

Annual Parish meeting

The APM this year was held on 4th April in Offham Village Hall and was attended by over 60 villagers.

As well as a Parish Council (PC) report, there was an update on the St Michael's Church renovation project by Rev David Green and the architect overseeing the work, John Bailey, from Thomas Ford & Partners.

Steve Humphrey and Ian Bailey from Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council (TMBC) also gave an update on the council's planning strategy and the TMBC local plan.

Additionally, Spadeworks set up plans, to show the villagers their intended expansion of the facility. At the meeting, we recognised three villagers whose contributions to Offham, over the years, has been 'above and beyond':

Clare Innes - was given the Kent Association of Local Councils award, for her work on May Day over the years and also for her contributions as a Parish Councillor and Governor at Offham School.

Val Taylor - was given an Offham Parish Council award, for her contribution to several Offham groups over the years and the Village Hall.

Stewart Malcolm - was also given an Offham Parish council award, for his contributions as a past Chairman and current committee member of the Offham Society and also for his work as a Councillor on the Parish Council.

Draft minutes of the meeting are available to view on the parish website.

Planning

Tonbridge and Malling Council have been progressing their local plan over the last year and have now ruled out the two fields, in Church Road, that Betts Farm submitted for development consideration, under the "call for site" programme.

The main area for concern currently, is the proposed planning application at Blaise Farm Quarry, to increase the size of blasts from the current 10kg to 25kg. The Parish Council will object to this increase, as and when the application is submitted, and would ask all concerned villagers to do the same. The Parish Council objection is only counted as one objection and does not represent the whole village, so it is vitally important to object individually if you oppose this, as clearly, the more objections received, the more likely it is to be seriously reviewed!

Green Spaces, Trees and the Churchyard

The recreation ground has again been well used over the year and has had an equipment clean and maintenance inspection. There has also been repairs to the cushioned wet-pour flooring in the play area, at a cost of @ £1,200.

As the play area equipment ages, the Council are having to spend more on this each year.

The village has looked really beautiful this Spring, with probably one of the best shows of daffodils we have had. The two village gateways have been spruced up, thanks to councillor Williams and her husband Peter; Wendy has also entered the village in the 'Kent Men of Trees' competition. The trees, generally, are all healthy, although there will need to be some work undertaken on some in Cosgrave field this year.

Tonbridge and Malling have removed their support grant this year, for maintenance of the churchyard; the Parish Council have therefore committed to provide funds to cover this.

The old landfill site (Offham Quarry)

There was some confusion over missed invitations to the landfill meetings this year but that has now been rectified. The main focus for the Parish Council within these meetings, has been concerning the on-going maintenance of the site, with missed mowings grassing over etc. We are now seeing improvements; however, both the PC and KCC feel there is more work to be done. There is an on-going concern about gas migration from the site, mainly on the southern and western boundaries, and this still needs resolution.

The annual noise report for the site was just about passed by KCC/TMBC this year, but aspects were queried at the liaison meetings around timings and duration of readings, as these were potentially being masked by the M20, so these are being amended.

One of the electricity generators has now been stood-down, leaving two in service.

KCC seem to be changing their minds about allowing parts of the site to be moved into formal aftercare, so we do not expect any of the former footpaths to be reinstated anytime in the near future.

Blaise Farm Quarry and composting plant

The composting facility at Blaise Farm has now been taken over by Panda, an Irish company. They appear to have dropped plans to install the anaerobic digester plant there. Panda have invested in replacing all of the filters at the plant and, during that process, there was an increase in malodours, but hopefully this will now decrease.

Parts of the village continue to be affected by the Quarry blasts on Tuesdays and Thursdays and, as previously mentioned, there is real concern over the blast sizes being increased. If you are adversely affected by the blasts, please do complain to :

Jim Wooldridge - Principle Planning Officer KKC at jim.wooldridge@kentgov.uk

Bill Bowley - Gallagher Quarry Manager at bill.bowley@gallagher-group.co.uk

Sarah Hohler - our County Councillor at sarah.hohler@kentgov.uk

Rosemary Ricketts - at the Environment Agency at rosemary.ricketts@environmentagency.gov.uk

The PC are also co-ordinating a log of the blasts and effects throughout the village; please mail our clerk Lynne Mackie at offham.pc@hotmail.co.uk for this.

Village Projects and fund raising

The Book Box was formally opened last summer, by our local MP Tom Tugendhat, and is being well used but, thankfully, not the defibrillator.

The bus shelter has joined the two trees on the green in displaying Christmas lights and Chris Tutte will be helping the PC this year to move the power supply connected to the large tree.

