

Annual Report to the Parish by the Chair 2019 -2020

When we ended the meeting in April 2019, at which the Chair's Report on the work of Headcorn Parish Council (HPC) had been presented, as usual, to a group of Parishioners and Councillors (Cllrs), we expected a repeat performance in 2020, complete with the nibbles and wine. However, in March 2020, life changed dramatically due to Covid 19 and the resulting lockdown.

Government Legislation- The Local Authority (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority Meetings) (England) Regulations 2020 -decreed that the public meetings which Parish Councils are legally required to hold, including Annual Parish Meetings (APM), should not take place. Regular Full Council meetings were to be held virtually but the Annual Parish Meeting would not take place at all, although a report for the year 2019-2020 should be produced.

This then is that report which will be filed in HPC records and be available on the website.

Since the previous APM until lockdown, the work of HPC had been continuing in the normal fashion, with Full Council (FC) meeting once a month and three formal committees, set up to cover specific areas and ease the time pressure at FC meetings. All formal meetings took place in Longmeadow Hall, with the exception of the meetings after February, after which they took place virtually using Teams, Zoom or Skype.

Meetings of Full Council (FC) usually take place on the second Wednesday of every month. Cllrs consider matters arising at the previous meeting and review progress before agreeing further action, reports are received from the Community Warden and from the PCSO. Financial payments, receipts etc are presented by the Clerk and agreed by the Cllrs. Specific issues, especially those involving expenditure are then discussed and the Cllrs agree the way forward. Correspondence is reviewed. The Cllrs have an opportunity to comment on the actions of the three formal committees as recorded in the committee minutes. Reports are received from specific issue working groups and on any external meetings where Cllrs have represented the HPC.

A representative selection of the issues covered by FC during the May 2019 to April 2020 period

- Increase in Anti-Social Behaviour and intimidation of traders in the centre of village, culminated in a survey of concerns from the traders. As a result of concerns raised by HPC, a meeting was convened by Helen Whately MP with HPC and neighbouring parishes, Police Commissioner Mathew Scott and senior officers of the Police. The police agreed to increase their presence and activity in Headcorn and a difference was noted by residents.
- Working with Kent Fire and Rescue to locate all fire hydrants and enquiring whether new developments have been fitted with hydrants and registered with Kent Fire and Rescue.
- Spires Ash registered as a Village Green thus protecting it from development.
- Footpath on Lenham Road from Artisan Way to join development to centre of village. Much ongoing communication with developers Crest Nicholson (CN) and Kent Highways(KH) about this issue. KH have a duty of care to road users under the 1980 Highways Act. .
The original planning application showed the path running along the southside of Lenham Road but CN put in new application for a northside path – a much shorter length to be developed, though not as safe for residents who will have to cross the fast traffic coming down Lenham Road. Despite the efforts of KH and HPC, we are still waiting for the footpath.
- "Welcome to Headcorn" Booklet, principally drawn up by Cllrs Dungey and James, was printed agreed, and distributed round local estate agents and new housing developments.

