

Annual Report from the Chairman of the Parish Council

This has been a year dominated by COVID-19. After the cancellation of last year's Annual Parish Assembly, we were hoping that we would be able to hold this year's assembly in the Village Hall, but unfortunately we were unable to do so. We have spent the past year conducting our business remotely online, but I hope that we will be able to resume our meetings at the Village Hall as soon as we possibly can, and I sincerely hope that we will be able to report to our parishioners in person next year, and that you are all able to join us at the Village Hall.

Shorne Village Hall

It is not just important to me that we can resume our business at the Village Hall, it is vital for the continued solvency of the Hall itself. As one of Shorne Parish Council's Trustees on the Village Hall Management Committee, I am acutely aware of the financial impact the pandemic and the resulting closures have had on the Village Hall. The Village Hall has had to rely on Government grants and depleting its reserves in order to survive. But this on its own is not sustainable in the longer term, and it is essential that the Village Hall is able to reopen for business as soon as possible.

The Parish Council recognises that the Village Hall is essential to the vitality of the village, and we have therefore agreed in principle that the Parish Council would be prepared to provide financial support to the Village Hall if there is no other alternative, in order to ensure its survival. But this would not be without its consequences. The Parish Council's reserves are not inexhaustible, and this would affect our ability to invest in other projects, and is likely to have an impact on the parish precept.

Parish Precept

The parish precept was increased by just under 2% for 2021/22, and once again we find that the property charge for Shorne is the lowest of all the parishes in Gravesham. A total income of £38,000 a year leaves little for any discretionary expenditure after fixed and ongoing operating costs are met, and we are dependent on grants for any significant investment in the parish. Difficult choices need to be made, but if the Parish Council is to be able to invest in the parish, then it is inevitable that the precept will need to be increased by more than inflation in future.

Shorne Common Children's Play Area

The children's play equipment on Shorne Common was originally obtained second-hand over 25 years ago, but it is no longer compliant with safety regulations, and it was decided to look into the cost of renewing and upgrading the play equipment. Whilst we were prepared to invest in its replacement, even a relatively modest scheme would have been beyond the means of the Parish Council without entering into long-term loans, and it was therefore necessary to apply for grant funding.

I am pleased to report that we have been successful in obtaining a £5,000 KCC Member's grant sponsored by the County Councillor for Gravesham Rural Division, a £15,000 grant from Veolia Environmental Trust, and a £10,000 contribution from Gravesham Borough Council. With investment from the Parish Council and kind offers of donations from local residents we hope to have new play equipment installed in time for the summer season.

Lower Thames Crossing

Despite the withdrawal of Highways England's Development Consent Order application, the prospect of the commencement of the construction of the Lower Thames Crossing looms ever closer. I will leave Susan to cover this and our ongoing meetings with Highways England in more detail, but I cannot over-emphasise the impact that the construction work will have on our environment. The scale of the construction work will be immense, stretching from Lower Higham Road in Chalk to the north, to Singlewell in the west, and to beyond the M2 junction 1 in the east. When it is completed, we will have a minimum of 14 lanes of traffic between Shorne Woods Country Park and Ashenbank Woods, a 6 lane expressway between Thong and Shorne West, and no direct access from Brewers Road to the M2. Our environment will be changed forever.

Gravesham Local Plan

Also looming on the horizon is Gravesham's Local Plan, in which it is intended to accommodate up to 2,000 new dwellings on land currently designated as Green Belt. Whilst the Parish Council will oppose any plans that significantly impact on the strategic gap between the built-up areas of Gravesend and the Medway Towns, we do not have the power to prevent it, and it is quite possible that the Borough Council will seek to accommodate some new dwellings within the Parish.

Telecommunications Mast

Last year, I was able to report that the unwelcome proposal to erect a 25 metre high communications tower on Shorne Common had been put on hold whilst the infrastructure provider investigated a potential alternative site. In September last year, they informed us that they are now proposing to install a 15 metre mast on private land. This is instead of their original proposal, but will of course be subject to reaching agreement with the landowner, and subject to any planning considerations and consultations that may be applicable.

