

Annual Parish Meeting of Upchurch

30th April, 2015

Upchurch Village Hall

Chairman's Report

Introduction:

This year concludes the 4 year term of office for the current Council. Over the 4 years, we have tried to listen to residents views and opinions and, whilst accepting that we cannot please everyone all of the time and some people, none of the time, we have been making changes and, I hope, improvements to the way we administer the affairs of the village.

We are much more confined these days by the priorities and funding issues of both Swale Borough and Kent County Council but we try to work with both to achieve the needs of the village. This requires good teamwork and open mindedness, which I feel, as we have become more used to working together, we are achieving.

It is extremely interesting when you get more involved in the detail and I have spent a lot of time with other parish councillors and their chairmen as well as attended many meetings at Swale. It strengthens the resolve when you hear other areas are having the same, if not worse, issues and good when people work together to get things done. It also makes you realise how much you don't know, so there is always something to learn.

As the Election Day looms, I am able to report that there were 8 candidates for the 9 positions of Councillor, thus negating need for parish council elections. I am pleased to see that most of our current Councillors have decided to re-stand. Sadly, however, we are to lose 2 of our longer serving Councillors, as Pat and Sue have decided to retire from the Parish Council. They have both committed many years to various groups and organisations in the village as well as both being Clerk to the Council before becoming Councillors. This gives them a wealth of experience of village matters. Along with this experience and their support for the newer Councillors comes a willingness to take on projects as required and to accept new ideas and challenges. I am sure they will continue with their other activities, but they will be greatly missed by the remaining Councillors. I can only hope that our 2 new Councillors come with the same dedication and willingness to work with us for the good of the Council and the village. We will advertise to co-opt one more Councillor in the coming months.

Events of The Year:

Last May, For and Against proposals were put before the Council for bus shelter at the Horsham Lane stop. Both were well balanced arguments and it was finally agreed, by a small majority vote, that we would progress a proposal for a shelter, which would detail the conservation considerations, location, cost and requirements for planning permission.

In July we received a request from a resident to investigate the possibility of a lych gate being erected at the main entrance of the church. This was with the view of creating a memorial for those who died in the 2 world wars, currently not commemorated on the existing church memorials, whilst doubling up as a bus shelter removing the need for one proposed opposite.

As something of this nature and location is principally a matter for the Church, meetings were set up with the resident, PCC and Parish Council. We also looked into the matter of missing names from the existing memorials. It was concluded that the Parish Council needed to see evidence that this was a matter of interest to many residents so a request was made for a committee to be formed of residents with representatives of the PCC and Parish Council in order to create a more detailed proposal. The PCC in the meantime would speak to the diocese to seek opinion as to whether permission would be granted for such a structure at the front of the church.

As such, disappointingly, the bus shelter was put on hold whilst we looked into this. After several months of discussion it was concluded that this suggestion was not practical as an alternative bus shelter and that the missing names needed more research and evidence that they should be represented in Upchurch. We have now reinstated the bus shelter project and have had made some progress with the conservation officer in terms of what would be permitted. We are now at the stage of drafting the cost proposal for consideration in the next few months. It has been suggested that we consider this area as a whole and possibly include reinstating a red phone box rather than the existing one – but currently this is just a suggestion!

The Village Fete took place in June. Although not organised by the Parish Council itself, it was instigated by various discussions by them with the view of providing a day where all local groups and organisations could come together to fund raise alongside each other. It was also put forward as a way the village could commemorate the start of World War 1 and give thought to those who served in it. It was extremely well attended and reported as a huge success. As such, it is being held again this year on 20th June in the Paddock with the support of the Parish Council.

Instigated by Michael Apps, a proposal was put forward to plant a memorial tree in the village hall grounds for Barbara Webb, the young lady who lost her life in a tragic accident at a village carnival 50 yrs ago. The village hall committee were approached and fully supportive of the plan. A service was held on 8th August 2014 and a tree planted. This was well attended with both the carnival princesses at the time of the accident present.

The Best Kept Garden competition for the Barbara Webb memorial rose bowl (donated by her sister for the 50th anniversary) took place in July. Our thanks to Bob Quy and the other volunteers for administering the event.

Crime is still an issue within the village, as it is everywhere. Our thanks go to PCSO John Cork for his continued presence and interest in the village. Unfortunately policing is very statistically driven these days so I can only repeat my regular request to ensure criminal

activity gets reported in order to raise awareness and therefore increased allocation of time from the PCSO.

Housekeeping:

Michael Apps resigned from the Parish Council in September last year. Unfortunately we were not as successful this time round with applicants but one interested party did come forward and it was agreed, due to other commitments, that they would wait to stand at election time. Therefore once again we have been functioning under capacity but hopefully at no detriment to service.

In December our Clerk of 6 years also resigned. Claire was a great asset to the Council and worked very hard to ensure all our responsibilities were managed well and running smoothly. As such, it was a daunting task and learning curve for me to understand the role, and what would need to be done, until a replacement could be appointed. She spent time with me explaining the basics during the month of her notice but I now know we only scratched the surface! Due to the timing of her resignation it was not practical to arrange a formal presentation of flowers and gift from all the Councillors but these were given to her on her last working day with our sincere thanks and we wish her good luck for her new ventures.

Fortunately, despite being Christmas time, we received several applications for the role and were successful in employing Julia in January. She is picking things up very quickly, despite my rather limited handover and, with the support of other Councillors, in particular Sue with the burial ground, she is getting to grips with council processes and official requirements. Things may get done slightly differently now, but we continue to learn and seek advice as necessary.

