

STAPLEHURST PARISH COUNCIL

Chairman's Annual Report 2014-15

I had the honour of becoming Chairman of Staplehurst Parish Council in September 2014. I followed on from Councillor John Perry, who was elected as a Borough Councillor in the May elections. He was soon made a Member of Cabinet at MBC, with responsibility for Community and Leisure Services. Luckily for us, he decided to stay on as a Parish Councillor and this has proved very helpful to the Parish Council for various reasons, of which more below. My personal thanks go to John for his long tenure as Chairman and for all of his help and advice.

For many years the Parish Council has had an informal policy of proactively investing in services for the Village. Although this has in the past required some increases in the precept (the money SPC is allowed to add to the Council tax to pay for its expenditure) I am pleased to say that this year's budget has seen no increase in the precept for the Parish.

Even so, Staplehurst's place in the list of the 41 parishes of Maidstone Borough is still about midway from top to bottom in size of precept. Yet what does this money buy our residents? We provide a number of services you may not have thought of. These include security cameras strategically placed at various points around the village, which have helped to keep the crime rate low.

The cameras can be moved from place to place as required. The police have made considerable use of them and have told the Council on several occasions that they have either deterred the commission of crimes or have helped in apprehending the culprits afterwards

We have invested in street cleaning, over and above that provided by MBC. As a result we have a much cleaner environment than many other places, which is not to say that much more cannot be done. We are still concerned with the Parade for example, which is privately owned and therefore difficult for the Council to influence. In addition to street sweeping, we have the annual Village Clean-Up, most recently on the 21st March. It was a huge success, producing over 80 bags of rubbish. Thanks to Councillors Buller and Burnham for organising and managing the affair. SPC manages the Bell Lane toilets which are in a better condition now than when the Council took over responsibility from MBC, which wished to close them to save money. The Parish Council also provides funds and premises for the Youth Club so that some of our young people have something to do each week. Thanks to Councillors Butcher and Kelly for organising that.

A lesser known service provided by the Council is the annual Playscheme project at the Kathie Lamb Guide Centre on Jubilee Field. During August the Council subsidises places for children to help parents during the summer holidays. This takes money, but also a lot of organisation effort by Councillors Buller (again!), Burnham and Kemp.

The last service I would like to mention is the availability of the Jubilee Field itself. The Council subcontracts the running of the football fields to user groups, but

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ultimately the Council underwrites the running costs and is the legal owner of the field. I know that there are many who are pleased to use the facilities available there and that is what the Council is here to promote. There are a number of other services for which the Council is responsible, but I will not go into all of them here.

A new project for the Council is the Oliver Road Open Space. Developers are building an estate at the south of Oliver Road and as part of the package are in negotiations with the Council to give a parcel of wilderness land to the Council for the Parish. They have already put considerable resources into managing the plot and the Council looks forward to taking it over in good condition. It is very exciting to have a new parcel of open land and I look forward to villagers enjoying it for the foreseeable future.

Not all of the issues that happen in the Parish are in the hands of the Council and yet may be of great importance to those of us who live here. The main issue facing Staplehurst in the next 10 to 20 years is a large increase in housing due to Central Government policy and the interpretation of it by MBC. You will have heard through the Neighbourhood Plan events and otherwise of MBC's original plan to allow for the building of 905 new houses here.

On top of that their planning officers recently suggested adding another 220. This went to MBC's Planning and Scrutiny Committee and then to the Cabinet. Due in no small part to the efforts of Parish Councillors and others, and especially the tireless work of Councillor Perry, first the extra 220 were thrown out and then the earlier 905 was reduced to about 650 houses. Councillors sat through well over 30 hours of MBC meetings to put the Parish's points over.

No one is saying that Staplehurst must not grow, but planners must be sensible in their aims. In particular, the infrastructure problem of the piecemeal developments of the past has at last been recognised and MBC has agreed that the sewerage and clean water problems must be settled before future development occurs.

Our thanks go to many individuals for their work in the past year: to our MP, Helen Grant, especially her interest in the sewerage and bus problems; to our Borough Councillors, John Perry and Paulina Watson, for their able representation of Staplehurst. I must mention too, PCSO Pete Gardner and Community Warden Mira Martin for their work here. Thanks to all councillors, whether named or not, who have all contributed well above merely 'turning up' to council meetings. (Thanks to our Council audiences too; you keep us honest!)

Lastly thanks to Chairman John Kelly and the Rural Settlement Group for piloting the Neighbourhood Plan towards Regulation 16 for Borough-wide consultation before it goes to the inspector for a final sanity check and then a Parish referendum.

Rory Silkin.