- Planning ahead - for Remembrance Parade and Service November 2020 following a very successful event in 2019. Also survey begun to see if parents were interested in rebirth of Summer Play Scheme in school -previously run by HPC but stopped due to repairs and new building at the school.
- New formula agreed for Annual Meeting of the Parish
- Bug Hotel moved following repeated vandalism.
- Speedwatch equipment new, but lack of volunteers to operate and an organiser of volunteers required.
- Robertsland -gift of 4 acres of land to HPC for preserving as a green area for the parish has yet to be legally finalised. Initial access no longer available so new access via the CrestwayOrbit site negotiated but legal process is taking much time despite chasing Orbit.
- Clerk and Chair attended meeting about MBC Local Plan Review Regulation 18 consultation. It became apparent that despite representations from various Parish Councils, the planners (led by William Cornall) were still not challenging the Government's housing formula which would lead to an ever-increasing number of houses in Maidstone Borough. A strong letter was written to MBC copied to among others, Helen Whately, MP, who raised the issues with the Housing Minister.
- Meetings and communications with Jennie Watson, KH, re Headcorn Improvement Plan (HIP) – a plan of highways issues which HPC have identified as needing attention. Some issues are resolved, others are said to be outside the scope. Issues discussed include safety at Hawkenbury Bridge and speed surveys to counter the rising level of speed at which drivers pass through village.
- CCTV used by Police and others via our operator but High Street cameras not able to record number plates – Cllrs agreed to upgrade.
- Large Gypsy and Traveller (G&T) site called The Meadows was refused planning permission and appeal has been due to be heard by the Planning Inspectorate (PINS) at an Inquiry since 2017. Cllrs therefore were very pleased to hear that all representations had to be at PINS by January 10th 2020 with an inquiry to follow in May 2020. Judith Norris of The Rural Planning Practise has been appointed by HPC, to make the case for rejection of the appeal, and will take Status 6 rights allowing her to represent HPC at the inquiry
- Temporary traffic lights at the White Horse Crossroads resulted in extremely long traffic jams, especially along the A274. Many meetings and conversations involved, with the Parish Clerk and site manager, plus more formal meetings with the developers, KH and our KCC Cllr Prendergast. A way forward was agreed for when the permanent lights were installed, but the situation was not helped by workers installing a large green metal box on Days Green because they thought the pavement was too narrow.
- Request for bollards around Days Green following vehicles driving across the grass to avoid the temporary traffic lights at the White Horse crossroads. Cllr rejected the idea as too urban and spoiling an outstanding feature of the village.
- Data received from Air Quality Diffusion Tubes placed in appropriate positions around the village
- HPC is a member of Headcorn Aerodrome Consultative Committee, a legally constituted body of parish, borough and KCC Cllrs plus representatives of the businesses at the airfield, which was set up to assist with the relationship between the participants following the planning inquiry, - Cllr attends the meetings (usually 3 a year), liaises with the operator as required and reports back to the FC.
- Dr Rebecca Driver, one of the original Neighbourhood Plan Group, has been asked to revive the HPC NP and get it through examiner so that HPC can receive the higher rate of CIL in future (25% instead of 15%). Rebecca is highly qualified and has previously given many hours of work pro bono to HPC, so this time it has been agreed to pay her a lump sum.

- The NP Group, principally Rebecca Driver, were also involved in writing HPC's response to the MBC Local Plan consultation following meetings of Cllrs to discuss sites and Cllr meetings with MBC officers.
- The Clerk after much investigation and harassing of MBC has finally received a schedule of the S106 monies due to HPC as a result of development in the parish.
- Reports from Village Hall Management Committee – HPC is Custodian Trustee and a Cllr attend their meetings.
- HPC is a member of Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC) – a Cllr attends the Maidstone area branch meetings throughout the year and reports back to FC.
- Hammerstream Paddock is often on the agenda – MBC Planning are involved re the unauthorised use of this land which has involved caravans, importation of lorry loads of soil, burning resulting in obnoxious smells. MBC Community Protection Team and Criminal Waste Team are also involved and the site is well known to the Environment Agency.
- Church Lane leading to the Village Hall is owned by the parish, so attempts continue to control the parking, particularly long term parking, and a residents parking scheme for residents without parking living on the other side of the churchyard has been introduced.
- Litter continues to be a problem, particularly the collection of same on the roads outside the 30mph -MBC have said it is too dangerous to collect, leaving residents to risk their lives litter picking. It is hoped that continued pressure will eventually bring MBC into line with other borough councils who do litter pick in such areas.
- Nitrous Oxide cannisters appeared in abundance all around the village and in the outer rural areas of the parish. HPC discovered there is little that can be done as these are purchased legally -the "fun" seeking users can only be advised of the dangers.

Staffing and the Staffing Committee

Staffing Committee meets as required and usually consists of the Chair and Vice Chair of the Parish Council, the Chairs and Vice Chairs of Open Spaces and of Planning. It continued to be chaired by Cllr James. It is responsible for all staff sickness issues, the Clerk's review, holidays and pay rises. The Clerk has been managing the lengthsman and recommends their pay rises and holidays.

Some changes however started in August 2019 when the Clerk, Caroline Carmichael formally stated that she would be retiring from HPC during the Autumn 2020 as she intended to move to India.

It was agreed that a Clerk designate should be appointed and after advertising and a formal interview process, Stefan Christodoulou was appointed to this post, initially working 20hrs a week and joining the HPC on Jan 6th 2020.

The existing Clerk would be there to train the Clerk Designate and the latter would be required to take CILCA and KALC training courses.

Also, changes were occurring with our 2 excellent lengthsman – one wished to reduce his hours by half and the question of an assistant lengthsman was discussed.

Open Spaces Committee

Cllr James continued to Chair this committee which meets once every 2 months preceded on the previous Sunday by a walk around the village. The emphasis is on making the parish, in particular the village, a pleasant place to live. The Committee has its own budget which is agreed by FC.

