

# Mere Parish Council

PARISH CLERK - MRS. L. C. WOOD

## CLERKS REPORT – March 2014

### Agenda Items

**5b) SWW Area Board – Public Rights of Way (RoW) Improvement Programme – Recommendations for a Mere Submission (Minute 98d)** – The following submission has been forwarded by David Stokes (co-ordinator):

The Mere Footpath Group have audited approximately 90% of the RoWs in Mere Parish and have identified several RoWs for the Area Board's improvement programme and one overarching plan to significantly improve the accessibility of Mere's nearby countryside and water features. There are four recommendations:

#### **1. FP20 Mere to Burton**

This path is important because it connects the communities of Mere and Burton. Additionally, it has the potential to provide a pleasant riverside walk with a picnic area and riverside seat by the bridge.

*Problems:*

- It is becoming overgrown at western end; blackthorn is dangerous. Needs cutting back with powered equipment to boundary each side.
- The tarmac path has grown over with grass and is now too narrow for mobility scooters.

#### **2. FP 49,50,66 Mere to Huntsgate and Southbrook**

This much used path is important because it connects the communities of Mere and Huntsgate/Southbrook.

*Problems:*

- Although the base of the path is wide enough for it to be used by wheelchair users, overgrowth narrows it considerably and it is not wide enough for wheelchair users to pass pedestrians safely
- Current design of the barrier at the Clement's Lane end of the path is not wheelchair friendly and thus prevents wheelchair users enjoying the path.

#### **3. FP 22 Burton to Huntsgate and Southbrook**

Via Mill Lane and/or FP 54 and FP29. This path is important because it connects the communities of Burton and Huntsgate directly. Additionally, it has the potential to provide a pleasant riverside walk.

*Requires improvements around the Ashfield Water bridge area:*

- steps or a better ramp to improve access
- cutting back at one side and some repairs to the fencing.

#### **4. A circular route for wheelchairs, disability scooters and pushchairs/prams**

Bringing the above improvements together and further improving FP22 would create a circular route of about 2 miles from the heart of Mere which then goes out towards Burton and alongside Ashfield Water and on to Huntsgate and then returns to Mere by way of Lordsmead and the Cemetery and St Michael's. This would enable wheelchair users etc, both residents and visitors, to enjoy the delights of 'walking' in both village and country and to see the singular nature of the community of Mere and its surrounding features. *(Please see attached map)*

*The improvements needed would be:*

- widening of the bridge over Ashfield Water
- building wheelchair friendly access at either side of the bridge
- tarmacking the footpath from the bridge to Mill Lane.

All of these projects would satisfy the SWWAB requirements in terms of:

- Improving rural rights of way and the promotion of walking
- They link communities

In addition improvement to these paths will:

- Encourage children to walk to school
- Encourage the outlying communities to shop in Mere
- Reduce car journeys
- Greatly increase the accessibility for all members of the community and visitors

At some time in the future there could be real benefits in upgrading the status of these paths to allow cycling.

Regarding funding a capital improvement programme, **the Area Board require confirmation from the Parish Council that the proposals have local approval.**

The SWWAB are asking for an initial response from Parish Councils by **9 March 2014.**

Once this initial feedback is received the Area Board, working with the Public Rights of Way team, will provide further direction on how the project will continue to roll out.

**6c) Youth Activities Review – Programme Consultation (10 week consultation runs from 3.2.14 – 14.4.14)** – there is much information available on Wiltshire Council’s Consultation pages, including a Briefing Report that was sent out to Area Boards (3 pages) and a Full Report that went to Wiltshire Council cabinet members (24 pages). Below is information on the four main options being proposed:

There are four main options that Wiltshire Council is considering as a way forward. Each of these options will lead to a change in how youth activities and support are provided in Wiltshire.

**Option 1 – A community led model.**

- Community areas would be given money from the council to fund youth activities. Young people would be involved in deciding what is provided, when and where.
- Youth advisors would be employed by the council to help communities develop activities and support young people to ensure their views were heard when decisions are made.
- Activities for young people would be provided by voluntary and community groups and a quality mark would be developed to make sure these are safe.
- Youth support workers from the council would support vulnerable young people and co-ordinate activities for disabled young people.

