

ABBOTTS ANN PARISH COUNCIL

Newsletter : December 2006

Strong and Prosperous Communities.

This is the sub-title of the White Paper setting out the proposals for the new Local Government Bill; not many surprises here, as its contents have been well and fairly truly leaked already. It seems to aim for a creative tension between the centralising tendency of much recent Government activity and the principle of *subsidiarity* (did anyone look up *neologism* last month?) which involves delegating decision-making to the authority closest to those affected. For parishes it is appreciative of their role and does seem to aim to make them strong - not so sure about prosperous - and indeed it commands parishes to go forth and multiply. To clarify what may have been rather hazy so far, the main items of interest to us are:

1. Principal Authorities will have the authority to create parishes, with a presumption in favour of creation. Creepily, though, it looks as if the same authorities will have the power to abolish parishes, too. London will be allowed, or even encouraged, to parish itself, and we could even see the parishing of Andover, which, curiously for such a strong and prosperous place, has no Mayor of its own, and should surely qualify for townning.

2. The "Power of Well-being" will exempt parishes from parts of the old Local Government Act which restrict the powers of Parish Councils to spend money for the good of their electors. It is hoped that this power will not be restricted to Quality Parishes and so used as a carrot to persuade more Councils to apply for this status. Though we are sure that no-one doubts the quality of our parish, several of the requirements for attaining that status are obstacles for us, including the fact that (a) we would somehow have to ensure that we have disputed elections, (b) the Clerk would have to take a course at the University of Gloucester; after 50 years of trying to get others through exams, he had hoped for a release from the world of education, and (c) any written work would have to be suitable for readers with no sense of humour. Elsewhere the idea is hardly catching on like wildfire, as of the thousands of English parishes, only some 300 are in the Quality pipeline.

3. Principal Authorities will have to work more closely with Parish and Town Councils in forming policies and plans and give *due weight* to the wishes and needs of local *communities*. The word *weight* arouses fears of the arrival of even more massive consultation documents accompanied by 10-page questionnaires. However...

4. It is proposed also to enhance the influence of Ward Councillors who are local and can actually see and hear the local wishes and needs and maybe get things done with more personal intervention and less paperwork. This is to be done by devolution of *power* and *budgets* to Ward Councillors, described as an opportunity for parishes to work in *partnership* with their Councillors in the next tiers up; it looks as if we will have to be very polite to Messrs. Woodhall, Peters and Dunnett, as of course we always are.

5. A *chance* (much watered down from any idea of an *obligation*) for the shires to become Unitary Authorities by abolishing Borough and District Councils. Cllr Ken Thornber, Leader of HCC and Chairman of the County Council Network, has reluctantly come to the conclusion that in the long run County Unitaries are inevitable, though meanwhile Hampshire has no appetite for gobbling up our beloved Beech Hurst.

6. Extending the power of local councils to pass byelaws. Great, but who enforces them?

7. Allowing Parish Councils to change their names to Community, Neighbourhood or Village Councils. This would ditch hundreds of years of history, but is partly aimed at stopping the perpetual confusion with the affairs of the Church of England. Might it also have anything to do with multi-culturalism (No, it's not in my dictionary yet either)?

8. All Parishes to be exempt from Best Value Requirements. A reading of two pages of legal language indicates that this currently only affects councils with an income of over £500,000, (yes, there are 41 parishes as rich as this) for whom it is a Whitehall-imposed pain in the neck.

9. Parish Councils may acquire the power to co-opt key members of their communities, over and above the existing power of co-option to fill vacancies.

10. Like the Cheshire Cat's grin, the intriguing figures of Mini-Mayors seem to be fading away, as do the much less cosy images of Neighbourhood Managers.

11. Two stings in the tail are (a) the creation of a single Inspectorate for Local Government and (b) strengthened powers for Overview and Scrutiny Committees to view and scrutinise.

The Rt.Hon. Ruth Kelly, wearing her fetching "Communities Secretary" hat, is bubbling with enthusiasm. "We have reached a devolution tipping point." says she, never using one word when two will do. "Parish Councils already make an important contribution to local democracy, engagement and services. We are now able to build on this firm base and move to a more mature and trusting relationship with our local partners. This means passing greater responsibility and discretion from central to local government... We want to put the people back into local politics." And so on into a Great Adventure.

Local Politics. Picking up on Ruth Kelly's phrase, the Parish Council wants to make it clear that at Parish level there are no *party* politics. Each Councillor sits as a representative not of a party, but simply of us parishioners, on whose behalf they look with care, and often with understandable scepticism, at all actions of regional or national politicians of any party which may have an impact, for better or worse, on Abbots Ann. For instance, if the creation of Regional Authorities like SEERA had been the work of that devotee of village cricket, John Major, instead of you-know-who, the suspicious attitude of Parish Councils all over the South-East would be no different.

