



BIDDENHAM PARISH COUNCIL

ANNUAL PARISH ASSEMBLY

APRIL 2018

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

My third year as Parish council chairman has seen some very significant issues, mainly regarding planning, around the village. This is my report for the Annual Parish meeting, held on 11th April 2018.

Firstly, I'd like to thank Chairman of the School Governors, Tom Perry and Headteacher, Maria Soulsby for opening St James's school to us this evening for our annual Parish meeting. As the Borough's schools gradually move to the two-tier system, lower schools such as St James's are changing into primary schools. The challenges this brings are being met with optimism and energy. We're able to see here today how the new classrooms being built, necessitated by the change to primary status, are an opportunity not just to "tack on" two more years, but to bring more fundamental benefits to the school as a whole.

I was personally invited to visit the school by Tom and Maria back in October. This followed the Parish Council's decision to award a grant of £2,000 for the purchase of various mathematical learning aids (some of which I tried on my visit). When we finished my look around, we had a very civilised cup of tea in Maria's office, and reflected on the fact that the school sits both physically and socially at the heart of our community. We would like to do more together, and this meeting tonight reflects that intent.

And so I turn to matters outside the gates of this place. Literally just outside, where we have the footpath leading down Main Road to the west. This, we recognise, is in need of resurfacing, and this will be done later this year using money put aside both last year and this. As one reaches the war memorial, I'm delighted to say we have had all the over-grown shrubbery removed along the fence there. The trees are to be pruned back soon, too. These jobs are harder to progress than you might think, which makes the final results all the more pleasing.

Walking further on, we get to the Coffin Path. This time last year it had been ploughed up yet again. But come the autumn we received the good news that the field is not to be cultivated for at least three years. We await the outcome of discussions Chris Jones, the Borough and the Wingfield estate are having about whether the path can be laid with shingle.

Matters further afield that we have been addressing are the application to fell the trees in Thorpe Close, flooding and drainage, and averting the loss of hedgerow on the main Bromham Road.

One area which seems sadly to be growing in popularity is the idea of demolishing one house to replace it with something much larger. We have failed to have any significant influence over this, both this year and last. And although more may yet be thrust upon us, it is of course very good news indeed that we've seen the refusal of permission to demolish Biddenham House, in the heart of our village and its conservation area. This was a far bigger development than the other developments where one house replaced another. Owners and their developers do seem to like to "try it on" with the most outrageous initial schemes; we must never be complacent about the need to speak up in opposition to such aberrations.

We can now look back on how we dealt with raising everyone's awareness of the Biddenham House application, and how to voice our individual opinions of it, with some satisfaction. It became, as it were, a rehearsal for the main event – that is the double whammy of the outline planning application for 250 houses on land west of Gold

Lane, coupled with the Borough Council's proposal in their Local Plan (2021 to 2035) to remove protections on the green spaces around the edge of our village.

From the initial meeting with the developer, Lioncourt, where we pulled together a potent mixture of the leaders of our community institutions, to meetings with the Borough chief executive and lobbying the consultation event in the Church Barn, we gradually developed the idea of bringing together a group within the village of both stakeholders and helpful, knowledgeable types with experience of dealing with the issues we now face. The resultant Biddenham Advisory Forum has only met once so far, but helped spur the activity we've all seen since. Key has been the ability to communicate the issues, and to make it as easy as possible to then present individual, personal objections back to the Borough Council – whether that be the planning people or the Local Plan consultation process.

We're grateful for the support provided in arranging the online "Have-a-say" facility, the detailed letters of objection sent by the Biddenham Society and Friends of the Pond, and the three letters Jon Gambold worked on with me which he and his wife Jean then hand-delivered to every house in the village. And special thanks go to Councillor Joe Warren, who has tirelessly kept the village web site updated with the latest news and led efforts to get people to sign paper letters of objection at various events around the village.

We now wait to see how events unfold as the consultation periods for both the application and the Local Plan come to an end. With many hundreds of individual objections, we have surely made certain that the Borough mandarins and their political masters understand the strength of feeling and absolute opposition we have to these plans. Biddenham is a privileged place, and some people think we are all posh types who only care about ourselves. Not so! We are good people. We are people who care about our environment, our heritage and our community. Something things are just plain wrong, and when they are we're going to say so.

Thanks, everybody, for your support. As your Parish Council we will continue to hear your concerns, be proactive, and use the limited influence granted to us.

I'd like to thank all my fellow Councillors, our two Borough Councillors, Jon and Roger, and our clerk, Alison Southern (who cannot be here tonight) for their great commitment and effort.

Peter Chase
Chairman, Biddenham Parish Council
11th April 2018