

KINGS CAPLE PARISH COUNCIL

ISSUES RELATING TO PENNOXSTONE COURT FRUIT FARM

Introduction

At the meeting of Kings Caple Parish Council held on 21 September 2019 I undertook, as a result of issues raised by councillors, to carry out a survey of local residents. The object of this survey was to establish to what extent they had been affected by the noise of the sprayer used by Pennoxstone Court Fruit Farm to spray strawberries grown on table tops in the polytunnels in the Plum Orchard and the Windmill Field. Subsequent to this meeting I discussed with Neil Cockburn my intention to conduct the survey in as neutral a manner as possible so as not to suggest that it was impelled by a large number of insistent complaints. I also noted my intention to leave a reasonable lapse of time after the end of the 2019 before undertaking the survey.

I carried out the survey between 12 and 20 January. I contacted 22 properties located near to the two polytunnel fields. Five of the houses were located on the U71004 between Caple Corner and The Green; the remaining 17 were located on the U71005 between its junction with the C1262 and Caple Corner. Initially all the houses were visited, though one had eventually to be contacted by telephone. The residents of two properties could not be contacted either by visit or telephone and are assumed to have been on holiday.

Spraying

Only at one property on the U71004 was the noise of the sprayer particularly noticeable; this was because of its close proximity to the Plum Orchard. However, at this point the length of the polytunnels was not great because of the narrowing width of the field and there was already an agreement with Neil to time spraying whenever possible so that its impact was minimised. The noise of the sprayer was not a problem to other properties along the U71004, nor to those on the more elevated southernmost properties along the U71005. However, on the more northern stretch of the U71005, between the access track to the Windmill Field and the C1262 junction, here most residents said the noise was noticeably audible and several described it as disturbing and intrusive. The reason that the noise problem seems apparent in this location must relate to the fact that the properties are at the same level as the tunnels and the ground to the east slopes upwards to the bank on the other side of the road, so that the sound is partly trapped.

The varying degrees to which different residents at the north end of the U71005 reacted to the noise no doubt reflect differing levels of hearing, particularly at higher registers, how much different people have become habituated or sensitized to the noise, and what their daily patterns of activity are. Two people mentioned being awoken by the spraying early in the morning and two others described individual spraying exercises going on for a long period.

Given this evidence, it is probably difficult to be prescriptive about what might be the least disruptive time for spraying. In general, it seems likely that spraying when people are still sleeping should be avoided and that spraying should not persist beyond the late afternoon. However, as I pointed out during the survey exercise, it is not easy to plan activity to suit every one, and there are operational constraints, such as the need to avoid spraying in the middle of the day in hot weather, which may over-ride other considerations. I will outline below the kind of liaison that might pre-empt some of these difficulties.

I wonder whether any investigation has been conducted into the availability of a mechanism that might reduce the noise output of the current sprayer. In the medium term

I believe Neil is already bearing in mind the assessment of noise output when it becomes necessary to replace the current sprayer. There are two further factors to be borne in mind when looking to the future.

- Is there likely to be any increase in the proportion of the enterprise's use of table top cultivation or alterations to its location?
- The field between Lightfields and The Homestead is one of the two allocated housing sites in the Kings Caple NDP and there is therefore likely to be an increase in the number of houses in the area most affected by the noise.

Movement of Refrigerator HGVs

I did not raise this matter myself during my survey, but several residents raised it with me. Their principal concerns were the number of vehicles daily and what happened when two met each other travelling in opposite directions on the U71005, and also vehicle movement late at night, sometimes after midnight.

It seems to me that the erection of clearly visible directional signs at strategic points has very materially decreased the incidence of drivers being unable to find Pennoxstone and thereby causing obstructions to the highway. Neil and I have discussed whether it might be possible to provide the transport companies with a directional map which could be issued to each driver. Currently some arrive only with a piece of paper containing the name Cockburn and a mobile telephone number, whereas the notices prominently display the name Pennoxstone, with the name Cockburn much less prominent.

I have emphasized to residents the difference between the S&A and Pennoxstone operations. S&A has ownership of and control over the large vehicles that collect the asparagus every day and the buses that transport the pickers, whereas the refrigerator HGVs that collect the fruit from Pennoxstone belong to a variety of distributors. I understand Neil has some influence on the distributors but not control. I would perhaps think it worth exploring with the distributors whether anything can be done to rationalize vehicle movement and avoid very late night collections.

Several residents have commented to me on the poor state of the U71005. This seems to me to be the result of a number of factors. The C1262 as far as The Clusters and then the U71005 as far as Caple Corner carry the residential traffic for the whole parish with the exception of Ruxton and Fawley; these two stretches of road also carry vehicles bringing in more than 75% of the children attending Kings Caple Primary Academy and local farm traffic, as well as the very heavy vehicles associated with S&A and Pennoxstone. The U71005 is narrow and has frequent driveways off to the west; the situation is made worse by the fact that at some stage a pipe or cable appears to have been laid on the western side of the road. The wheels of the heavier vehicles are likely to impact on the surface where the trench to lay the pipe was dug and subsequently filled. A series of potholes, some very deep, has consequently developed here. As we all know, road maintenance now is seriously under-resourced. The Parish Council will highlight to Balfour Beatty the current problems with potholes in the context of the heavy usage of this stretch of the U71005. The Parish Council is also conscious of the very poor state of the C1262 between Lightfields and The Clusters; this is more serious than a series of potholes and the PC reported it to Balfour Beatty in October. As a result they have made an asset management referral for a complete resurfacing of this stretch. This is likely to take one day or just over and the PC is negotiating for this to take place before the asparagus and fruit picking seasons begin.

On-going Liaison

I have discussed with Neil and Andrew whether there are any lessons to be learned from the liaison arrangements the village now has with S&A in connexion with their asparagus

operation. There is a liaison committee including villagers on the S&A group, but this meets now only once a year. There are two principal means of communication with the village. One is through the publication on the Parish Council website of the minutes of the liaison meetings which outline S&A's operational plans for the current year as well as summaries of discussion of any problems. The other is access open to any villager to S&A's Public Relations Manager who is able to relay any problem arising to the appropriate S&A manager for quick assessment and, if necessary, action. Clearly S&A is a much larger concern than Pennoxstone and the latter cannot be expected to have a full-time PR officer available at all times. It might however be worth considering a named contact who could be available at an agreed number for a short agreed period every day or couple of days. In addition, my discussions with Neil and Andrew suggest there would be no objection to the publication on the PC website of the Pennoxstone Liaison Committee minutes and annual planting plan. In relation to the minutes the S&A group have found it necessary to have a means to approve draft minutes by email contact so that in the case of an annual meeting held at the beginning of the year, residents can access operational plans for the current year. Finally, Andrew, who has been a parish councillor, has indicated he would be prepared to attend the PC meeting after the Pennoxstone liaison minutes had been published in order to deal with any questions.

I hope this report will prove helpful in fostering good relations between Pennoxstone and the village.

Adrian Harvey
Chair, Kings Cuple PC