



Loughton and Great Holm Parish Council

Chair's Annual Report
To the Annual Meeting of the Parish
Council

16th June 2014



Introduction

This is my third consecutive annual report on the activities of the Parish Council.

My reports for the years ending [31st March 2012](#) and [31st March 2013](#) are available on the Parish Council website, via those hyperlinks.

In this report I shall summarise the activities of the Parish Council during the year ending 31st March 2014.

The financial year of the Parish Council runs from the 1st April to 31st March each year.

This report will be also published on the website of the Parish Council and will be received at the Annual Meeting of the Parish Council on 16th June 2014.

Meetings, membership and attendance

Loughton & Great Holm Parish Council has 10 members; 5 for the ward of Loughton and 5 for the ward of Great Holm.

Members receive no remuneration for their services; they give their time and effort for the benefit of the community.

The time commitment involved can be very considerable and will involve not only attending one full meeting of the Parish Council a month but additional committee meetings and numerous other meetings during the year.

The full parish council met 12 times in the year (twice in April but not in August).

Zoe Nolan was elected at a contested election on 4th July 2013 for Loughton ward following the resignation of Simon Kirkman.

Andy Lovett and Ray Harrison resigned during the year and their successors were elected at contested elections after the end of the year. Andy has a busy career with Railtrack and is involved in a number of other local community groups so struggled to attend as many meetings as he would like. Ray unexpectedly found himself working abroad during the year and eventually found he had to step down due to his non-availability. I would like to thank them both for their cogent contribution to the Parish Council.

The table below summarises the attendance by members of the Council in the year at meetings of the full Parish Council.

(Key : P=Present, A = Absent, L= arrived late, E = left early, L & E arrived late and left early)

Attendance	Apr 8 th	Apr 15 th	May 20 th	June 17 th	July 15 th	Sept 16 th	Oct 21 st	Nov 18 th	Dec 16 th	Jan 20 th	Feb 17 th	Mar 17 th	%
Peter Todd	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	E	E	P	94.4
Peter Ballantyne	E & L	L	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	91.7
Hilary Dyer	P	P	A	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	91.7
Andy Sargent	A	A	P	P	P	P	P	A	P	P	P	P	75.0
Barry Barrington	P	P	A	P	A	E	E	A	P	P	P	P	69.4
Zoe Nolan ¹					A	P	A	P	P	L	P	P	66.7
Andy Dransfield	A	A	P	L	E	E	E	E	E	E	L & E	E	55.6
Don Hoyle	L	A	P	A	A	A	A	E	E	A	E	L & E	33.3
Andy Lovett ²	A	A	P	A	A	P	A	A	A	A			20.0
Ray Harrison ³	A	A	A	A	A	A	P	P	A	A	A		18.2

¹elected 4th July 2013; ²resigned 10th February 2014 ; ³resigned 17th March 2014

Major issues and projects

The Badminton Centre planning application

One particular issue dominated this year – namely the planning application by Badminton England for outline permission to build 104 houses on park land and its current site in the linear park next to Lodge Lake.

Judging by the representations made by residents of the Parish on this application, the vast majority of local residents were opposed to the application. There is usually less than 5 additional dwellings given permission for development in the Parish each year as the area has already been intensely re-developed as part of the new city plan and the remaining green spaces are designated as such.

In many years there are only 1 or 2 new additional dwellings given planning permission. To have an application for 104 additional dwellings in the Parish is a scale of application we have not seen in recent years. The Parish Council played a role in making local people aware of the application by a leaflet drop to every home in the Parish and by holding meetings at which it was debated.

We held a meeting of the Parish Council on 8th April 2013 at which 30 local residents attended to formulate the Council's summative assessment of the application. It was unanimously decided to oppose the application. The major objections were :-

- The park site was not designated by the local plan for housing development;
- 104 new houses was too intense a development in a sensitive site next to the lake; and the number should be restrict to a lower number

- The Council's development policy required developments of more than 15 properties to have at least 30% affordable housing provision. The application involved zero affordable housing provision on the site and required waiver of the policy;
- The proposed layout was clearly intended to maximise the development revenue by packing in the maximum number of large properties into the site, rather than creating an attractive and sympathetic development;
- The plan involves the demolition of the late 18th century stone barn of the former Loughton Lodge Farm which is an attractive heritage asset and such assets should be preserved;
- There would be a severely negative effect on wildlife corridors which are an important part of the linear park. Protected species such as bats and other wildlife would be adversely affected. MK's core development strategy aims to protect the linear parks from development.

Detailed objections to the application were submitted, along with scores of objections from local residents. The Badminton Centre countered this by encouraging their members to submit representations in support of the application. All such representations tended to focus on the benefits to be gained from the new proposed Badminton Centre rather than the merits of the Loughton Lodge development.

