

Annual Report

Eric Hotson County Councillor Maidstone Rural South

A year of sadness, frustration and desperation, but one where we continued to work together for the benefit of all.

I drove home from County Hall on 15th March 2020 and have not returned since. I, like you and many others, have been carrying out my role in a virtual world.

Astonishingly, within days of lockdown, residents of Staplehurst enquired of neighbours as to their wellbeing and in no time volunteers were everywhere. They ran errands, made up food parcels and provided a contact for elderly and those in need.

I willingly, from my Member Grant facility, gave £1,000 to the Parish Council to distribute accordingly. And still the volunteer work continues. Truly remarkable!

Staplehurst Parish Council is extremely fortunate to have the services of an excellent Clerk, Deputy and Support Officer and this year Mick (now retired), Alison, Deborah and Jean have excelled.

There has been no 'easing down' on Councillor duties and I am well aware of your efforts and workload throughout the year. I believe we work well as a team and I am truly thankful for the support given.

I detail below some of the Parish matters covered over the past year.

HOUSING

I have supported residents and the Parish Council, by written representation, in their objections to the 2 additional sites detailed in the draft Regulation 18b Preferred Approach. The next Call for Sites consultation is due in June/July and, hopefully, your policy considerations and evidence will have been taken into account and supported by your Borough Councillors.

I based much of my objections on the lack of employment and highway infrastructure. In 2020, Maidstone Borough Council and Kent County Council jointly commissioned a Transport Modelling Assessment. A key recommendation from the study was that the Local Plan review should move away from a reliance of allocating sites in Rural Service Centres (Staplehurst, Headcorn and Marden) and large villages (Langley, Boughton Monchelsea and Sutton Valence) which are less likely to be able to deliver significant sustainable transport improvements. Reference is also made to existing congestion and air quality issues along the A229 and A274 corridors.

It cannot be right for residents of the Slaney Road estate to take up to 20 minutes to get from their driveways to the main road during peak times. I am sure the same applies to properties off of Marden Road.

HIGHWAYS

Your Highway Improvement Plan will prioritise schemes within the Parish and, as always, I will assist if problems occur.

Millions of pounds are spent every year on repairs, particularly potholes. Pedestrians, cyclists and motorists cannot see evidence of such spending. Trials are taking place in the north of the County with an additive called Graphene which prolongs the life span of paved and resurfacing areas. Other road surfacing innovations/trials are in the pipeline with low temperature asphalt (easier to use, plus reduced environment/emissions impact and a cheaper cost impact). I hope we see the introduction before next winter.

POLICING

The Chief Constable gave a presentation to Kent County Councillors a month or two before the pandemic arrived. He advised that a large recruitment programme had taken place and the first consignment of recruits were being trained. We have to appreciate that Covid 19 has placed additional duties upon the Force as has Brexit transition.

Residents in rural Maidstone tell me they want to see a police presence – petty crimes are on the increase and there are pockets of anti-social behaviour being reported but no action taken.

However, of greater concern is the lack of speeding enforcement. In his presentation, the Chief Constable promised Rural Teams. Hopefully, these are now in place.

SURFACE and FOUL WATER DRAINAGE

My postbag has more and more complaints relating to flooding issues. The Environment Agency advise that there are 60,000 properties (residential and commercial) in England at risk of flooding from rivers and the sea. This may be due to climate change, of course, but, with more housing, we are witnessing real complaints of surface water flooding and associated drainage problems.

Protection against these issues is important and Surface Water Management Plans may have to be updated. I would support updating if this was the wish of the Parish Council.

LIBRARY and YOUTH FACILITIES

Residents and the Parish Council are well aware of my disgust that KCC are ignoring our pleas for the re-opening of the Library. Subject to what happens on 6th May, I will request that the relevant Director or Cabinet Member to meet with the Parish Council on site to explain their reasonings for the continued closure.

Hopefully a full youth service will resume at the earliest opportunity with a physical County officer presence.

These are a few of the issues considered and covered over the past year.

My very best wishes to you all.

Eric Hotson
County Councillor Maidstone Rural South