

STINSFORD PARISH PLAN – FIRST PROGRESS REPORT

Introduction.

The parish plan was presented to the parish council on 26th November 2007. Since then the council has been progressively reviewing the plan section by section. This report covers the conclusions of the review so far. Further reports will be published in due course.

The plan was compiled in the form prescribed by the government, but, because of the anonymity of the survey it is not possible to pursue points or suggestions with the individuals who made them. It is disappointing that not much additional information has been gleaned during parish council meetings. This has meant that there was no way in which the parish council could pursue particular suggestions with their originators. For example: the suggestion that [someone] “should look into development of local after-school activities for the under 16s” did not include the types of activity that the suggester had in mind. To add to the problem, because of data protection rules, the parish council is not allowed to ask how many under 16s there are in the parish, nor where they live: it has to rely on people offering such information. Equally, there is no way of knowing how many parishioners are seeking employment within the parish.

The parish plan admits to being a wish list. Many wishes are expressed in the form of suggesting that things be organised or arranged. It is not clear whether the implication of the plan is that the parish council should be organising or arranging these things, or that it is hoped that groups of like-minded people might take the initiative.

It is important that parishioners realise the limitations on what the parish council can actually do. The first limitation is lack of funds. The parish precept, currently set at £4,000 only raises sufficient money to cover the day-to-day statutory expenses of the council (the parish clerk’s salary, insurances, auditor’s fees, etc), plus a small reserve. The council, if parishioners so wished, could raise money for particular projects through the council tax precept, at the rate of an additional £8 on the Band D charge for every £1000 required. However, there are ways of applying for long term loans for major projects, to be repaid through the council tax precept. It may not be realised by parishioners that the parish council (unlike district and county council) receives no portion of the business rates levied on businesses within the parish.

The parish council is a facilitator, and its expertise and influence will be willingly directed to help parishioners’ achieving ambitions set out in the plan. The parish council is not an impresario.

Many of the points mentioned in the plan were already being addressed by the parish council. Guided by the parish plan, other initiatives have been pursued as quickly as other statutory bodies have allowed. The purpose of this report is to document the progress which has been made on some key issues. For reasons explained above, the parish council is anxious to hear from individuals or groups who wish to contribute detailed proposals to be incorporated in this work.

Transport.

The parish plan emphasises the lack of public transport within the parish. A review of what is available shows that while some communities are better served than others, some are not served at all. Those that are served are not as well served as some other parts (mainly urban) of the county. One difficulty in this respect is that the county council has not been able to establish any criteria against which provision can be judged – i.e. there is no formal definition of public transport. From various presentations and exhibitions, it is clear that the prospect of establishing a public transport system serving the communities of the parish to the extent that the system can be used in preference to a motorcar is, at best slight, but practically zero.

There is a request in the plan that the parish council establish a car sharing scheme, or similar cooperative arrangements. The experience of such schemes (they take various forms) in other parishes is not a happy one. Although begun with much enthusiasm, they have foundered for a number of reasons. These include the burden on those running the scheme, mostly elderly, and the lack of replacements when they consider the time has come to pass responsibility to others. Many users have placed unreasonable demands on the scheme and those volunteers running it. The restrictions on what is allowed to be charged to keep below the threshold beyond which insurance premiums rise, income tax and VAT have to be paid, means that those providing the transport cannot recoup their reasonable costs. Because of the geographic spread of the parish, the parish council does not intend to establish such a scheme, rather it believes that the communities within the parish are sufficiently compact to arrange these things themselves on the basis of common need and good neighbourliness.

Traffic Management and Road Safety.

The majority of roads within the parish are class C or D, and because of this there are compelling traffic management issues in various parts of the parish. These include:

Speeding through Lower Bockhampton

The use of Bockhampton Lane and Cuckoo Lane as a primary route because it is the most logical route for many people travelling from the Lower Frome Valley northwards and vice versa. That it is used as a rat run to avoid congestion on the A35 is beyond doubt.

The Cokers Frome Road (often wrongly referred to as Slyers Lane) between the B3143 (the proper Slyers Lane) and Charminster, which is to all intents and purposes the northern Dorchester bypass.

