and pressure whilst ensuring that the opportunities to exploit legal loopholes are minimised.

There has also been the consideration of developing an open space in the Parish between Waltham St Lawrence and Shurlock Row. The Parish Council are fully aware of split views on this but it has to be right to explore possibilities and look for positive opportunities for an improvement to facilities in the Parish.

Significant time has been input by Suzy Young and Maggi Bevan in particular, supported by other local residents, and I am very grateful to them all for this. It is expected that there will be a Parish vote later this year to decide whether or not the local community wish to progress with this.

There are a number of other longstanding matters including the remediation of the Downfield Pit site, which is showing signs of drawing to a conclusion with a planning application in for equestrian facilities. Network Rail's site by Milley Bridge is an ongoing eyesore but there have been fewer recent reports of noise and disruption. After a number of dangerous traffic incidents, the Parish Council and Ward Councillor David Evans met with the Bristol to Maidenhead Network Rail Project Manager which resulted in regular temporary contraflows.

Flooding, in the Parish as a whole, was less of an issue in the last 12 months but we remain alert to the problems and Mark Hipgrave continues to liaise and meet with Thames Water and monitor the state of the ditch network.

The poor state of the roads is a constant challenge, with ever diminishing Borough budgets, but Suzy Young is relentless in her monitoring of, and reporting on, the local pothole network. Speeding is regularly reported as a major area of concern but it is very difficult to police given the Parish's remoteness and no doubt PC Pick can provide an insight into this problem later.

The Local Neighbourhood plan is approaching a referendum and adoption and thanks must go to Clive and John Birkett for all their hard work and input over a number of years to ensure that the interests of the Parish are fully reflected. As a result there is also a plan to appraise the central Waltham St Lawrence Conservation Area.

Looking ahead, Bellman Hanger is likely to become an ongoing saga with plans currently for 20 homes on the site which is a wholly inappropriate location given the dangerous road with lack of sight lines, neighbouring farm and damage already done to the historic woodland. The Parish is committed to supporting opportunities where appropriate for lower priced housing but not at the expense of safety or urbanisation.

There are also plans to replace the wooden structure of the pound in the centre of Waltham St Lawrence with new English Oak, which is much overdue after decades of being patched up.

Finally, I must extend my thanks to my fellow Councillors for all their hard work over the last 12 months, particularly Maggi Bevan who drives us towards adherence to best practice on disclosure and publicity and who actively manages the local twitter and facebook pages. I would also like to pick out John Birkett and Katie Sarsfield who review and compile details on all local planning applications each month, which is no small task.

I would like to use this opportunity to welcome our Responsible Financial Officer, Serena Bowe, who joined us in October and our new Parish Clerk, Alison Jones, who joined us at the beginning of this month. We wish them well for the future and I would particularly like to thank Alison for the extensive time and effort that she has put in as she has been thrown in at the deep end with two meetings to arrange in her first month in office.

I would like to convey my personal thanks to Sally Burtenshaw who stepped down as Parish Clerk after nearly 17 years in the role. She has shown loyalty and dedication to the community throughout this period and I am grateful for her guidance and support during my own short tenure on the Council. I have received apologies from David Crawley-Boevey, a past Chairman of the Parish Council, who is unable to join us this evening due to a family commitment, but there has been a collection drawn from past and present Parish Councillors as a small token of their thanks for all the time and hard work you have put in Sally and I would like to ask Clive Scott Hopkins, as the longest serving member of the Parish Council and past Chairman, if he would do the honours of making a presentation of this small gift.

My final thanks goes to those within the community who take the time and effort to either attend Parish Council meetings or to share your views and opinions through other means. 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.