**Option 2 – Outsource the service**

- A new service would be developed by the council in consultation with young people and communities.
- The new service would not be run by the council, but by an ‘outside group or organisation’ like a charity. It may be run by several organisations covering different parts of the county.
- These groups would run the service for an agreed amount of money and could be paid based on how well they do the job.

**Option 3 – Encourage staff to form a public service mutual.**

- Youth work staff would be invited to set up their own company (called a ‘Mutual’) to provide services and activities for young people.
- A strong commitment would be needed by staff and the council would need to be sure the new company would be able to do the job with the resources available.
- Staff involved in the mutual would decide what is provided and the mutual would be responsible for running youth services and activities.

**Option 4 – Keep the youth service ‘in house’ but spend less.**

- Wiltshire Council would still run the youth service but there would be less staff and youth centres.
- There could be four main youth work hubs and they would focus on working with vulnerable young people and those most in need.
- Youth workers would work closely with voluntary and community groups to help them develop local activities and services for young people.

The council currently thinks **that option 1, a community led model**, is the best way forward, but what do you think?

**7b) Report on Wiltshire Council’s Neighbourhood Planning Workshop No: 2 - ‘Selecting sustainable sites for development’, Trowbridge 3 February 2014 (Cllr. D. Hope)**

**Objectives and deciding upon a Neighbourhood Plan**

Wiltshire Council’s planners opened by emphasising that well before selecting sites, parish and town councils (PCs/TCs) must have gone through the process covered in Workshop No: 1. This process involves setting objectives and deciding whether a neighbourhood plan (NP) is needed. A key element is ‘scoping’, whereby PCs or TCs engage their community, set up a steering group of local stakeholders, set objectives, assess the available evidence for planning in their area, establish a level of growth, and consider the means of delivery – whether a NP, or alternative approaches.

**Planning policy context**

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) sets out government planning policy. Wiltshire’s Local Plan policy is the Wiltshire Core Strategy – the Council’s assessment of needs over the period to 2026. It is subject to amendment following recent examination by an Inspector and will hopefully be adopted in Summer 2014.

The Core Strategy expresses levels of growth in terms of overall requirements for Wiltshire and a hierarchy of settlements: Principal Settlements, Market Towns, Local Service Centres, Large Villages, Small Villages. Mere is defined as a Local Service Centre where only modest development is anticipated according to Core Policy 17, viz: at least 250 new homes – 200 at Mere and 50 in the rest of the community area. There will be no allocated strategic housing sites in the community area and development may consist of a range of sites in accordance with Core Policies 1 and 2.

## **Neighbourhood policy**

The NPPF requires NPs to support development needs in the Local Plan (Core Strategy) and to plan positively for local growth. NPs can allocate more growth than the Core Strategy but not less, and growth should be proportionate to each settlement. There is no obligation to prepare a NP. With housing, for example, communities might decide instead to feed small sites into a Wiltshire Council supplementary plan that will be brought forward within the framework of the Core Strategy – see below.

### **Core Strategy Examination – Inspector’s view: overall housing requirement for Wiltshire**

The Inspector who examined the Core Strategy recommended an increase of 5,000 in the housing target from 37,000 to 42,000 homes. A disaggregation of the revised housing figure will be presented on a Community Area basis by the end of February 2014. A swift review of settlement boundaries is required, but rather than delay the Core Strategy, the review will be progressed through a supplementary plan, called a ‘Housing Sites Allocation Development Plan Document’ (DPD). The draft DPD will be published for consultation at the end of 2014.

The Housing Sites Allocation DPD will set out a rolling supply of land over the period to 2026 and is regarded by Wiltshire’s planners as essential in avoiding challenges from developers. A number of councils have lost planning appeals recently through not having an up to date local plan with an adequate rolling supply of land for housing. Wiltshire Council keeps an online portfolio of potential development sites, known as SHLAA – the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment. Anyone can forward a site for inclusion in the SHLAA, but this does not mean that it will be developed.

### **Neighbourhood planning – determining appropriate levels of growth**

Neighbourhood planning can cover local objectives for employment and community facilities as well as housing. DCLG advises that plans must meet the needs of the wider area, taking account of the planning authority’s assessment of housing and other development needs. Consideration must include the Core Strategy, the Local Needs Survey and the SHLAA (Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment). Wiltshire’s Housing Department carries out a rolling rural needs survey - a questionnaire goes to every household to establish the level of housing need.

