

CHAIRMAN'S ANNUAL REPORT 2011-2012

This has been an active year for our Parish. The May 2011 elections resulted in a new Council being installed. This Council endorsed the policy of taking a proactive approach to issues and services affecting the well being of the community; and this is reflected in the services provided.

Current services include the provision of street lighting, ownership of Jubilee and Surrenden Fields (the latter on a long lease) and the management of the public toilets. The latter was taken over from Maidstone Borough Council (MBC) and is now well established. New services include the introduction of our own street cleaning service and the installation of state of the art security cameras. We feel that residents should feel secure when visiting our community and these cameras have already had a positive impact on reducing anti-social behaviour. In addition we have funded the implementation of a new drainage system at Jubilee Field. This should enable more effective usage of this important public facility.

The Council continues to make a significant contribution to Borough wide issues affecting Parishes. We have played an active role in the Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC) and have taken a leading role in promoting the Parishes' interests in the concurrent functions debate with MBC. The concurrent functions grant covers work undertaken by Parishes which in non-parished areas is undertaken by MBC. We recognise that MBC needs to find savings; but this is a major source of funding for Parishes.

In last year's report I mentioned the work of the Rural Settlement Group. This group is made up of both residents and councillors and continues to make an important contribution towards developing a Neighbourhood Plan. I should like to thank John Kelly for his work in chairing this group.

As many will know we have received applications from two major supermarkets to develop and install a new supermarket in Lodge Road/Staplehurst Station area. Staplehurst Parish Council organised and chaired two public meetings and these were very well attended. In each case Staplehurst Parish Council held Council Meetings to discuss and make recommendations in respect of these planning applications. I must emphasise that these meetings were concerned only with planning issues and the recommendations made to MBC Planning Committee were based solely on this criteria.

We have a Finance Group which makes recommendations to the Council in respect of the Council's budget and precept. The cost of maintaining services and the introduction of new services has increased costs. This has put demands on our financial reserves which

will need to be increased to meet audit recommendations. The increase in the Parish Precept may seem high in percentage terms, but it is starting out from a relatively low base and in reality amounts to less than ten pence per week for a Band D property. In comparison with other parishes in the Maidstone Borough Staplehurst remains very much in the middle of the precept range for a Band D dwelling.

I should like to take this opportunity to thank our MP Helen Grant and County and Borough Councillor Eric Hotson and Borough Councillor Richard Lusty for their support. Joan Buller and husband Malcolm continue to do sterling work with Speed Watch which is an important tool in regulating speeding through the village; their work is much appreciated. We also very much appreciate the work of the Police and in particular the role played by our PCSO Pete Gardner. Having a PCSO dedicated to Staplehurst is vital to our community and his contribution is also much appreciated. As many will know our Community Warden Chris Lomax has moved on during the year to a new post. Chris was extremely well known in the village and I should like to take this opportunity to thank him for all his hard work. His position has been taken by Mira Martin who is very experienced in this field and we are delighted she is continuing with this important work.

We welcomed Councillor Sam Lain who was co-opted on to the Parish Council after the May election. I believe Sam is the youngest Councillor in the Borough and quite possibly in the County; this should add to the wide range of experience and expertise which the Council can call on. Councillors Jack Davidson and Steve Smith have left this year and in their place we have welcomed Adele Sharp and Anne Gosling. Sue Bassett who has been Clerk to the Council for over 16 years will be relinquishing her post shortly. Sue has been the linchpin of our operation and will be greatly missed. However, I am delighted to note that she will be returning to take up the position of Responsible Finance Officer (RFO). This is an important position and I am sure Sue's knowledge and experience will be invaluable. I should also like to thank Sue for her support during the year. In her place I am delighted to welcome Mick Westwood who will be taking over Sue's role as the Parish Clerk. Mick is very experienced and has very good knowledge of Staplehurst; we look forward to working with him during the coming year. Finally, my particular thanks go to my two Vice-Chairmen Councillor Tom Burnham and Councillor Paul Kelly for their support and advice and to Councillor Paul Butcher who has successfully taken over as Chairman of our Planning Committee.

In order further to develop our communication process we have recently set up a monthly surgery at the library. We need to hear from you.

John Perry