Parish Council Personnel

I would like to welcome our new Councillor Allison Franks, who joined us in February, and thank all my colleagues for their work on behalf of the Parish over the last year. My particular thanks go to Robin Theobald for supporting me as Vice Chairman, to Susan Lindley for her continuing diligent work as Chair of the Planning & Highways Committee, and to Pauline Clifton who took over last year as Chair of the Footpaths, Properties, & Greens Committee. Pauline's help and support in selecting the play equipment extended to

visiting other play areas to try out the equipment herself, which is a sign of her true dedication. Last but not least, I would like to thank our Clerk Sarah Poole, particularly for making sure we were able to continue with our meetings online. I would also like to congratulate her on passing her Introduction to Local Council Administration, and she is well on her way to obtaining her full certificate.

Bob Lane

Chairman

2020-2021 Planning and Highways Committee Annual Report

I would like to thank for their assistance: the Vice-Chairman John Bugg, Sarah Poole our Parish Clerk, all the members of the Committee and specifically Robin Theobald for all his help and advice.

The COVID-19 pandemic did not have much impact on the work of the Committee, which if anything has been increased as residents had more time to think about their homes and neighbourhood, with a view to undertaking or seeking improvements.

Planning

This year the Parish Council was consulted by Gravesham Borough Council (GBC, the decision makers) concerning 85 planning applications of various kinds affecting the Parish, which is a little higher in number than last year.

There were five applications outside but close to our boundary. These are important as they can also impact on the parish. Examples are development at Knights Place Farm in Cobham and East Court barn in Chalk, and changes to operation of Milton Rifle Range.

Five applications were non-residential: there was continuation of the application for an enlarged industrial estate at the Nuralite site, which despite strong opposition from both Shorne and Higham parishes is heading towards being permitted; two were at New Green Farm where they want to plant caravans for their seasonal workers as well as apples; and two were applications for a barn building on farmland adjacent to Park Pale Yard, which has been refused permission.

There were seven Appeals to the Planning Inspectorate over previous decisions of refusal, of these four were dismissed (i.e. refused permission), one was withdrawn before determination and two are still pending. The Appeal regarding the land adjoining the See Ho public house was dismissed – application had been made to build two houses, but the site is outside the official boundary of the settlement and is classified as Green Belt land. A new and unwelcome feature of the Appeals process is that Inspectors can decide to hear cases under a “householder process” which prevents both GBC and Shorne Parish Council from submitting additional comments even though the householder can do so.

That leaves 68 applications on residential properties. As reported previously there are often several applications on the same property, and a new record of 10 was set this year by one property on Pear Tree Lane where the existing house is to be demolished and replaced with a very fine new, but non-modern, design. Of the 68 applications, one was withdrawn, nine are pending decision, 41 were permitted and 17 were refused.

All applications are examined very carefully, and generally some kind of comments, of varying levels of detail, have to be submitted. All comments sent in by SPC can be viewed on the GBC website plus are recorded in the Planning and Highways Committee minutes, as

is information about individual planning problems. The detailed analysis will be published in the minutes of the next Planning and Highways Committee meeting. Some areas of the Parish cause a lot more difficulties than others. Most applications are reasonable and proportionate to their sites but sad to say some are “over-the-top”, inconsiderate to neighbours and the rural environment and to the Parish as a whole.

Over the last few years there have been relaxations of planning rules (e.g. eight-metre deep rear single-storey extensions are permitted without full consultation). This was initially temporary but has now been made permanent. Increasingly, it is also the situation that some householders are not applying for straightforward planning permission but using the Lawful Development process to bypass this and to legalise proposed very large outbuildings without neighbours or the Parish Council officially being able to object, although we send in our comments to GBC regardless.