A village walk was completed before the March 2020 meeting but following lockdown future village walks will be cancelled until the virus is under control, though the meetings will continue virtually.

Open Spaces completed their usual tasks such as the maintenance of the Days Green, Parsonage Meadow, Hoggs Bridge Green and Spires Ash. Additional attention was placed on the latter, where residents freeing carp and goldfish in the pond had unsettled the natural balance and a local ecologist is helping with assessing the area and advising on appropriate measures to correct the situation, including reducing the number of fish.

The ending of the mowing contract with MBC and the purchase of a mower, using S106 money, for use by our own lengthsman has been a huge success allowing the grass to be mowed when needed and not to a schedule.

Other usual tasks included maintaining and improving the Christmas lights and the summer flower baskets, and arranging and responding to the Annual Tree Audit and the Annual Rospa assessment of all play equipment. Additionally, the state of the toilets and renewal of the cleaning contract, plus the condition of the Traders Car Park and fees were undertaken.

However, the biggest project is ongoing and that is the extension of the burial ground at the rear of the Methodist Church. When the Methodist Burial Ground was bought by HPC as a Village Burial Ground it was realised that eventually more land would be required and planning permission was obtained for a section of Long Meadow to initially be planted with trees, but eventually to be an extension to the new burial ground. Negotiations have been undertaken with MBC re the removal of some of the trees and a plan is being outlined for the next section of this area to be used for burial. In the meantime, the maintenance of the existing burial ground is monitored and a new area is developed for those who wish to scatter the ashes of their loved one.

The Planning Committee

Cllr Pyeman continues to Chair this committee. It has been meeting twice a month for some years, but as the number of planning applications has slightly reduced, it was agreed that from October 2019, it will only meet on the last Monday in every month.

HPC is a statutory consultant to MBC Planning on all planning applications in the parish. Since the last report to the Annual Parish Meeting, 63 plans have been scrutinised. This can be a complicated procedure and a knowledge of what constitutes a planning matter for or against the application is useful.

Many of the applications are for extensions to houses but over recent year there have been plans appearing for new estates of houses which need careful scrutiny and conditions, based on local knowledge, suggested to MBC, the planning authority.

Gypsy and Traveller planning applications for site on greenfields continues to cause much concern as the numbers of sites continue to increase, meaning that Headcorn has a higher ratio of G & T sites to settled community than anywhere in Kent. I will make my usual statement here -that G & T's have been in Headcorn for many years, settled in houses or in discreet small sites in the countryside, and they were just part of the community. However, the influx of G&T s due to the use of special legislation allowing the use of greenfield sites, retrospective approval and taking into account social needs -all unavailable to the settled community, is a cause for community division. MBC Planning in their response to the situation have a lot to answer.

Arrivals and Departures

The Cllrs were sad to hear in February 2020 of the peaceful passing of Dr Robert Hardwick who served as a HPC Cllr for 51yrs and Chair for 23years. A tree is to be planted in his memory.

HPC, like several other parish councils, continues to lack a full number (13) of Cllrs. It often seems that parishioners prefer the use of social media rather than to serve on HPC and try to work out issues for the benefit of the community.

During the year Cllr Wendy Tull resigned due to increased work commitments and Cllr Tony Collins- Moore, who was co-opted in 2019, left after only months for similar reasons. I thank them for their community spirit in participating in HPC and wish them well.

It had been hoped that, with an ELECTION due in May 2020, an election campaign could be used to boost the number of Cllrs but the election has been POSTPONED until May 2021 due to the Covid 19 situation. This news came as a shock to those Cllrs, myself included, who had been intending to retire after years of service, and decisions have to be made as to whether to continue for another year.

On the positive side, we welcomed Stefan as our Clerk designate and I wish him well – he has a large pair of shoes to fill!

Finally, my thanks goes to my Vice Chair, Bridget Dungey and the Chairs of the committees -Clls James and Pyeman, for all their hard work during the year. Also, not forgetting our soon to depart Clerk, Caroline Carmichael whose feeling towards the community and hard work with attention to detail have been invaluable.

A long report -different in style to last year (2018-19) but I have concentrated on the varied and often frustrating work of the Full Council whilst still giving some thoughts to the committees.

Stay safe in the difficult time ahead. Let's hope for a prompt return to nibbles and wine!

Lyn Selby

