

Chairman's Annual Report 2019/20

This is the first year in my role as chairman and I would like to say how rewarding it has been supporting the village in conjunction with my fellow councillors. I have a truly wonderful and enthusiastic team and we shall be working tirelessly to help residents and to carry out improvements to the village whenever and wherever we can.

Blaise Farm Composting Plant – (IVC) New Earth Group

A detailed maintenance and improvement programme was implemented by the company following a review of its operations and in response to concerns over fly infestations and malodours. Parish Councillors have visited the site regularly and have been impressed with how quickly the work was completed and it was very pleasing to note that very few flies were seen. Indeed the reports of incidences where flies and malodours have occurred have reduced dramatically. However should any residents encounter any problems please contact the Site Manager Artur Wojciechowski at Artur.Wojciechowski@newearthgroup.co.uk and Rosemary Ricketts at the Environment Agency at rosemary.ricketts@environment-agency.gov.uk.

Blaise Farm Quarry – Gallaghers

Quarrying continues at a pace as ragstone is in huge demand. The quarry will continue to expand its area of operations for about the next 30 years. One of the biggest issues that exist are the vibrations caused by the blasting. Although the level of the blasts are well within government guidelines many residents believe that the vibrations could be causing damage to their properties. However research on this subject would indicate that this is unlikely. If anyone wishes to have a vibration assessment carried out at their property this can be arranged by contacting Gallaghers using the email address below.

Should you have any complaints or concerns regarding any of the activities carried out in the quarry you should let the Parish Council know but most importantly contact the following organisations:

Jim Wooldridge - Principle Planning Officer KCC at jim.wooldridge@kent.gov.uk

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

Sarah Hohler – our County Councillor at sarah.hohler@kent.gov.uk

Rosemary Ricketts – at the Environment Agency at rosemary.ricketts@environment-agency.gov.uk

The Parish Council are also co-ordinating a log of the blasts and effects throughout the village; please email our clerk Lynne Mackie, at clerk@offham-pc.gov.uk with your comments.

Blaise Farm Anaerobic Digestion Plant – Blaise Biogas

This is a new facility built in the quarry. It has been partially commissioned to ensure it functions correctly but will not operate fully until the Environment Agency (EA) has completed all of their deliberations. If the EA are satisfied they will issue a permit for the company to operate but it will include strict conditions to protect the environment and public health. The plant will primarily take in animal waste from, for example, the meat processing industry which is then rapidly decomposed in one of the digesters. During this process methane gas is generated which is captured, refined and then piped into the National Gas Grid. This process is supported by government, county and borough councils as it reduces landfill and also produces a beneficial end product. The Parish Council have been monitoring the build and have had several meetings with the operators. We have raised concerns regarding a number of potential issues such as malodours, flies, noise and the impact on our roads of a considerable number of vehicle movements. The plant has been built using the very latest tried and tested technology and we are assured that its operation should not cause any issues and lorries will use major routes and not come through the village. Clearly we won't be in a position to comment until the plant is up and running but obviously we shall be taking a keen interest at all times.

The old Landfill Site – FCC Environment

The Parish Council continues to have regular contact with the company and following correspondence with the newly appointed Site Business Manager, Michael Ross, we have been able to get some remedial work carried out on some of the fencing. A lot more fencing repairs still needs to be done along with tree and hedge cutting. We have been assured that this will be undertaken in the near future. A liaison meeting planned for earlier this year had to be cancelled due to the Coronavirus restrictions so we are corresponding by email for the time being. We are currently awaiting further information about their plans for the White Ladies property which was devastated by fire last year.

Planning

A planning application was submitted during the year for 120 houses at King Hill. This brought about many objections including several raised by the Parish Council but unfortunately planning was agreed because the Local Plan was and still is under consideration.

Amongst several other routine planning applications was another from Kentfield Farm wishing to address as well as to amend previous planning conditions imposed by the Borough Council in respect of the wedding venue business. This brought about a large number of objections from villagers including the Parish Council. Whilst some amendments were agreed others including an extension to the time by which events had to finish were denied. Temporary planning permission will continue until early next year and if villagers feel that there is genuine nuisance from extra traffic and noise from an event held there, then they should register their complaints with TMBC planning who will consider whether or not to give permanent approval. However due to the current Coronavirus restrictions weddings have had to be postponed so it is likely that Kentfield Farm will seek an extension to the temporary planning term.

Waste Collections

Last year saw the introduction of the new waste collection service which turned out to have more than its fair share of teething problems! We are now beginning to see things settling down and returning to a more acceptable level of service. There is still room for improvement so if you are experiencing difficulties please contact TMBC via their website and emailing either Piers Montague – piers.montague@tmbc.gov.uk or Ann Kemp – ann.kemp@tmbc.gov.uk who are our Borough Councillors. The good news is that the changes to the waste collection service have brought about a massive increase in the level of recycling.

