

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT TO ANNUAL PARISH MEETING 2020

INTRODUCTION

This has been another year dominated by the issues surrounding the draft Local Plan and the planning applications and appeals which have been generated by the lack of an approved Local Plan and a 5-year residential land supply. The pressure for new housing sites in the eastern end of the Borough - the Medway Gap - has not been so great since the later 1950s and then the 1960s. There will more of this under Planning.

And then at the end of the period during March 2021 there has been the complete change brought about by the coronavirus. As March progressed it became clear that we would be unlikely to have our April council meeting or indeed any committee meetings at all. Following suggested advice from the Parish Councils Association as to possible ways forward we held an Extraordinary Council meeting on 23rd March in Church Farm Hall to meet social distancing advice and increased the powers delegated to the Clerk so she can take decisions in consultation with the Chairman, Vice-Chair and Committee Chairs as appropriate. This was on the basis of keeping members informed and consulting where new decisions needed such as on planning applications. We also signed all cheques for bills to that date.

We just made this as the Government issued advice on 20th March later reflected in legislation that to quote from their guidance all "non-essential premises" such as public houses, cafes and community centres be closed and whilst parks could remain open "communal spaces" within them should be closed. Public footpaths to remain open.

Accordingly, our village halls, already suffering a steady stream of cancellations, were closed and also the play areas and balls parks plus skateboard area. Like the Borough's country park, our playing fields and open spaces remain open. Football has been cancelled by the clubs concerned.

The parish walk on 5th April was also cancelled and the Clerk and Assistant are working from home. No doubt there will be more to report back on this most unusual period next year!

In terms of members I am pleased to say the vacancy in the Larkfield North Ward has been filled by Ray Haffenden from Leybourne Park and there have been no other changes. We were however sad to report the death of former Cllr Pat Whelan and I attended his funeral in October.

Amenities Committee

(Chaired by Cllr. Tim Bishop)

At last May's Annual Parish Council Meeting Anita Oakley stood down as Chair and Tim Bishop was elected in her place

On the parish walk front it is hoped to have the cancelled East Malling walk later in the year and the Larkfield Walk is fixed for SUNDAY 25th OCTOBER with further details to be fixed. Also following the demand from last year's event, I intend to have a History Walk on SUNDAY 20th SEPTEMBER at 2.30pm starting at East Malling Village Hall car park. The intention is walk round the Mill Street and Clare Lake part of the village looking at its old buildings and features.

Staying on public footpath matters which are largely a KCC function there have been no particular problems in the last year save from time to time reporting overgrown paths such as that by the allotments through from Kingfisher Road to Plover Road.. There has been an application by the

British Horse Society to change the status of MR114 from The Heath to Kings Hill where it now ends to an old road supported by old map evidence including the Enclosure documents when East Malling Heath ceased to be common land at the start of the 19thc.

Looking at last year's report we have recently been told by the Borough Council after much reminding that we will need listed building consent to do works to restore the WAR MEMORIAL on East Malling Green and the Clerk will be submitting an application.

We have agreed in principle to take over the PUBLIC TOILETS in Martin square, Larkfield as have all the other parishes save one. We understood this was to be from April 2021 and detailed documents are awaited. The Borough have also agreed to put them in good order before any transfer. With the focus of the Borough Council now on the issues arising from the virus it remains to be seen if this timetable will be met. The Government has said it will end business rates being charged on public toilets but this needs legislation to be passed.

During the year there have been several meetings and follow up meetings with KCC about the No 58 BUS and we were pleased it was agreed this would terminate at Maidstone Hospital rather than Martin Square as at first suggested. KCC regard this as a feeder service and it seemed to be doing reasonably well but will now be affected by the reduction in people using buses generally.

This committee also deals with our VILLAGE HALLS and for this year relief was given to Larkfield Village Hall so it no longer pays business rates and this has been repeated for the current year. This is fortunate as it will help in view of the cancelled bookings at the end of 2019/20 and continuing into the new financial year. During the year the floor at Larkfield was renewed.

It should also be recorded in passing that Jack Bennett one of our caretakers who also does litter picking on the playing field and previously also at the country park was given an Award as an Environmental Champion by TMBC.

As mentioned last year we continue to be concerned about traveller incursions on our car parks but still await any changes in the law the Government may make.

Lastly, on Car Parks the entrance to the parish owned car park at Village Field, East Malling has been re-surfaced and a contractor has been found to re-paint the yellow lines and parking bays in the access.

Allotments and Open Spaces

(Chaired by Cllr. Roger Roud)

Roger Roud has continued to Chair this Committee having taken over last year following the sad death of Pam Ayrton.

Looking again at last year's report the possible outsourcing of the Boroughs country park at LEYBOURNE LAKES has not progressed due to continuing difficulties we understand with preparing the tender documents. In the Autumn there were difficulties with the new refuse contract and staff switched to those more priority tasks. I assume it will now be delayed by the extra work and changes caused by the virus.

I am though pleased to report that WHIMBREL GREEN has now been registered as a village green by KCC and put in their register. This gives it like others we have registered extra protection.

At EAST MALLING PLAYING FIELDS the trough now has a great display of daffodils and the replacement trees for those felled planted. We have also budgeted this year to repair the ragstone wall at the west end where it runs along Mill Street.

When I drive past East Malling Playing Fields it is good to see how well the play equipment is used and also that at Larkfield Playing Fields off New Hythe Lane.

We also continue to maintain the closed churchyard at Holy Trinity, Larkfield and it is good to see the roof of the Vestry where the slates were stolen has recently been repaired. It is perhaps appropriate to record here that Larkfield has been re-united with East Malling for church purposes ending the separation since 1949 and re-uniting the both the civil parish we represent and the church one.