Litter Bins. After a deafening silence from the Borough, going back to last July, an emailed reminder caused the sudden appearance of litter bins in the four locations requested. They are already visibly being used. The first complaint has already been received.

Graveyard Clean-up. The P.C.C.s annual clean-up took place on November 11th; the volunteers, greatly helped by Mr. Smeddles's ride-on Hoover, nobly cleared leaves and other debris from the Council's Burial Ground and Church Path as well. Together with the Clerk and others they also represented the village at the War Memorial for the 2-minute silence.

Village Map. Mr. Downey has seen to the distribution of the new map to every household in the Parish, including, perhaps to their surprise, those in Burghclere Down.

Telegraph Poles. Hardly had the most urgent of the problems in Little Ann been solved by the removal of the new pole and the re-connection of the wires to the old, condemned, ivy-covered pole in Mr Howard's garden, than a further outrage was noticed. Another new pole has been installed at the lower end of the Old Salisbury Road right in front of the historic milestone erected in mid-Victorian times to tell coachmen that they were 66 miles from London and 15 from Sarum (see the Village Design Statement, page 3). As this was perpetrated by BT's sub-contractor's sub-contractor, the chain of responsibility is hard to establish, but efforts continue. The Andover Advertiser's report and photo nearly got it right under the headline:

NEW POLE DWARFS
HISTORIC MILESTONE

The two main queries so far received have been (a) whether Mr. Griffiths has a twin brother called Brian, and (b) whether there has been a sudden immigration of small people from Eastern Europe.

PARISH COUNCIL MEETING, 7 December 2006

Planning. Two issues are always rising up to haunt your Councillors, namely Conservation and Traffic, and they would not go away during the discussion of six Planning Applications. All six were judged likely to increase the amount and/or danger of traffic on our roads.

Manor Farm, Monxton Road. A third application to change the use of the premises to offices could only increase the number of vehicles going through Abbots Ann and Monxton.

Jasmine Cottage. Mr. Li's proposal to replace the bungalow with two larger houses was considered likely to increase traffic volume to add to the dangers inherent in the existing driveway. The houses were also considered to be too dominant and certain to have a negative impact on neighbouring properties as well as altering the view to and from the Conservation Area.

Out-of-Town Café. The developers are having a second try to slot two more houses into the plot. Councillors were no happier than before about the doubling of the traffic hazards, particularly in view of the poor sight-lines from the driveway.

Gemella Cottage, 5 Catherine's Walk. The fence along the Red Rice Road here has no gates, as the original planning permission contained a condition denying direct access to the street, again to avoid adding to traffic and parking problems at a particularly hazardous section of Red Rice Road. Though realising the tediousness of having to go round the houses to reach the street, Councillors were unwilling to support the request for a gate.

White Smocks. The Council did not consider that the plans offered in Mr. Chao's second application for a two-storey house and garage would change their view that it was out of keeping with its surroundings, unsympathetic to the nearby Conservation Area and liable to make the Little Ann z-bends even more scary than before.

33 Andover Road, Red Post Bridge. This involves a futuristic structure at the far end of Cattle Lane, beyond the viaduct, but is still part of Little Park, where the policy strictly calls for single-storey buildings, so the Council objected to the 3-storey design.

Good News. Councillors take seriously their responsibility to current and future villagers to maintain the character and safety of the village scene, and were depressed by having to turn their thumbs down six times out of eight. So they were glad to be offered some Christmas cheer with an unusual series of items of good news on top of those mentioned above.

Burial Ground. A very amicable meeting in the Eagle between members of the Parish Council and the Parochial Church Council, with the Rector, has ensured that the Churchyard will remain under the control of the Church and so will not pass over to the Borough. Financial assistance from the P.C. will ensure the safety of the memorials and the high standard of maintenance of the area.

War Memorial Hall. All the necessary funding is now in place, and there will be a new roof next summer, so we have missed the cuts threatened by the Borough. Sorry about Stockbridge...

Village School. We have at last come to the top of the queue, and funding has been promised for ensuring a secure future in splendid accommodation.

Village Shop Helped by the votes of its customers, our mini-Harrods has been short-listed for the regional finals of the Best Village Shop Competition, a well-deserved tribute to the hard work of the staff and volunteers.

Correspondence. Some of the Clerk's letters and emails have been answered, including one from Hampshire Highways about traffic-calming measures, ending with those immortal, but in the long run encouraging, words "i* d** c*****e."

Minutes. Full minutes are available in the Village Shop, on the Website or from the Clerk, who wishes all parishioners a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

Next Meeting. Thursday 11th January 2007 at 7 p.m. in the Jubilee Room, which is nice and warm. Members of the public are welcome to attend.

Adrian Stokes, Clerk