Despite considerable local opposition on the hearing of the application, all local political parties supported the application and the application was granted permission on a unanimous decision of the MK Council Development Control Committee. It was adjudged that although the application did not meet local planning policy in a number of material respects, the wider benefits justified the waiving the various conflicting planning policies. There was to be no s.106 compensation provided to local people for this either, as all the development gain was directed to the new leisure centre to be constructed at the Bowl.

This application was controversial. Not all local people objected. Some local supporters of the application criticised objections as "Nimbyism" and that the Parks Trust land was "scrub" land, and the new Badminton Centre would bring kudos to Milton Keynes.

In the end, the decision was made by MK Council that the development in our Parish was a price worth paying for the new centre. It can only be hoped that at the detailed planning permission stage that some of the concerns expressed above can be addressed.

The Annual Meeting of residents

The Annual Meeting of residents of the Parish took place on 15th April 2013. Only 5 local residents attended (excluding Members of the Parish Council). This meeting is intended by statute to be a meeting of local residents. There are approximately 7,500 residents of the Parish in Loughton and Great Holm so a turnout of 0.07% was extremely disappointing and is perhaps evidence of the Parish Council failing to engage with local residents and failing to make itself relevant. This is something which I think the Parish Council should address by aiming to make the Annual Meeting of Residents a meeting which more residents of the Parish would want to attend.

The Scarecrow Trail

Julienne Hanson organised a Scarecrow Trail which took place in Loughton 29th June and 6th July 2013. Julienne had received encouragement from the Parish Council for this venture and we helped to promote the marketing of the event. This was ostensibly a fundraising event for All Saints' Church. However, I was very impressed that the trail united many of the stakeholders of the Parish – from the local Schools (in both Loughton & Great Holm) Scouts, Guides, the Equestrian Centre, local residents and businesses. I cannot think of another event which has involved so many local people in a single event. The particular genius of the idea is that almost everyone has the materials that can create a scarecrow at virtually no expense – all it needs is a little time and imagination. The week ended with a Scarecrow Supper in the Church which was a happy occasion. The “bring and share” supper brought people together to share food together and there was songs, poetry and other performances to round off a very good week. I look forward to the promised return of the trail, next summer.

Change of name

In June 2013, the Parish Council resolved to change its name from Loughton Parish Council to Loughton and Great Holm Parish Council. The name change was subsequently approved by MK Council and our logo, website and branding has now been updated to reflect the new name. I note that on a google search for “Great Holm Milton Keynes”, the Parish Council website now appears on page 1 of the search results. Before the name change, the Parish Council website was nowhere to be seen on such a search and many residents in Great Holm were probably oblivious to the role of the Parish Council in the area. In my view, the Parish Council and the local area is stronger and more united for this change.

The Jubilee Graveyard

I was delighted to attend the [formal opening of the Jubilee graveyard](#) on Sunday 2nd June 2013. This was the culmination of a great deal of dogged hard work to finally bring the project to fruition. The project had had some difficulties so it was a very happy day for me to finally see this project successfully completed. I am sure this will be valued by the local community for years to come and I am pleased that the new graveyard already has a number of burials. Although £8,282 was expended by the Church and a further £6,330 by the Parish Council to make the project happen, we have already seen £8,200 generated in sales of plots and reservations and very shortly the Parish Council will be receiving 50% of sales until our outlay on the project is recouped.

I would like to thank all those from All Saints Church Loughton and Watling Valley Ecumenical Partnership who have worked in partnership with us to provide this local facility for all residents of the Parish.

The new play area in Loughton

On 20th July 2013, I was delighted to attend the formal opening of the [new play area at the Loughton Sports ground](#). In this project we worked closely in partnership with MK Council and with WREN who provided a very substantial funding grant.

The net cost of this project to Parish Council funds was nil as we were able to recoup the entire cost of the project from various grants.

The opening event was a very happy occasion and I was grateful for the Parish Clerk in organising the event and for the Mayor of MK , Cllr Brian White in attending and making a speech praising our work in partnership with MK Council.

I am particularly grateful to Robbie Caddock and Phil Snell from MK Council who worked very supportively with us to enable this project to succeed.

The feedback I have received from countless local residents is that they think the new play area is outstandingly good. It is well used by local children and much appreciated. This is a good example of what the Parish Council can do by working together with MK Council and other local organisations. It just needed dogged hard work to access the resources and to put together and manage a project to realise tangible benefits for local people which will keep on giving back for years to come.

The Millennium Meadow

The Millennium Meadow was created in 2000 by the Parish Council and conceived of as a wildflower meadow.

The Meadow had minimal maintenance input from MK Council in recent years so in 2013/14 we tried to restore the Meadow in line with its original conception.