An aggravating factor is inappropriate standards of driving throughout the parish, particularly on the lanes; it is particularly bad during the tourist season, but some locals do not do it well either.

The poor design of the Stinsford Hill roundabout, with its short sight-lines, which coupled with traffic, particularly from the east, which hardly reduces speed through the roundabout, makes it a hazard for those joining from the direction of Stinsford, and for pedestrians.

The effects of the closure of the A35 between Stinsford Hill roundabout and the Puddletown bypass due to a collision on that stretch of road, or further east, leading to gridlock on Cuckoo and Bockhampton Lanes.

The lack of footpaths along the A35 between Cuckoo Lane and the Stinsford Hill roundabout.

That the importance of the C and D class roads within the parish is not reflected in the county highway authority's road maintenance and winter-weather priorities.

There is a reasonable hope that the delayed high-level meeting to include, the Highways Agency, Connect (the Highways Agency contractor for management of the A35), Dorset County Council Highways, and the police, to resolve these issues, will take place shortly.

A Parish Hall.

Until 1958 there was a parish hall located in Lower Bockhampton opposite the telephone kiosk. It began life in 1919 as a working man's reading room. In the late 1950s the hall, which was a wooden military hut, had reached a state of dilapidation such that it could no longer be used. The hall was managed by a group of parishioners, and had nothing to do with the parish council, nor the church. Although a parishioner was prepared to buy a replacement and the Dorset Farm Institute was prepared to carry out the necessary groundwork at no cost, and the Dorset County Council was prepared to continue a rolling seven-year lease at two shillings and sixpence per year, the hall committee decided that the cost of moving the replacement hut from its present position and its redecoration (around £150) was too much of a financial commitment. Therefore, set against the background of diminishing use and an undertaking by Dorset Education Authority that the schoolroom could be used, it was decided not to proceed with its replacement. The school was closed and sold two years later! The parish lacks a focal point for community activities, and from time to time it has been mooted that a new hall should be established, but the cost has been prohibitive. The key issue, if through some means a hall was to be established, is would it be used to an extent that it would be financially viable.

A number of alternative venues are being explored. The parochial church council (PCC) has offered the use of the Church for any activity which is 'lawful and moral', and which will not damage the fabric of the building. This is subject to a satisfactory trial of removable seating. Kingston Maurward College is reviewing what accommodation it could offer to clubs and other activities when not required by the college. A prospectus is due shortly. It may be that there are other buildings which may be suitable as they stand, or may be suitably adapted, elsewhere in the parish. Please will parishioners review the area around them to identify potential sites. In parallel, those parishioners who wish to organise the types of activities set out in the parish plan are asked to tell the parish council what their requirements are.

Policing.

The parish plan commented that less than half of respondents considered police coverage 'good to reasonable', to the extent that a large majority was in favour of establishing a neighbourhood watch scheme. The parish plan was formulated before the introduction of Safer Neighbourhood Teams. The parish falls on the eastern boundary the Dorchester Rural West Safer Neighbourhood Team's area of responsibility. Currently (March 2010), the team consists of a sergeant, a police constable, and a police community support officer; however the sergeant is also the team leader of three other teams – Dorchester Rural East, and two in Dorchester. The Dorchester Rural West team is responsible for neighbourhood policing in a very large area including Cerne Abbas, Maiden Newton, Cattistock, and Abbotsbury. Such a small team spread over such a large area explains why meeting the team in the normal course of day-to-day life is unlikely. However, those who have had cause to contact the team report they have responded well to their concerns. The Commander of the Dorchester and Sherborne Section of Dorset Police emphasises that the team is supported by response officers based at Dorchester and Sherborne who work 24 hours per day and 7 days per week, together with many other specialist departments.

The parish plan records an enthusiasm for establishing a neighbourhood/home watch scheme. The two are similar in scope, but a neighbourhood scheme covers a larger area. The dispersion of communities throughout the parish probably favours the establishment of a number of Home Watch schemes, rather than a parish-wide neighbourhood scheme. Any community wishing to establish such a scheme should contact the neighbourhood policing team directly.

An aspect of community policing which the parish council will pursue is the establishment of a Partners and Communities Together (PACT) forum within the parish, to reflect parishioners' priorities for policing.

Communications Within the Parish.