I would like to thank the Councillors and the anonymous residents who helped litter pick the Recreation Ground and Paddock whilst we were looking someone to take on the village cleaner role.

We engaged a village caretaker in August for the Recreation Ground and the Paddock to undertake the litter picking and general maintenance issues. This is working well and, as he has got to grips with the initial duties, and with our agreement, he is expanding them to include monitoring the area around the church and shops and clearing leaves / litter as appropriate. Thank you to Cliff Hansford for his hard work.

Grasstex have been doing our grass cutting for a year now and this is working well. A few teething problems arose, but by meeting with the contractors and discussing the issues, these were resolved promptly and they are also willing, for little extra cost, to take on minor jobs as they arise.

Planning:

We continue to receive regular and varied planning applications. Most are changes to individual homes but most recently, and with substantial impact on Upchurch, are the Medway applications for 2 sites, 1 at Moor Street (A2) and 1 at the top of Otterham Quay

Lane. We also have received detailed plans for the 51 houses at Four Gun Field and a proposal for 41 houses in Jubilee Fields. Public opinion expressed regarding these larger applications is that the village infrastructure and services cannot sustain such an increase in residents and through traffic. All concerns have been put to both Medway and Swale councils.

Allotments:

These are running well we hope, going by lack of complaints or concerns raised by allotment holders. Our allotment representative, Cllr Masson, is getting to know the allotment holders and is regularly on hand to deal with matters on behalf of the Clerk.

Some of our longer standing tenants have released their plots, which were well tended over the years, but we are fortunate to have reallocated them for this year so hope the new holders have good basis on which to start. We have also has someone take on a more problematic plot that has been vacant for some years so we wish them luck with that! We do still have a waiting list which is encouraging to see.

An unfortunate incident where a motorist crashed into the allotment fence resulted in the need to replace a section of it. The driver was fortunately unhurt but, by the nature of the existing fence, the cost meant a need to claim on our insurance.

Recreation Ground:

The old fence along the Oak Lane footpath was becoming rather weak and unstable in places. We secured a grant from KCC to replace it along with the possibility to replace the rather uncomfortable benches with a new one. The fence work has been completed, as I am sure you will have noticed, and we are finalising costs for a bench.

Sadly we have had to remove several of the diseased horse chestnut trees. The remaining two will need removing before they get too infected and we will consider a replacement programme when budgeting for next year. We have had some reports of tyre tracks in the middle of the grass where it has been driven over and would ask if any resident sees such activity that they report it to the Clerk or PCSO if possible.

Burial Ground & Churchyard:

We have made little progress with locating any appropriate land to expand the burial ground so concerns about future capacity are still in our minds.

In looking in detail at the current burial ground layout and plots to project future availability, we have found that we have a number of plots that are in breach of the regulations provided at time of purchase. After initial attempts to contact the individuals were, on the whole, unsuccessful we discussed the situation at length. It was agreed that we investigate the possibility of reverting to the original concept, which was that the majority of the area was turfed, with small areas at each headstone for small plants or memorials. Many will have seen the notices regarding this, seeking feedback and we have had mixed responses. We have listened to these views and are now considering that we approach this by addressing the most

important non-compliance issues such as a rapidly growing tree and other such vegetation and then addressing those graves that appear to be unattended. We do realise this is an emotive and difficult matter to address and are conscious that non-compliance should have been 'nipped in the bud' as it were, so we appreciate matters should not have got to this stage. However, with the finite space comes finite income for the Parish Council and in order to conserve parishioners' money we need to find a way to tend this area at reasonable cost and low maintenance. We would request that anyone that has erected various borders, planted permanent shrubs or trees and also any large memorials contact the Clerk for confirmation of compliance and then take appropriate steps to comply if necessary

The Adopt a Grave scheme in the 2 churchyards has worked well with many graves being well tidied and looking very neat now. Thank you to those residents for their efforts.

Thanks as always to Liz Walters for her work tending the rose beds and general gardening duties in the burial ground.

Finances:

Julia has given you an update on our financial year. I will just add that we are in the process of developing a 3 year budget plan and will be working with the council representatives for each area and any appropriate external contractors (such as a tree surgeon) for advice and future plans for work and therefore expenditure. At the moment we tend to react to problems and this could be avoided if we have a plan for what is likely to need doing.

Highways:

Unfortunately, having organised some speedwatch sessions during the summer, which resulted in a lot of brakes being tested rather than a high volume of speeding cars being recorded, the equipment developed a fault and we could not continue. It is now fixed but we could really do with more trained volunteers to man these sessions. It is proving a good deterrent so you will still see it around the village. Please contact the Clerk if you are interested in helping!

Cllr Arnold continues his good work with Highways on the usual problems of pot holes and faulty street lights. We are planning to conduct a risk assessment on the lights this coming year and whenever possible we are replacing irreparable lights with LED ones to help save money in the long term.

We met with representatives from the Co-op to see if we could do anything to address the parking issues, particularly around delivery times, in the centre of the village. It was fully agreed that it is not just a problem caused by the Co-op, as there are other shops in the area as well as having to facilitate parking needs of neighbouring residents. Unfortunately a proposal to mark a loading bay was rejected by Swale so we continue to rely on the common sense of drivers in regard to parking in this area.

In conclusion:

To conclude, I hope residents do feel they can work with us in protecting the interests of the village and look forward to their continued support and input for Parish Council.

I would like to thank all our councillors for their continued support and commitment to matters of the Parish Council. They give up a lot of time for their duties as councillors and I would like to think are approachable for residents to ask questions or suggest improvements as necessary.

Thank you.