The “Eco-warrior” group from (nearby) Loughton School planted the seeds in the first week of April 2013. By July 2013, the Meadow put on an outstanding show :-



I was contacted by many residents who walk in the Meadow to say how much they enjoyed the display. The way the footpath winds through the Meadow makes it particularly suitable for such planting. The eco warriors loved watching their handywork grow and noted the extra bees, butterflies and other wildlife it brought to the site.

Great Holm fire station

We have changed the standing orders of the Parish Council to allow for a formal opportunity for residents to attend and raise issues of the Parish Council not otherwise on the agenda of meetings.

A good example of this working well was in September 2013 when a delegation of local residents from Great Holm attended and raised concerns re noise nuisance from the Fire Station. We were persuaded that these concerns were worth exploring and I was pleased to hear that the local station took these concerns on board and the matter was quickly resolved.

MK Play Association open access play sessions

In 2013-14 we piloted open access play sessions in Loughton and Great Holm during school holidays. These sessions have been held on Tuesday mornings and Thursday afternoons in Loughton and Great Holm respectively during Easter, summer half term and summer holidays (approx 8 weeks of 2 sessions a week, total 16 sessions).

It is not always easy for parents to find activities for children during school holidays. Too often children are stuck indoors and in front of screens. MK Play Association promote outdoors play and the particular health, social and educational benefits of creative and imaginative outdoors play.

The Parish Council decided to renew the contract to provide the sessions in 2014-15. We will continue to monitor to ensure the benefits obtained by the sessions justify the costs. However, my opinion was that the participation of local children was such as to justify the cost, and enriched the lives of our local children.

Crime

I am grateful to our local PC Albert Bernard who attended our meetings regularly throughout the year both in person and sometimes through his colleagues.

Thefts from vehicles have been a recurrent issue. I am also concerned that there has been a local rise in burglary which in my view has got somewhat worse in the past couple of years. This indicates that local residents need to be vigilant to avoid leaving vehicles and properties insecure.

The reorganisation of our local neighbourhood police team means that the same number of officers are covering an area considerably larger than before. There is a perception that our Parish is perceived as a "low priority" area and that resources could be diverted into other "higher crime" areas.

PC Bernard will be shortly retiring so I would like to thank him for his service in the Parish and wish him a very happy retirement. There may be further reorganisations of the local neighbourhood police team as a result of Albert's retirement and we will have to monitor this carefully and press for resources for patrols and investigations to be maintained.

The Neighbourhood Action Group

Loughton and Great Holm benefits very significantly from our active local NAG, chaired by Councillor Peter Ballantyne. The NAG has undertaken a number of projects during the year working in partnership with the Parish Council on a number of local projects. I greatly value this partnership and consider it is excellent that a number of NAG members are also active members of the Parish Council. The NAG has for example arranged for the new river birch trees to be planted on the new village green in Great Holm. These new trees look fantastic

and were planted by local people coming together to provide voluntary labour to improve the local area. The Parish Council provided the funding for the trees themselves and I think this is an excellent example of how the Parish Council can work in partnership with the NAG to improve the area. The NAG have delivered numerous tangible benefits to our area and help gets things done.

I would like to recognise and commend the work of our local NAG and all those who have been part of the NAG (particularly Cllr Ballantyne) in the valuable community service they have provided.

Communication

Since becoming Chair of the Parish Council I have been working to improve the extent that the Parish Council communicates with local residents.

The Parish Council now has a new [website](#) which contains a great deal more information about the work of the Parish Council. The numbers of visitors to the website and page impressions has increase very substantially. I would like to formally thank our webmaster, Mike Jones, for the voluntary work he has provided for the Parish Council in supporting our website and emails. He has worked away in the background providing us with invaluable expertise and support. Without his help we would have had to pay thousands to obtain the same level of service. He never complains and always delivers! I am so grateful to him.

We now have a [Twitter presence](#) and have tweeted 1,224 times and gained 587 followers. This helps us engage outwardly with not only residents but also other organisations across MK and beyond. The website embeds the twitter feed.

Our Parish Clerk created our new [facebook presence](#) which enables us to engage with local residents by updating them on our work in their facebook news feed. This costs us nothing but helps us raise our profile

We published newsletters in Spring and Autumn of 2013. These were funded partly by sales of advertising and partly from Parish Council funds. I think there is a role for such hard copy forms of communication, delivered to local residents. The feedback we have received about the newsletters have been generally positive.

Our online residents survey continues to get regular feedback from local residents about the issues that matter to them. So far in 2014 (for example) the survey has been taken 64 times. This helps to identify problems of concern to local residents and we have reviewed the feedback and discussed action we should take as a result of the issues raised.