Environmental Enhancement Scheme

This scheme has now been completed and a new traffic speed count has been undertaken. This has shown that although traffic speeds have decreased slightly there has been a massive increase in traffic volumes. This is not surprising given the number of new houses being built in the area and unfortunately this is only going to get worse. Having consulted other Parish Councils we have considered additional traffic calming measures but the cost of implementation has proved to be prohibitive. This matter will be kept under regular review and any new measures that could be adopted will be carefully considered.

The mobile Speed Indicator Device continues to be effective and our thanks go to Colin and Sheila for managing the device for us.

Green Spaces, Trees and the Churchyard

The recreation ground continues to be very popular with our children, which is good to see. The maintenance of the play equipment is expensive but as time goes by we will need to replace items rather than carry out repairs which will be at even greater expense. To this end we are setting aside funds on an annual basis to establish a sinking fund for this purpose.

Councillor Wendy Williams entered the village into the annual Parishes in Bloom competition and judging took place in July. The judges were extremely impressed and although we received a “silver gilt” award for the second year running we only missed out on a “gold” by one point! A tremendous amount of energy went into the preparations and our thanks go to not only Wendy but also to many other residents including Ken Frost, Simon Mahoney and his team and Susie Williams for her work in the Pound.

The Parish Council has continued its grant of £1,000 to the Church for the grass cutting in the churchyard which always looks so nice. Now that work restoring the perimeter wall has been completed it is a real picture.

The Methodist Church

Sadly due to a declining congregation the Methodist Church has had to close. It was built in C.1898 and for around 120 years it has been a key focal point in the village and will be sorely missed. Let’s hope that a play group or similar organisation will take over to keep it a village asset. Shortly before its closure the Church donated £500 to the Parish Council in order to pay for a new bench which has been installed in the recreation ground. We are very grateful to the Church for their generosity and it will act as a suitable reminder to all that use it. I’m sure that numerous exhausted parents will also find this to be most welcome!

Village Projects and Fund Raising

The annual Race Night in February was a great success and raised £1300. As usual everyone who attended had a really enjoyable time and special thanks go to the Malling Lions who made it all possible and also to those who kindly donated auction items including those who bid so generously for them!

Last Christmas saw our fabulous display of Christmas lights switched on by our May Queen Sophie Bailey. A donation was made by the Parish Council towards the cost of mince pies and mulled wine supplied by the staff at the Kings Arms which were enjoyed by those attending.

Ongoing maintenance work continues at the village pond in order to keep it looking good although we were disappointed that our annual brood of ducklings failed to appear this year.

Donations

The Parish Council, as usual, made various donations this year to organisations that are closely aligned to the village. This year we gave donations of £100 each to the Offham Lunch Club and St Michael’s Church. £50 to Offham Cricket Club towards the cost of repairs to the perimeter wall. We also made a donation £150 to Malling Lions for their much appreciated help in running the “Race Night” for us.

Community Awards

The Parish Council have discussed and agreed who will be the recipients of the Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC) Award and the Offham Community Award which are made in recognition of outstanding work and contribution to the village. Presentations were due to be made earlier this year but due to the Coronavirus restrictions they have been postponed but will be made at the earliest opportunity.

Council Tax and the Village Precept

We are pleased to advise you that the Parish Council Tax for this coming year has not been increased and remains at £55.41 for a band D household. The Parish Council will therefore receive £21,592 for the year.

Newsletters

In order to keep residents up to date with important information, forthcoming events etc. the Parish Council now sends out a monthly newsletter which I hope you have found to be useful. The Parish Clerk, Lynne Mackie takes responsibility for this and has received numerous complimentary remarks not only from villagers but also from Sarah Hohler, our Kent County Councillor, and a number of other Parish Councils. Well done Lynne!

Coronavirus

I do not need to tell you about the devastating impact of the Coronavirus pandemic. However I would like to tell you about the most heart warming response there has been from so many people in all walks of life to help those in difficulties. Indeed two of our Councillors, Caroline Dyer and Charles Unter, have been at the forefront of the Offham Community Network scheme run under the umbrella and guidance of Rev David Green at St Michael's Church. Within just a few days of setting up the scheme they had offers of help from over 70 volunteers. Many people have said that there has never been such generosity and community spirit since the Second World War and without doubt we live in not only a great country but also in an amazing village. Huge thanks go to all involved.

Parish Council meetings and helpers

In normal circumstances the Parish Council meets on the first Tuesday of the month at 7.30pm in the village hall committee room and villagers are welcome to come along and have the opportunity to contribute. However due to the Coronavirus restrictions we are temporarily having to hold virtual meetings using Zoom.

The Parish Councillors are all unpaid volunteers and, as 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 specific work parties or just in general to keep our village beautiful. We are putting together a list of helpers who we would like to email when assistance is required to undertake certain tasks. If you would like to help occasionally then please email the Parish Clerk.

Finally I would like to thank my fellow Councillors and volunteer helpers for all their hard work throughout the year and for the time they have given up to support our lovely village.

Steve Rickett

Chairman
Offham Parish Council