

Introduction

This 'Parish Year' has been one with many challenges: people, facilities and plans. Fortunately, our financial position has been sound and the Parish has been able to keep its precept at the same level yet again. The latter arises because we are a Parish that is expanding rapidly to the east with the new developments in the Broughton and Brooklands areas and to the west with the Oakgrove Village. This expansion raises the absolute level of the precept but brings its own challenges of communities which are finding their feet and looking for help. Beyond that, the City Council are making plans to devolve more powers to parishes although these ideas are not yet fully formed even though allegedly close by.

People

The Parish Council had several vacancies one year ago with the greatest need in the new housing areas to the east. Since then we have been able to recruit a strong complement of Councillors bringing a diverse range of skills and representing all areas of the Parish. The year has seen a new Chairman and Vice Chairmen after the resignation of Councillor Alec Kidd after several years of loyal service. Our Vice Chair stood down in that role but fortunately continues as a veteran of some 27 years of service! A greater pool of knowledge we could not have in Jenny Brighton who continues by the side of us 'newbies'. Our new Councillor and Vice Chair, Tim Small has provided massive support especially in the fields of HR and contracts. And if all that turnover was not enough change, our longstanding Parish Clerk, Helen Ward also decided to change parishes in the New Year. Nonetheless, we couldn't have been happier to obtain the services of Vick Mote from sister Parish - Kents Hill and Monkston (KH&M). She will be performing both parishes duties for the time being. Our enormous thanks must go to Vicky for stepping up and beyond any normal expectations to keep us afloat during the transition period.

Facilities

The transition of people has only been matched in complexity by the transition of management of our two principal buildings – Middleton Pavilion and our new Oakgrove Office.

Middleton Pavilion is an important asset of the Parish. It has been historically managed both directly by the Parish Council and under lease to an independent operator. In the Summer of 2016 a Working Group recommended that it should be offered for lease once again as this better suited the parish's management environment. The working group completed the transaction by signing a five year lease in April 2017. Hidden within this task has been a major program of refurbishment for heating, lighting and general repairs and redecoration. This will be completed in May. We are indebted to the Pavilion Working Group (Jo Small, Julie Chambers, Tim Small and David Monk) and Colin Bowker for completing the task on schedule and ready for the Summer season. The Middleton Pavilion is now up and running – servicing the MK Cricket Club and the community at large. It is early days but by all current accounts this is already going well.

The Pavilion had been the temporary home of the Parish Offices. Fortunately, a decision had been taken earlier for the Parish to lease office space in Oakgrove Village. We had much work to do before being able to move in in April 17. Two people deserve mention for their stellar efforts in turning an office shell into a working, safe and functioning office with utilities to go. These are independent contractor Colin Bowker and Cllr Jo Small whose unpaid hours on this project have been truly noteworthy. Of course, this move has been supported by both Clerk Vicky Mote and Alison McNaughton as they have kept the administration and finances in running order throughout these physical changes.

We are now installed in Atlas Way, Oakgrove with fibre broadband, modern furniture and a fully equipped conference room with hearing impaired loop and functional kitchen. This will be a useful community facility and a place where we shall be more accessible and able to offer sensible comforts for small community and Parish Council meetings. The move is a major achievement much like that of moving a family home.

The third 'asset' garnering our attention of late has been one of opportunity rather than reality. Project 'Broughton Beans' has been the consideration of managing a community coffee shop within a new (as yet unbuilt) retail development in Broughton. This opportunity arose over one year ago as plans were being finalised for the area. Given the then current difficulties of managing the Middleton Pavilion it was with some reluctance that councillors wanted to add a potential 'retail' liability. Our commitment to the community was to assess this opportunity as objectively as possible to form a fact-based decision, not one based on emotion either for or against. A Working Group (Gary Stimson, Claire Craig, Mez Solanki, and Tim Small) was formed to draw this matter to a conclusion as the developer was looking for a firm decision. The group contracted with specialist retail foodservice consultant who will be delivering the benefit of their experience on the viability of the proposal in May. Either way, we are looking to make a final go/no-go decision by June 2017. I would like to recognise the great commitment that Cllr Gary Stimson has shown in leading this. While this project has strong community support we recognise that the decision will have financial implication for ten years and must be rigorously analysed before commitment.

Allotments

The Parish now has five sites and these require significant management both physically and administratively. In January and March of 2016 our Kemsley Crescent Site was flooded in high rainfall with overflowing raw sewage. This has been cleared up and 17 allotments have also been decommissioned for two years as a result. This has been a concern for the allotment holders both for the clean-up work but also for the future possibility of a repeated incident. This issue has taken management time with councillors attending meetings with Anglian Water and at the allotment

association's AGM. We have secured reasonable assurances from Anglian who are planning to install more pumping capacity soon and have already taken several other measures to cope if the same conditions occur again. We shall be pleased to draw this matter to a close once we have received final settlement from Anglian Water's insurers. We have been using external warden resource until recently but we shall be taking measures to manage this directly in the coming months.

Grants

The Parish Council have made a number of grants to community based organisations enabling many children to take part in organised activities both home and away. Several residents based groups have received support for social activities and we hope these will seed fund their growth to becoming self-sustainable.

We made grants to help replace windows in the Milton Keynes Village and Broughton Village Hall and upgraded the nearby play area.

Funding support to the outreach program of the Citizens Advice Bureau was also provided to support residents needing this service.

On a lighter note – we provided funding support for the MK Village Firework Display which again attracted several thousand visitors.

Efficiency

The transition to new offices and new Clerk creates a natural opportunity to revise our management systems. We shall be giving serious consideration to purchasing a new financial accounting and payments system that has been developed for parish council users. This should make any future hand-over much simpler and the data easier to protect. Similarly, we plan to use the same supplier's allotment admin package. This will greatly help with communications with our customers and save time.

Our IT equipment and services needs replacement and this will be addressed quickly, with great support from Cllr Mez Solanki. This is within our new budget.

An opportunity of sharing more than a Clerk has arisen because of both the Clerk and the new office. We are giving serious consideration to sharing our new office with KH&M Parish. This could extend to administrative support, warden, conference room and other equipment. This is at an early stage but would enable greater use of facilities and expertise of people.

These ideas sit within a cloud of uncertainty that the City Council refer to as 'devolution to the parishes'. Whatever happens here it is inevitable that we shall need to look at cost efficiencies within our own domain to ensure best value for our tax-payers.

Strategy

Last year we held our first 'Strategy Review' and listed a long shopping list of project ideas needing attention. Since then we have been consumed by operational matters as discussed above. These have required inordinate amounts of unpaid time from Councillors and we are indebted for this work. The good news is that we have completed our highest priority tasks with great pride. We have a solid financial base. Now these are complete and we have a refreshed complement of enthusiastic and capable Councillors we can get back to the future and build the support for a community that is the best we can manage.

David W. Monk
Chairman, B&MK Parish Council