Planning matters particularly worth mentioning:

Lower Thames Crossing:

Having undertaken a “supplementary” consultation in January 2020, Highways England (HE) then held a “design refinement” consultation in July 2020 so the Parish Council once again had to review thousands of pages of documents looking for changes and making detailed comments as required. HE then submitted their Development Consent Order application (the equivalent of seeking planning permission but a much longer process) to the Planning Inspectorate in October 2020 so we were expecting to have to go through the processes all over again when, to everyone’s surprise (and no small amount of relief), HE had to withdraw their 40,000 page application as the Planning Inspectorate had indicated that they would not accept it as presented. We are aware that since then HE have continued working towards resubmission, which was originally expected to happen by the end of March but that date has gone by. We have heard suggestions that there may be another “focused” consultation before the DCO application is then submitted later in 2021.

Meanwhile HE has been working on archaeological surveys (no very interesting finds yet), more detailed geology and investigating the location of utilities – they have been searching along the A2 for a very elusive large gas pipe.

Parish Council representatives have had on-line meetings with HE staff to discuss some of the objections and concerns that we have raised in the past, most of which are still valid.

We continue to press for improvements to landscaping, minimisation of tree loss, visual and noise screening and many other aspects on behalf of Parish residents and the wider local communities.

More detailed information can be found in the Minutes of the Planning and Highways Committee meetings, on the Parish Council website.

“Future Hoo” housing developments and London Resort Theme Park at Ebbsfleet:

We continually keep a watch on developments in the wider area that might impact on Shorne, and have submitted representations on both these projects, which are of concern due to potential increase in local traffic levels.

Highways

It has overall been quite a successful year for resolving Highways issues. I am very pleased to be able to report that, after several years of lobbying Kent County Council (who are the Highway Authority), two long-term improvement aims (the reduction of the Pear Tree Lane speed limit to 30mph throughout, and the installation of double yellow lines on corners of Forge Lane that are adversely affected by School parking), have been achieved during the past year.

Highways matters particularly worth mentioning:

Lorries ignoring statutory signs: We have continuing problems with lorries ignoring the statutory “road less than 6’6” wide” signs although they are allowed to pass them for access to particular properties. Our monitoring shows that this does not actually happen very often but occasionally a single lorry can cause significant problems and damage. After prolonged consultation with KCC they have agreed to install new signage aiming to protect Thong Lane and Shorne Ifield Road, and at Park Pale and Higham traffic lights for Pear Tree Lane.

Village gateway sign:

We have been in discussions with KCC over getting a Village gateway sign installed on Brewers Road, to warn drivers that they are approaching a residential area, where there may be pedestrians. It is proving difficult to achieve agreement about where such a sign would be located but discussions are continuing.

Bollards on verges outside Shorne Woods Country Park:

When the Park is very busy people inconsiderately and in fact illegally park vehicles fully on the pavement where there are double yellow lines near the Country Park entrance. This causes pedestrians to have to walk in the road and prevents access to the bus stop and dropped kerb crossing points. The Parish Council is funding, with a contribution from the Country Park, for wooden bollards to be installed along the edge of the pavement areas so as to prevent this nuisance.

Susan Lindley

Chairman of the Planning and Highways Committee

REPORT for PARISH ASSEMBLY

Council Committee on Footpaths, Properties and Greens

This is my first year as Chair of the Footpaths, Properties and Greens Committee, having been Vice Chair for one year. My thanks to Lisa McCluskey for her support as current Vice Chair and also to Robert Hardy who has accompanied me on footpath checks.

Footpaths

There are 13 miles of Public Rights of Way (PROWs) within the parish and most of these are maintained by Kent County Council. Maps showing tracks and pathways can be downloaded from the Parish Council website (under the heading Our Parish). The maps are divided into various locations within the parish. Although KCC have schedules for cutting back the PROWs, it is important that the paths are walked regularly in order that they are kept clear. If you notice that a path is overgrown or blocked it can be reported directly to KCC. There is a link to the KCC reporting page on our website.

