

Chair's Report - May 2025

I would like to start by expressing my gratitude to my fellow councillors for their invaluable time and unwavering dedication. They have generously volunteered their time without seeking recognition or compensation, providing invaluable support and expertise.

I also wanted to recognise our former Parish Clerk, Joy Appleton, for the work that she often does on behalf of the parish, pursuing Streetcare and others around issues such as the repair of potholes.

However, the majority of the work is undertaken by our Parish Clerk, Nicky Pierce. She not only implements the strategy we have developed but also serves as our primary point of contact with bodies such as West Berkshire Council. She dedicates a significant portion of her time to obtaining responses to various issues, both for our benefit and theirs. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Nicky for her commitment to ensuring that the affairs of the Parish operate efficiently, as well as the planning and delivery of items such as the recent training around CPR and the use of the defibrillators.

This year I would like to begin by addressing Highways, a regular item on the Parish Council agenda, and a subject on which we work closely with West Berkshire Council to monitor the state of the roads around the parish and also to suggest improvements.

Last year, we expressed real concern about the lack of signage around the High Street/B4000 crossroads following a series of near misses and some minor collisions. Both Cllr Hayes-Newington and I had been witnesses to a serious accident at this junction just a few weeks previous to last year's AGM, with some quite distressing scenes and an air ambulance having to be called. This happened again shortly thereafter, and has continued with incidents of varying degrees of seriousness over the past 12 months, occurring with a frightening regularity given the circumstances and possible outcomes. This item has been on the agenda of every Parish Council meeting this year and we, along with several members of the parish, have communicated our concerns to West Berkshire Council. Despite our requests for action being relatively simple and low cost, especially when compared to the expense of calling out an Air Ambulance, we are extremely disappointed that West Berkshire do not appear to have this as a priority themselves. We will continue to push for action on this, and for me it is the single biggest priority in the Parish at this time, as it is for many of you.

The Parish Council has always highlighted that the maintenance budget put into the B4000 through Stockcross and onto Wickham, where HGVs are banned, is not reflected in the maintenance on the lower Lambourn Road and High Street, which this larger traffic often uses as a result, and we are therefore pleased to acknowledge that significant repair work has taken place this year. However, the recent closure of the A4 Bath Road has highlighted once more our concerns around speeding and general levels of traffic on the Lambourn Road. The road is simply not suitable for HGV use, and we have had several situations where the road has effectively been blocked as these vehicles are unable to pass due to the restricted width and tight turns along the length of this road. We have shared these concerns with West Berkshire, who I am informed are 'monitoring' the

situation. This remains on our agenda and I hope that this year we will convert this to action.

Moving on to planning, the total number of planning applications is once more down slightly on previous years, with a continued focus on extensions and outbuildings rather than the larger new builds on empty plots. This is what we would expect given the work that was done in defining the settlement boundary in the previous year.

However, I do have concerns that the Government's push for increased housing will be used as an excuse to push for larger scales of development in rural parishes such as Boxford, rather than a sympathetic and planned approach to ensuring that any development meets the needs of the inhabitants of the parish and is in line with the rural environment in which we reside. I believe that we are already seeing indications of this in recent applications, and I would like to call out Cllr Hayes-Newington for his efforts in representing the parish at the West Berkshire Council planning meetings, and ensuring that applications such as these are refused.

This is not nimbyism; we are a small rural parish in a National Landscape, and we do not have the infrastructure to support increased development, let alone retaining the peace and beauty that is not only enjoyed by its residents but also by an increasing number of visitors who enjoy the walks and sights around the area.

A great deal of thought and discussion goes into ensuring that any planning submissions meet the needs of building and maintaining the diverse and vibrant community that we have, while also ensuring that the rural environment and character of the parish is retained.

An item that continues to baffle me is the amount of rubbish that is deposited on the roads leading into the village, with the High Street being particularly bad. It is inconceivable to me how so much litter does not find its way into bins, and we will be holding a further litter pick shortly. We are also in discussions with the relevant landowners to discuss closing off some of the lay-by areas that attract the greatest amount of dumping.

In addition to working with landowners to ensure that footpaths are kept clear, the Parish Council is responsible for the general upkeep of the area and employs the services of a local contractor to cut the verges, recreation ground, churchyard and other areas of land. This is one of the largest items on the annual budget and last year, following a review, we put out a tender to see if we were still getting a competitive service. As a result of this, we changed to a new contractor. After a rocky start, we believe that normal service has now been resumed and certainly the public spaces within the Parish appear to be in good condition.

In order to build on this general maintenance, we have discussed the possibility of carrying out some landscaping in the village to further enhance its character. We do not

want to take away from the rural appearance but feel that more interest can be created in some areas. We are currently looking for any volunteers who have landscaping experience to assist us with this.

As a Parish Council, this is an example of the sort of activity we consider by being as proactive as we can, and is one of a number of a broad range of issues we consider beyond the more obvious planning applications and footpath issues. As part of this, we continue to work on a new Parish Council plan, looking forward several years to try and understand what a village such as Boxford and the rest of the Parish will need in terms of infrastructure and facilities, as well as housing development, so that we can start putting those pieces in place as soon as possible. Work has already been done on the settlement boundary as I discussed earlier but we believe that it is important that we have as comprehensive a view as possible to inform our decision-making process and that it is in the interests of the community as a whole.

We do hold regular formal meetings every other month, and all parishioners are welcome to join these. I passionately believe that as many people as possible should get involved in parish matters, and there are a number of projects where help would be welcomed by anyone with an interest. It does become harder from year to year to get volunteers to carry out activities, perhaps because people are reluctant or too busy to come forward. A parish such as ours needs active involvement to keep it functioning and to make it thrive.

As I mention each year, it is sometimes forgotten that each councillor is a volunteer, giving up their time to try and do our best for our community. Many of us have full-time jobs and must fit parish business into evenings and weekends, but we try to be accessible and accommodating to parishioners each and every day.

Several of the members of the Council, myself included, have been serving for a large number of years. If there are any people within the parish who are interested in learning more about what we do, or are curious about possibly joining the Council, then do please let us know. I have served as Chair for much longer than I intended, and it was my intention to step down this year, but I would welcome the opportunity to finalise the Parish Plan and would be happy to continue as Chair for one final year if that is the wish of the parish and the Parish Council.

Peter Thompson

Chair 2019-2025

May 2025