

## **The Cholsey Parish Council and the Planning Application Process**

In South Oxfordshire, most planning applications are decided by South Oxfordshire District Council (SODC). Some planning applications, such as sand and gravel and new waste management facilities, are deemed to be county matters and are decided by Oxfordshire County Council (OCC). A small number of applications, such as large electricity generation plant or infrastructure deemed to be of national importance, are determined by central government.

No matter who is the deciding body, the Parish Council is consulted on every planning application within its boundary, as well as applications in nearby parishes that could have an impact on Cholsey.

When we are notified of an application, it is considered by the Parish Councillors who sit on the Parish Council's committee. We read each application before discussing it at the Committee meetings, which are open to the public and usually held once a fortnight. We consider the impact on Cholsey and if in our view it meets our needs as a village and accords with relevant policy. We may vote one of three ways: "Support", "Provide Comment" or "Object". If we object, we must provide reasons based on SODC/OCC/Central Government policies and regulations, for example loss of privacy to neighbouring properties.

The SODC/OCC planning officer then takes our views into our account when preparing her/his report on the application. The report will discuss the application in terms of policy and make a recommendation for approval or refusal. If the application is deemed to be minor, such as a small extension to a house, SODC's senior planning officers can make the decision to approve or refuse it without reference to SODC's planning committee. This is done under "delegated authority" to speed up the planning system; it is simply not possible for SODC's planning committee to hear each of the 3,000+ planning applications that make it to the decision stage each year.

If the decision is major and the Parish Council has objected, the application is automatically called in to the SODC or OCC planning committees. We then have an opportunity to address the District or County Councillors and try to convince them refuse the application.

If the application is refused, the applicant has the right to appeal to the planning inspectorate. The Parish Council has the right to address the inspector appointed to hear the appeal, which can either be in writing or at a public inquiry.

In Cholsey and the surrounding area, we have a shortage of infrastructure and services, including secondary school places, water supply capacity, sewerage capacity, capacity in the surgery and parking. Generally, we object to developments that would make these shortages worse, or which would negatively impact on the quality of life (for example developments which would damage the character of the village and make it less attractive). However, since 2011, changes have been made to government policy that make it much harder to object to anything that is considered by government to be "sustainable development", regardless of whether or not, the infrastructure can cope. The changes were made deliberately to greatly increase the number of planning permissions

granted for housing (but as we have seen in our District, this does not necessarily increase the numbers of houses built).

Whilst we will continue to object to development that we consider is not in the interest of Cholsey's inhabitants, we do encourage developers to come and talk to us before they submit applications. In that way we can sometimes influence the plans to improve the development and minimise negative developments.

As Cholsey Parish Council does not have enough funds to employ external planning consultants, examining and responding to planning applications takes a considerable amount of Councillors' and Officers' time. For example, in combination with Wallingford Town Council the team (Wallingford, Cholsey and non-paid experts) dedicated over 300 hours to object to the New Barn Farm sand and gravel pit application. That effort was nearly worthwhile, we convinced most of the OCC planning committee not to vote in favour. Unfortunately, it was approved in a highly controversial manner by the chairman's casting vote.