Footpath NS171 runs from Green Farm Lane across to Green Farm. Poles and wires have been erected in order to support the apple trees which will be planted and the path now runs between the poles. The KCC Public Rights of Way Officer for Gravesham checked the path and, after requesting the farmer to move a couple of poles, is satisfied that all is in order.

Properties

If affordable, we are considering options to improve the two brick-built bus shelters on the Gravesend Road in order to reduce the anti-social behaviour which occurs there. It will probably be more appropriate (and less costly) to adapt the existing shelters rather than replacing them with new shelters.

The iron railings in The Street are due to be re-painted shortly.

Earlier in 2021 we arranged for the war memorial in the churchyard to be steam cleaned. This has made a considerable difference to the appearance.

Greens

Kent County Council is responsible for the maintenance of our roadside greens and verges which are cut periodically. Where bulbs are planted (Tanyard Hill, Post Office Green, and Chestnut Corner) KCC do not carry out any cutting until the flowers have died back. The Parish Council supplements this by arranging for additional spring cutting where bulbs are planted. We are planning to do some planting in the autumn on one of the verges in Tanyard Hill which currently has no bulbs.

Common Land that the Parish Council owns and is responsible for maintaining:

The Recreation Ground in The Ridgeway is leased to a local football club and the grass is maintained by Gravesham Borough Council. A new gate at the main entrance was installed in January this year. We have recently introduced licensing permits to control and charge for commercial activities on the Recreation Ground.

Shorne Common Rough lies between The Ridgeway and Woodlands Lane. The grass in the small picnic area near Woodlands Lane is cut by Gravesham Borough Council. There are currently some missing butts around the edge of the common, resulting in motorised vehicles being able to enter. Our contractor will shortly be replacing the butts. Last summer it was necessary to prevent cyclists from digging in the woods and constructing additional ramps.

Shorne Common in Mill Hill Lane now has two benches. We purchased a new bench made from recycled plastic in memory of our former Clerk, Theresa Martin who sadly passed away in May 2020. The old bench has been pressure washed, treated with oil preservative, and has a new plaque explaining how the Common was gifted to the Parish Council. The grass on the common is cut by Gravesham Borough Council. It was necessary this year to cut back a small amount of dead trees and branches as a result of the survey done by the arboriculturalist. This is a survey which we have carried out annually and rotates between the Recreation Ground, Shorne Common Rough and Mill Hill.

Crabbles Bottom is an area of 27 acres of footpath, bridleway, woodland, meadow, and orchard. It is a very pleasant area for walking and can be reached on foot from Bowesden Lane or by parking in the lay-by in Crutches Lane. The ancient orchard has many Bramley apple trees which continue to yield very good crops. We encourage you to pick as many apples as you wish for your own use. This year we have had repairs carried out to the fencing alongside the bridleway. The Parish Council employs contractors throughout the season to cut back the footpath and bridleway and also to cut the grassland in the orchard.

Michael Gardens Play Area in Shorne West is part of Shorne Parish but is owned and maintained by Gravesham Borough Council. GBC are planning to install a couple of picnic tables in the area at no expense to the Parish Council.

Litter Patrols

24 volunteers braved the rain on 3rd October 2020 to collect litter from all parts of Shorne. Another 10 volunteers picked litter separately, either on the day or shortly before or after. On 27th March this year 60 volunteers collected over 100 bags from Thong Lane in the west to Pear Tree Lane and Crabbles Bottom in the east, from Green Farm Lane in the north to the A2 in the south. This included Gravesend Road, Shorne Ifield Road and the A2 slip roads at Brewers Road. We are very grateful to all the volunteers as well as those individuals who regularly pick litter when out for their daily walks.

Trees in The Ridgeway

At the end of 2020 The Parish Council was obliged to fund the cost of cutting back overhanging branches along The Ridgeway. This resulted from a request from Kent County Council, claiming that it was in the interest of public safety as they had received concerns from pedestrians and road users, including buses.

Pauline Clifton

Chairman of the Footpaths, Properties and Greens Committee