### **Case study – Sherston**

Sherston is a NP ‘front-runner’. A Steering Group established a series of objectives, including provision for *a limited amount of housing to meet an identified local need*. A housing needs survey, undertaken with Wiltshire Council, established a requirement for 40 new homes in total - 20 affordable/ 20 market. Potential sites were screened for development in relation to capacity, topography, flood zones and past development rates. There was extensive community engagement and testing of alternative scenarios.

### **Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)**

NPs need to be screened to determine whether an SEA should be undertaken – Wiltshire Council would do this for PCs or TCs. The SEA process is enshrined in European and domestic legislation. All plans have the potential to be caught by the law, the ‘trigger’ being whether or not the NP is likely to have significant effects. An SEA is more likely if the NP allocates sites, contains sensitive natural heritage assets that might be affected, or results in significant environmental effects. The SEA process was outlined but was difficult to follow – an SEA document is on the Council’s website.

Demonstrating that alternative scenarios have been considered is important when a NP gets to its later formal stages. Ideally, there should be discussion in the NP of reasons for selecting preferred uses, for screening out some sites and for selecting preferred sites.

### **Practical exercise**

Each table at the workshop undertook an exercise in site selection for housing, facilitated by a planning officer from Wiltshire Council. Most tables came up with a similar selection. Given sites outlined on a map were ranked with reference to:

- Constraints: development prohibited by flood zone, SSSI . . .
- Restraints: development limited by AONB, Conservation Area, Local Nature Reserve.
- Local factors: further than 250m from town centre, outside settlement boundary . . .

### **Questions and discussion**

A delegate said that his parish had been engaged on preparing a NP for some two years, and until recently had been assessed as unsound by Wiltshire planners. In answer to a question about the weight that is given in planning decisions to a NP in progress, NPs only start to be a material consideration towards the end of the whole plan preparation process, when Wiltshire Council has consulted the public for six weeks.

David Hope  
February 2014

**10b) Precept Capping – latest news from Local Government Association** – the following article confirms that Parish & Town Councils are now ‘on notice’ that council tax referendum principles may be set for 2015/16:-

# Council tax vote threshold to be 2%

Every vote cast by councillors on budgets and council tax will have to be recorded from this year, the Government has announced.

The requirement emerged as ministers confirmed that councils planning to increase council tax in the coming financial year will have to hold a local referendum if the increase equals or exceeds 2 per cent.

The new limit now includes other local levying and precepting bodies (except parish councils), such as internal drainage boards – which means that councils that have frozen council tax could still face having to organise referendums and potentially council tax re-billing, whether or not the increase in total council tax was a direct result of their financial decisions.

The Local Government Finance Report (England) 2014/15 also puts parish and town councils on notice that council tax referendum principles may be set for them in 2015/16.

Cllr Sharon Taylor, Chair of the LGA's Finance Panel, said: "Local authorities are striving to keep council tax down but are grappling with the

difficult task of protecting vital services following a 40 per cent reduction in government funding over this Parliament.

"Many councils have already finalised their budgets for the coming financial year and the lateness of this announcement has added to the uncertainty faced by local authorities making crucial decisions about how local services will be provided from April.

"It should be for councils and their residents to decide how local services are paid for, not Whitehall. The ballot box on local election day allows for people to pass judgement on their councils. No other tax increase is subject to the extra cost of a referendum, as all other taxes are rightly seen to be within the mandate of the elected government. The same should apply for council tax."

Communities Secretary Eric Pickles said: "We have given extra funding to town halls to help freeze council tax and handed local residents new rights to veto big local tax hikes, so local people have the final say on the amount they pay."

## Information Items

**Active Wiltshire website – [www.activewiltshire.org.uk](http://www.activewiltshire.org.uk)**

Wiltshire Council has just launched a new interactive website that will act as a one stop shop for sport, physical activity and health across the county. Visitors to the site will have access to information on how to lead an active and healthy lifestyle, find sports clubs, groups and events in their local area and create a free profile on the site where they can record their BMI, follow a food plan and participate in challenges.