There is now a parish council website which includes agendas for parish council meetings and their minutes, and an occasional newsletter. An additional notice board has been erected in Stinsford, and funds are being sought for boards in Frome Whitfield, and Higher Kingston. Many parishioners bring matters of concern to the attention of the parish clerk or individual councillors, and parishioners are reminded that each parish council meeting (which is open to the public) is preceded by a public session where parishioners may bring up any matter relating to the parish.

Environmental Matters.

The parish plan includes a number of suggestions which can be grouped under the heading of environmental matters. Some of them are addressed below.

Community Compost Site.

Although there is general support throughout the county for the concept of community composting, investigations have shown that the regulations surrounding such sites (licensing, environmental controls, need for continual manning, etc.) mean that they are beyond the resources of a community such as ours.

Housing and Other Development.

The parish is not within an area of outstanding natural beauty (AONB), which makes it a target for developments (particularly infrastructure) which would not be allowed in an AONB, but might geographically be more suitably sited there. Within the parish there are two conservation areas, a historic park and garden of national importance, sites of special scientific interest, ancient woodland, and a substantial flood plain. Consequently, greenfield sites for even moderate development – be it housing or business – are limited, especially if the character of the parish is to be preserved. The parish council also recognises that parts of the parish are ill served by the infrastructure needed by a new business development. Therefore, the council is anxious that existing brownfield sites are exploited to the full, before consideration is given to greenfield development.

With regard to housing, the parish council recognises the reasonable wish of those with an long established association with the parish to continue to live here, particularly the young and those in retirement. The establishment of Knapwater was intended to serve the needs of those in retirement,

but for a variety of reasons the housing authorities have been able to break this criterion. Although housing associations are not entirely bound by local council policy, it is comforting to learn that within Dorset the policy is that public housing is allocated primarily to those with a local connection. Even so, the parish council is anxious to avoid a repeat of the Knapwater experience, and so is reluctant to encourage landowners to offer land for local-needs housing until it can be guaranteed that such housing is indeed used to fulfil local needs in perpetuity.

Energy Conservation. In respect of energy conservation, the parish council believes that because there is so much information in the public domain, and from other statutory bodies, there is no need for the council to add to it other than to encourage individuals to undertake a proper evaluation of the effectiveness of the measures and costs in respect of their own property beforehand. West Dorset District Council has produced a compilation of sustainable technologies information sheets, which is a comprehensive digest of the technologies available, their costs and benefits.

Litter.

The parish is not exempt from the national scourge of litter. Keeping the amount of litter along the roadside and in other public places to a reasonably acceptable level requires the individual involvement of parishioners. This is because the parish council does not have the funds to employ someone to do it, and those authorities responsible for clearing the roadside do so infrequently, if at all. West Dorset District Council arranges an annual district-wide litter pick, and Kingston Maurward College leads the parish contribution. However, once a year is not enough, and there has been a suggestion that individuals/communities undertake their own 'picks' throughout the year. Because of the current litter laws, special dispensation may have to be obtained to allow this to happen.

The parish plan calls for dog litter bins at a number of places in the parish. The emptying of these bins would be a parish responsibility. Dog litter may be deposited in district council bins, to be emptied by the district council on the day of normal refuse collections, provided the refuse lorry passes the bin. The parish council has been told that, perversely, rubbish bins attract more rubbish (of all sorts) than the bins can accommodate, so any in the parish would need to be emptied more frequently than once a week. The view of the parish council is that, on balance, the disadvantages of installing litter bins of either type outweigh the advantages.

Tourism.

Tourism is a mixed blessing. Although it brings prosperity to some, it places a burden on others. The parish council supports the view that there needs to be a balance between tourist activities and their effects on the local community and environment. It is conscious that inappropriate development can degrade the attractiveness of the area. The parish council is mindful of the limitations of the road network within the parish which include the threat from motor vehicles to pedestrians, cyclists, and riders. This is an aspect of the concerns over traffic management referred to earlier.

Business Forum. A business forum has been formed by businesses in the parish. The parish council is anxious to support initiatives by the business community within the parish, to provide employment for those within it. However, the council is mindful of the limited amount of brown-field land and limited infrastructure within the parish to support large scale development.