Lastly, I record we agreed to make a grant to wards the extra play equipment at LEYBOURNE PARK and it was pleasing earlier in the year to see it all installed.

Planning and Development (Chaired by Cllr. David Thornewell)

It is hard to know what to record as there is so much happening! The BOROUGH LOCAL PLAN has still not been approved and the first hearings to consider it in May have been put back. We are in touch with West Malling Parish Council to obtain preliminary legal advice from Buxton's solicitors about how we can contribute to the session on the GREEN BELT extension.

Meanwhile the big victory last year was the rejection of the BELLWAY application to build on the fields adjoining Malling Abbey. With West Malling Parish Council we had jointly employed Buxton's, Solicitors, to write to the Borough Council setting out our case and they then represented us at the Appeal concentrating on the effect on the listed Abbey plus the West Malling Conservation Area including the approach along Swan Street where trees would be removed. We employed our own planning expert and heritage one too. It was a great relief to receive the appeal dismissal decision.

Meanwhile nearby, permission was granted by TMBC for a further car park for the station off the eastern approach to WEST MALLING STATION. The plan had been amended to delete the access onto Lucks Hill with the tree loss involved and create it off the private rail access road. As I write nothing has yet happened to implement this decision.

There was also an appeal against the refusal of permission for car storage at 260, Broadwater Road, East Malling within the conservation area. This was dealt with by written representations and Christine Woodger was most helpful in providing information. Again, it was pleasing when the appeal was dismissed citing the conservation area.

The last pleasing decisions were that of Liberty to withdraw their appeal against the refusal of 40 homes at Heath Farm off Watringbury Road and later the dismissal of their appeal for houses off Amber Lane, Kings Hill into a field in this parish next to Warren Wood which would have extended Kings Hill northwards. As we rather anticipated the three other appeals for housing on land previously shown for employment purposes were allowed and underlined again the problem of the borough not having a 5-year residential land supply. The Local Plan will need to be amended to recognize these decisions.

The other big site in East Malling is FORTY ACRES where the borough planners are proposing approval subject to a lot of conditions but the meeting to consider this was cancelled due to the "lock down". We await to see what happens next.

AT PARKSIDE, adjoining New Road, permission has been given for the amended scheme for just over 100 homes subject to many conditions and legal agreements. We are here seeking a reduction of the speed limit to 30mph and protection of the trees belt and wall adjoining New Road. This like the following site was in the submitted draft Local Plan.

Further afield but of importance was the Borough Council's decision to approve the WHITEPOST FIELD site at AYLESFORD for some 800 houses being a site allocated on the submitted draft Local Plan and a crucial part of the housing land needed in the Maidstone market area of which it is deemed the Medway Gap falls within. This was however stopped by the Government on the request of the local MPs and we await to see if they will call a public inquiry or allow the decision to be issued.

In respect of smaller applications, the conversion of the Rising Sun PH to 5 flats has been approved which if implemented will mean only the King and Queen is left of East Malling public houses. Elsewhere we await a decision on the houses proposed for THE OLD COAL YARD, New Hythe; a revised application for a site between 166 to 194 Rocks Road on the edge of the village; and also revised proposals for the site on the corner of A20/Winterfield Lane once a KCC Highways depot.

Turing to other planning matters the changes to the New Hythe Lane/A20 junction to ease traffic flows are well under way but now paused again due to the virus. As our proposals to bring in car parking charges for MARTIN SQUARE which were originally put back due to errors in the public notices. Also, on highway matters we did approach KCC and it was agreed a different cutting regime would apply to the highway verge in Lucks Hill to encourage the wildflowers. However, with grass cutting being reduced this may well apply in other areas!

I have not so far mentioned the AYLESFORD NEWSPRINT site but so far there has not been any fresh planning application. We do know however it has been sold apparently for £75m to an American based company that develops sites for warehousing.

I would conclude my report on planning to thank members for putting up with somewhat long explanations and discussions on these planning issues we face; for their support at the public meetings we have held or I have addressed; and for the public in responding often several times with letters and emails to the various proposals. I think the record shows while the decisions might not always be what people we have all had an impact on the final results.

Finance and General Purposes Committee

(Chaired by Cllr. Mrs. Margaret Moore)

It deals with the overall council budget and paying the bills. This year our part of the council tax is £69.51 which is an increase as we thought partly to take on the public toilets and deal with legal fees for planning appeals. With the virus it does allow us to more easily deal with the closure of the village halls and loss of income. It remains in the middle of the parish precepts with Ditton continuing to be the highest at £150.31p at band D and the very rural small parish of West Peckham at £31.29.

One of the uncertainties we were aware of was the decision of the Borough council to cap the amount granted to Christmas lights at £40,000 across the borough but no details have yet emerged how this will affect their grant to Martin Square Christmas lights. We have £500 in our budget as a contribution to what is supposed to be a joint scheme.

Legal matters also fall within the scope of this committee and I am pleased to report at long last we have completed the Lease with the doctors in respect of the SURGERY in CHAUCER WAY. We also need to progress this year our attempt to get our ownership of East Malling village green registered at the Land Registry as it already is under the Commons legislation at KCC.

I have previously reported on the long running saga of the Boundary Commission proposals to alter the parliamentary boundaries. In the latest twist it has just been announced the Government no longer proposed to reduce the number of MPs by 50 as proposed by the Coalition Government so it is back to the drawing board.

Conclusion

As usual I thank all the council for their work throughout the year and all our staff and particularly during the present period.

David Thornewell
April 2020