In January 2013 we began using the free online software mail chimp to deliver a monthly email newsletter to local residents. You can subscribe to this service via the Parish website. Awareness of this has continued to grow in the year and we now have 241 subscribers. The service appears to help to generate interest in and attendance at the monthly meeting of the full parish council. A Parish Council which does not communicate with or engage with local residents is as much use as a chocolate teapot.

The Parish Planning Committee

With the additional resource of our Parish Clerk being employed 28 hours a week, we have been able to establish a planning committee of the Parish Council, chaired by Vice-Chair of the Parish, Andy Sargent.

Loughton and Great Holm are very busy areas for planning applications. There are always multiple planning applications pending. We have not always had the resource to carefully scrutinise, consider and make representations about local planning applications. Meetings of the full Parish Council tend to have a great deal of business to get through so devoting sufficient time to planning matters has been difficult.

I would like to formally recognise the commitment shown by Andy Sargent and the members of the planning committee in establishing and developing the work of the planning committee. The committee has held multiple meetings in the past year and has hosted helpful meetings with developers and objectors. It has carried out site visits, arranged training, liaised with MK Council and carefully developed representations.

I am now confident that all planning applications submitted in the Parish will be carefully considered and scrutinised by the parish planning committee and appropriate representations to MK Council will be formulated. This will work to the long term benefit of the area.

The Conservation Area review

On 7th June 2013 we launched a substantial local consultation on the review we had commissioned of the Loughton Conservation Area.

Hard copies of the [review](#) were delivered to every home in the Conservation Area and surrounding areas with a hard copy questionnaire for completion. An online survey was also launched and featured in the local newsletter. A meeting of the Parish Council was held to consider the draft. Eventually, all of the feedback was written up in a detailed [consultation statement](#).

The draft proposes changes to the size of the area and the introduction of additional planning controls in the Conservation Area.

Eventually in February 2014, the draft was further revised in the light of all the consultation feedback into a [final version](#).

The final version was delivered to MK Council with the Consultation statement and MK Council has been invited to formally adopt the new Conservation Area statement. MK Council has welcomed the work of the Parish Council on the document and they are proceeding with a process intended to lead to formal adoption of the document. I will continue to follow this up with MK Council so that the work done comes to fruition in due course.

Finance and staff

The Parish Council employs only 1 person. Our Parish clerk is employed 28 hours per week (which is approx 0.75 full time equivalent). I would like to take this opportunity to thank Brian

for his service throughout the year. Since his appointment, our meetings are considerably more effective and well organised. I can always rely on him to be on time and well prepared. He has been reliable and hard working and provided sensible advice. He has enabled the Parish Council to develop its effectiveness by establishing a busy planning committee. It is noticeable that since Brian has been able to hand-deliver a full set of papers for our meetings that members come to meetings better prepared and meeting effectiveness has improved.

The annual precept for the year ending 31st March 2014 was £32.05 on a band D property. This is about half of the average level of precept for Parishes in MK (£62.93).

As such we are a Parish Council which raises substantially less local tax than the vast majority of other Parishes. We presently have no office premises and employ less than 1 full time member of staff.

Some Parishes have large office premises and employ many full time members of staff. This means of course that we offer much fewer local services to local residents than the average Parish Council in MK.

A minority of members of the Council have consistently complained that the current level of local precept is too high and should be significantly reduced (it has been proposed by about half). This would involve making the role of Parish Clerk partially redundant and would effectively reduce the activities of the Parish Council very substantially. It would mean, for example disbanding the Parish Planning Committee, not taking on the devolved management of landscape contracting or any other Localism project including asset transfers.

For the financial statements of the Parish Council please refer to the internally audited accounts which will be published on the Parish Council website under "Accounts".

Conclusion

It has been a pleasure and an honour to chair the Parish Council during 2013/14

I am proud of many of our new communication initiatives – such as the newsletters, email updates, the website. I think we are now engaging with the local community much more effectively than in the past. This is likely to promote engagement with local democracy.

We have worked to improve our local area in a number of ways – whether it is in the graveyard, children's play area, bulb planting, Conservation Area Review etc.

We also monitor criminal activity in our area and scrutinise all planning applications.

We have held or participated in community events such as the Scarecrow trail and children's play sessions, which promote a sense of community.

We publish agenda and minutes of all our meetings and publish our accounts and budgets.

The precept for our area is one of the lowest in Milton Keynes.

Parish Councillors receive no allowance and are all unpaid volunteers. I am grateful to my colleagues and to our Parish Clerk for their contribution to making Loughton & Great Holm

Parish Council a success for another year. I believe we have been highly effective and efficient and can be proud of our achievements.

Peter Todd

Chair

16th June 2014.