The PC is also planning to refurbish the old village well outside Walnut House this year.

The village improvement projects are funded by two Parish Council activities each year: the February quiz night and the annual calendar, that for 2018 features village gardens. The two raised over £1500 between them and your ongoing support is greatly appreciated - please keep doing so!

Council Tax and the Village Precept Tax

TMBC have changed their Council Tax structure this year and have introduced a 'Local Charge'. This mainly applies to the residents of Tonbridge town, who previously had a lower council tax than the rest of the Borough, as they were not 'Parished'; clearly, this has been unfair for some time. The main effect of this, is that TMBC's Council Tax charge to the rest of the borough will go down. However, at the same time, TMBC have stopped the 'Council Tax Support Grant' and also the 'Additional Payment Grant' to parishes, which has reduced the Offham income by nearly £3,000. This has forced Offham PC to have to increase its precept charge to villagers to maintain its income. Therefore, the net effect to households in the village, is that the Offham tax increase is the same as the TMBC tax reduction. However, in addition to this, TMBC have increased their tax by

2% on last year, and KCC have also implemented a 2% Community Care Tax. Offham PC's income has not increased through these changes and remains the same as last year.

Our Village Hall

The Village Hall is the village's biggest asset and one that, at some stage, most of us use. It is run by a dedicated committee of volunteers, who do a fantastic job and should be congratulated. Due to the age of the building and the on-going programme of maintenance, the hall requires constant fund-raising over and above its rental income, in order to support it and keep it at the standard we all enjoy. Most of the burden of this fund-raising falls on the shoulders of the committee, who are great at it and clearly go above and beyond the call of duty, on an on-going basis. The PC felt that the village, overall, should really help a bit more if it can. In April, a proposal was put to the attendees of the annual parish meeting, to formally 'precept' the Village Hall, which was overwhelmingly (I believe unanimously) supported. This means that, from next year (2018) onwards, there will be a small increase in the Offham Council Tax contributions to each household in the village, of circa £2.40 a year for a Band D property, and circa £4.80 a year for a Band H property. This will enable the PC to grant the Village Hall Committee £1,000 a year, to help in their fund-raising for our hall. We hope you feel this is a small price to pay, to help support a great village facility!

Environmental Improvement Scheme

Following last year's overwhelming support for the Environmental Improvement Scheme, the Parish Council gave KCC approval for the scheme to go ahead. The work was due to begin in July last year, but suffered from technical liaison issues between TMBC and KCC Highways; additionally, it was further complicated by the departure of the principle architect and designer of the scheme from KCC, who it turns out was a contractor and on a weeks notice!

Highways appointed another engineer to take over the scheme, who then made some changes to the plan and had further discussions concerning types of materials and contractors etc etc etc. However, you will have seen that the works have now started and the changes to the plans originally presented to the village, are minor and mainly positive. The work on the mock gullies is the first stage, followed by the junction and verges work; this will end with Teston Road being re-surfaced between the two gateways. Unfortunately, there will be considerable disruption in the village during the works, but considerably more for the drivers who use the village as a 'rat run'!

SpeedWatch

The PC have decided not to reinstate the traditional 'Speedwatch' programme within the village, as we have been fortunate to have secured funding for a 'Mobile SID' (Speed Indication Device), through the generous support of Sarah Hohler, our County Councillor.

This system consists of three permanently positioned poles in the village and a battery operated SID, that is temporarily mounted on one of the poles, enabling it to be moved around the village to deter speeding. The SID has a battery life of around 5 days and also records traffic data. The PC felt this would be a more effective deterrent, along with the enhancement plan, than the traditional Speedwatch in the middle of the village green.

We would still appreciate forming a team of volunteers to help manage and run the SID programme, so please contact Lynne Mackie, the Parish Clerk, or myself if you can help.

Parish Council meetings and helpers

The Parish Council meets the first Tuesday of the month, at 19:30 in the Village Hall Committee Room and villagers are welcome to come along and have the opportunity to contribute to the meetings.

The Parish Councillors are all unpaid volunteers and, you may have noticed, we do an increasing amount of the maintenance jobs in the village ourselves; we are therefore always looking for volunteers to help with either specific work parties or just in general, to keep our village beautiful. We would like to put together an e-mail list of helpers, who we would mail when there are group jobs to be done that required your help. If you would like to help occasionally, then please e-mail myself or the Parish Clerk.

Finally, I would like to thank my fellow Parish Councillors and volunteer helpers, for all of their hard work throughout the year and for the time they have given up to support our village- it is much appreciated.

David Frankling
Chairman
Offham Parish Council