

Chairman's Annual Report 2021/22

The coronavirus pandemic has continued to overshadow our lives during the last year, but since July we have been able to resume face to face council meetings. Many other meetings, e.g. borough council, training, have still been online and this unanticipated innovation has been generally successful. However, fund raising events were still not possible and this continued to hamper our ability to support special projects.

Parish councillors

There has been a number of changes to the parish council over the last year. The chairman Steve Rickett and the vice chair Caroline Dyer stepped down in May 2021. Both gave exceptional service to the council, with Caroline returning for a second period. Brian Jones retired in April 2022 and we thank him for his wise and astute contribution.

New councillors were appointed in September 2021, Matt Scullion and Tracy Benton, but unfortunately Tracy had to resign in March 2022 for personal reasons. We thank Tracy for her service and wish her well. With just five councillors at present, two vacancies exist.

Landfill site - Solar Farm

A planning proposal to install a ground mounted solar photovoltaic (PV) array and associated infrastructure on the old landfill site adjacent to the village was top of our agenda at the beginning of the year. The planning authority is Kent County Council but almost one year later we still await a decision on the application. The application site is 19 hectares (47 acres) a similar size to the village itself, and temporary planning permission is being sought for 35 years.

Councillors acknowledged the green credentials of a solar park but had concerns about the effect of any development upon Offham residents and our local environment. Opinions were canvassed from all residents. The minimal consultation with the local community by the owners and developers and their poor response at the parish council's virtual meeting with them emphasised a range of concerns. The parish council's formal response to KCC described a number of objections to the details of the proposal.

White Ladies

There has still been minimal progress with fencing repairs to this derelict building and no demolition action has taken by the borough council. This is because a planning application for three detached houses still awaits determination. The parish council remains concerned about unauthorised entry to this unsafe building.

Other planning

A planning application for an additional seven houses at the Barfield site, following the refusal for 15 dwellings last year, has also been refused. The proposal was considered to be inappropriate development within the Green Belt, which is harmful by definition and would result in material harm to openness.

Highways

Councillors remain concerned about the speeding of vehicles through the village. They would like to see Speedwatch instituted but this would mean a significant ongoing commitment from a group of residents.

Our draft highways improvement plan for Offham was reviewed by KCC and their Highways Project Manager conducted a detail inspection in January. Suggestions we made to improve our roads are being assessed and proposals from KCC are due in the next few weeks.

Blaise Farm (Composting Plant/Anaerobic Digester/Quarry)

There is little to report this year about the three businesses within the quarry and no significant problems have been reported. A six monthly online joint meeting with all three companies and interested parties, including councils and the environment agency, is becoming an useful forum.

Gallagher has extended its quarrying work into the adjacent field following a sympathetic diversion of public right of way MR288 and creation of a permissive path to Lords Walk (MR260). Councillors will continue to monitor the works and preservation of rights of way.

Recreation Ground

Councillors continue to carry out maintenance work on equipment, especially within the children's playground. Replacement of the playground equipment is essential and is the parish council's main fundraising objective. However, some significant expenditure is now required to ensure safety is maintained.

Council tax

After two years during which the Parish Council Tax has not risen, this year an increase in line with inflation of 5% has been necessary. The precept for the Parish Council amounts to £23,519 for the year and equates to £58.18 for a band D household.

KCC Bus Funding Reductions

As the year ended, KCC's consultation on the reduction of many financially supported bus routes in the county was underway. It is proposed that bus route No 70/502 from Larkfield to Borough Green via Offham will cease. The parish council has informed all residents and urged anyone with a view or concern to respond to this consultation.

Offham Community Awards

In recognition of outstanding work and contribution to the village the parish council has made the following awards:

Caroline Dyer - Kent Association of Local Councils award
Rachel Godfrey - Offham Parish Council award
George Rothchild - Offham Parish Council award

In addition, in recognition of their brilliant community service, floral awards were presented at the Annual Parish Meeting to eight residents all of whom acted as coordinators for the Offham Community Network for 18 months from the first Covid lockdown.

Communication

Offham Parish Council continues to communicate with residents as much as possible: daily as necessary and by monthly newsletter to those on our email list, on the several notice boards in the village and via our Facebook page. We urge everyone to sign up to our mailing list but for those who cannot, we encourage neighbours to spread important and relevant information and news.

Help

Councillors are all unpaid volunteers but cannot manage all the maintenance work that is needed around Offham. We really appreciate any additional assistance that residents can offer. If you feel you can help out on occasions please let us know via our parish clerk at clerk@offham-pc.gov.uk

To all those who have helped us during this year and to my fellow councillors, my grateful thanks for keeping our beautiful village so well cared for. Huge thanks also to our parish clerk Lynne Mackie for her enormous support to the council and for ensuring that our communication with residents is informative and responsive. I am also very appreciative of the support we have from our county councillor and borough councillors.

Finally...

Your Council Needs You!

Parish councils and the help and support that councillors provide for their communities, only survive if sufficient people put their names forward for election or co-option to a parish council. We have two vacancies for co-option and encourage and welcome interest from Offham residents.

Charles Unter
Chairman
Offham Parish Council