

ANNUAL REPORT OF STAPLEHURST PARISH COUNCIL 2013/14

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT TO THE ANNUAL MEETING 12 MAY 2014

The Parish Council has continued with its proactive policy in respect of the provision of services to meet local needs. These services include amongst others: the provision of security cameras in key areas of our village to make sure that the environment remains and is perceived to remain safe for all our residents, provision of our own street cleaning service to ensure that the streets in the village are cleaned to the highest standard, managing, maintaining the Bell Lane public toilets and the funding of a youth worker for the village's youth club. We have also provided support for the UpRockin event at the skate park which once again has proved a great success. However, the Parade area which is largely privately owned still gives us cause for concern and we continue to work closely with Maidstone Borough Council (MBC) to try to ensure that proper standards are maintained. Another issue that has caused us considerable concern has been the quality of the bus service. We have had numerous reports of buses breaking down, services being withdrawn or not arriving and major problems with children getting to school. Representations have been made to the operator and to KCC. We have also been in contact with the Regulator and have met with our Member of Parliament. I believe some progress has been made but we are continuing to monitor the situation closely. I should like to take this opportunity to thank those residents who brought this matter to our attention and provided the much needed evidence to take this matter forward.

Two main issues have dominated matters over the past year and are likely to continue to do so for the foreseeable future. These are the applications to develop a supermarket and future housing development in the parish. In the case of the supermarket applications the Parish Council considered both applications very carefully. We supported the Sainsbury's application which will be on a brown field site. However, we opposed the application from Tesco as it involved development north of the railway line and in our view contravened MBC's own policy concerning development in the open countryside as set out in ENV.28. MBC approved the Sainsbury application but eventually rejected the Tesco application. Tesco submitted a new application which included some revisions.. But, in our view the changes made were not material and we again opposed it. This application was also rejected by MBC so we now have to wait to see whether Tesco will appeal. In the meantime work has commenced on the D.K. Holdings site which will ultimately be the site of the new Sainsbury's supermarket.

Turning to the issue of future housing; the Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) and the Strategic Housing and Economic Development Land Availability Assessments

(SHLAA and SEDLAA) instigated by MBC have resulted in an initial allocation for Staplehurst of 905 houses and it is this figure that has been included in MBC's draft Local Plan. This is based on just two sites and appears to have been justified on the perceived availability of these sites and the application of 30 dwellings per hectare regardless of the perceived needs for the site. The Parish Council recognises that there is a need for an increase in the supply of housing in the borough to reflect both national policy and local needs. Nonetheless the total allocated to Staplehurst has increased significantly and is very high and raises serious questions regarding the level of sustainability of this proposal. The Parish Council considers that unless a more strategic approach is taken in respect of the major infrastructure requirements involving all the parties concerned there will be significant problems created for the future. Therefore these issues must be considered before any future development can take place; and our Neighbourhood Plan will make the provision of infrastructure as one of its overriding policies. We also consider that the calculation for affordable housing in rural areas is flawed and that a policy of 40% could lead to serious problems in the future. Affordable housing numbers must be primarily based on local needs. MBC has requested comments on their draft Local Plan. The Parish Council along with the Kent Association of Local Councils supports the response made by Kent County Council which argues for a much more realistic target housing figure; Staplehurst Parish Council has submitted its own robust response.

The above leads me on to the subject of the Neighbourhood Plan which Staplehurst Parish Council is currently sponsoring. The Neighbourhood Plan will set out the vision for Staplehurst for the next fifteen years or more. It does have to be in line with MBC's Local Plan ; but, given that it will have had an extensive consultation , been subject to approval by an independent inspector and finally subject to a referendum, will mean that it will have force. It is also targeted to be published considerably in advance of MBC's Local Plan. The process will enable our community to set out its views and influence the final outcome. Clearly time is of the essence and in order to achieve this and to ensure that the approach is professional we took the view that we should seek the advice of experienced planning consultants. This we have done and the resultant workshops and consultation sessions have proved very successful to date and we are well on our way to establishing an emerging plan. We believe that the Neighbour Plan process will enable Staplehurst to set out its views regarding housing numbers sustainable for this village.

It can be seen from the above that there will be major issues for Staplehurst and I believe that we must work closely with MBC to achieve the best outcomes for all concerned. We aim to work closely with our Borough and County Councillors and I should like to thank both Councillor Hotson and Councillor Lusty for the help they have given to the Parish Council and to the community as a whole. Our thanks also go to our MP Helen Grant for her support and for the fact that she has always found time to listen to our concerns despite her busy schedule. We also much appreciate the work of our PCSO Pete Gardner and Community Warden Mira Martin; their presence and contributions are much

appreciated and are essential to the well being of our village. We have recently signed a new agreement with the Parochial Church Council (PCC) covering the maintenance of the Churchyard and I should like to thank our Rector Silke Tetzlaff and her team for their contributions to making this such a successful outcome.

I should like to thank all Council Members for their support and their contributions to the Parish. My particular thanks go to my two Vice-Chairmen Councillor Tom Burnham and Councillor Paul Kelly and to the Chairman of Planning Paul Butcher; their advice and support are invaluable. I should also like to thank John Kelly for chairing the Rural Settlement Group. This Group is made up of both Residents and Parish Councillors and has been a guiding influence in the development of our Neighbourhood Plan.

Finally, I should like to emphasis the key role that the Parish Office plays in supporting our community. This has become even more important with the development of the Neighbourhood Plan; the Parish Council has a strong supporting team. I should like to thank our Clerk Mick Westwood, his Assistant Deborah Jenkins, our Responsible Finance Officer Sue Bassett and our Caretaker Les Reeve for all their hard work and support.

Parish Councils are the first rung on the democratic ladder. However, the Council can only reflect the views of its residents if they are freely given, for example by letter, telephone, personal contact, email or attending Council meetings. Our Village Update remains an important channel of communication and our thanks go to all those who are involved in producing and distributing it; but we still need to hear from you.

John Perry
Chairman, Staplehurst Parish Council