

Mayor's Report to 2020/21 Annual Town Meeting (April 2021)

The last twelve months have been unprecedented and I would like to start this report by thanking all the residents of Woburn Sands for their community spirit and cheerfulness despite the incredibly challenging times which we have lived through. I am particularly grateful to the medical and other emergency services which have supported the community, and to the many volunteers who have helped their neighbours in so many ways. Hopefully we are approaching the end of the pandemic and normal life will resume later this summer.

As can be appreciated it has been a strange year for the Town Council. Although we held some face-to-face meetings we held most of them on a remote basis which inevitably reduced discussions and made for difficult decision making. We were however able to keep the Council's business on track and I am grateful to my colleagues for their cooperation and support during the year. Unfortunately we had to cancel the annual Remembrance Day parade and Christmas Fair, both regular well supported community events; the Garden Competition was also cancelled.

Apart from coping with the day-to-day COVID issues the Council faced two major strategic matters – the development of South East Milton Keynes (SEMK), and the development of the East West Railway through Woburn Sands. Unfortunately we have been unable to hold public meetings to discuss these two issues.

SEMK involves the proposal to develop approximately 3,000 houses between Woburn Sands and Bow Brickhill. During 2020 MKC held a number of informal meetings with stakeholders, including the Town Council which resulted in the publication in January 2021 of a draft Development Framework for the area. The Town Council made a detailed response at the end of March which can be found on our website. The main points made in our response were as follows:

- We thought that it was premature to finalise the Framework until the route of the proposed Oxford – Cambridge Expressway had been agreed and the future of the railway had been clarified. In the event the expressway was subsequently cancelled but the future of the railway remains uncertain. Furthermore MKC has failed to produce a long term transport strategy for the area. We have recommended that further action on SEMK be delayed until transport issues are clarified.
- We expressed deep concern at the proposed density of housing. The proposed density in the draft framework is 15.15 dwellings per hectare

which is significantly higher than the density in Woburn Sands and also greater than that proposed for Milton Keynes East (10.84). This has resulted in a reduction in the buffer zones between the established communities of Woburn Sands and Wavendon and the new development, and a resultant need to construct blocks of flats with up to six storeys. We have recommended a maximum capacity of 2,500 in SEMK.

- We have fully supported the concept of a buffer zone between Woburn Sands and SEMK which would incorporate the fishing lakes and football pitches; we have suggested that this should be called the Woburn Sands Country Park.
- We have supported the idea that community facilities should be planned to complement rather than compete with existing facilities.

We await further progress on the SEMK discussions – the closing date for comment was 19 April.

The East West Rail Company (EWR) published their proposals for the development of the line on 31 March. They are running an informal consultation period until June. At the time of writing this report the Town Council has only just received the consultation document and will not be meeting EWR until mid-April. It is however clear that the options before Woburn Sands are somewhat unpalatable. The number of trains on the line will increase significantly over the next few years which will mean much longer closure times for the railway crossing. The alternative of a by-pass is also virtually impossible. We will be exploring the options with EWR over the next few weeks and report back when possible. Hopefully we will be able to hold an open meeting for residents in due course.

One particular railway problem which occurred during the year was the unexpected closure of School Crossing, the pedestrian link between Cranfield Road and the Recreation Ground. This caused considerable disruption and we hope that a more satisfactory solution can be reached as part of our discussions with EWR.

Unfortunately two projects have been delayed by the pandemic. The Sports Hall should have been handed over by the end of 2020 but will now not come into service until the Autumn of 2021. The upgrading of the Recreation Ground has also been delayed. Over 100 residents responded to our survey and the relevant officer from MKC is now drawing up an implementation programme. Hopefully we will start to see some progress by the Autumn.

In financial terms the Council's finances were hit hard by the pandemic. The halls were closed for much of the year but this loss of income was partially

offset by a COVID grant of £10,000. We reduced expenditure wherever possible and did not have to draw down significant reserves.

We saw a wholesale change in personnel during the year. Lynne Stapleton retired from the Council; she was appointed as Halls Manager in 1987 and became the Clerk in 1993. She stood down as Clerk in December but remained for a couple of months to support our new Clerk, Alison Jordan, as she settled in. We are enormously grateful to Lynne for all that she did for the Council and residents of Woburn Sands. Pauline Biggs also retired at the end of 2020 after many years looking after the halls; she has earned the thanks of both the Council and the hall hirers. We have welcomed Sam Townend as Pauline's replacement.

Mike Geddes
Mayor