

Wittersham Parish Council Annual Parish Meeting held on 28th April 2016

Once again, good evening everyone.

This is going to be my last Annual Parish Meeting for Wittersham, having almost completed eleven years on the Parish Council (PC), ten of them as your Chairman. So tonight, I am not only going to talk about the last twelve months in some detail but I am also going to reflect on the last decade for the Parish Council and what, as I see it, the future might hold for us all.

First of all, I would like to remind everyone that being a Parish Councillor is an unpaid role, volunteering for public service, something I will come back to later. Our councillors give their time to support our village community freely, and none of our councillors claim expenses, and that includes travel. In fact, the Parish & Town Council layer of Local Government, the '*third-tier*', is nationally recognised as being the most cost-effective of all ~ far better than District and County Councils. Money raised by way of Precept, our portion of the Council Tax collected each year by Ashford Borough Council, is all spent locally for the benefit of our community.

So it is all the more remarkable that, across England, there are over 80,000 Parish and Town Councillors working to do what they believe to be in their community's best interest. None more so than for our own Parish Council. In no particular order, I would like to sincerely thank my colleagues for their support to the Parish Council, and their community, over the last twelve months:

- Cllr Sue Mash
- Cllr Jeremy Smith (Vice Chairman)
- Cllr Nigel Thom
- Cllr Paul Venning
- Cllr David Green
- Cllr George Parkin

Wittersham Parish Council employs two members of staff: Our Clerk, effectively our '*Chief Executive*', Yvonne Osborne, employed on a part-time basis (although she always seems to be doing far more hours than we ever pay her!) and Alf Mather, our full-time Village Caretaker.

Yvonne, as Clerk, is the golden thread that runs through all that the PC does. She answers questions from the public, via emails, phone calls, in person as she walks around the village, and also at the Community Market Parish Desk on the first Tuesday of each month. She works very hard not only to find the information that members of the parish ask her for, but she also liaises with Ashford Borough Council (ABC) on the Parish Council's behalf, and with other outside agencies, groups and companies. It is not unusual for Yvonne to check with ABC's planners when, for example, she spots that they might not have included all the correct houses in a consultation, or if the latest date for a response needs to be deferred so that the Parish Council can comment effectively. She also makes very good use of the legal and information services we receive from being members of the Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC), to which I have the honour of being County President. This means Yvonne keeps up to date and '*on the ball*'! Wittersham is very lucky to have such a hard-working, efficient and knowledgeable Clerk! Thank you Yvonne, for all your support and all that unpaid overtime you spend carrying out your tasks for the good of us all.

Alf, as our Village Caretaker, was an absolute breath of fresh air when he took over from the short-lived previous incumbent! What a difference he has made to our village, and to Stone-cum-Ebony, Kenardington and Warehorne with whom we work with as part of our caretaker scheme. We have

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been able to use Kent County Council (KCC) money and ABC money, spent in the four villages mentioned, to continue not only to provide the same level of service but also a great deal more, to a higher degree of flexibility and standard. Alf is certainly the kind of guy who goes that extra mile, often literally, and has an excellent work ethic along with high personal pride in all that he does. We are very fortunate to have him as our caretaker, as many of you will already know, so I would like to take this opportunity to formally thank him, once again, for a job very well done over the last 12 months!

Your Parish Council also has the benefit of others that give their time freely to the benefit of us all:

- ✓ To those who give Alf a cup of tea ~ which he does appreciate.
- ✓ Phil Willcocks, Tree Warden, and Dave Fletcher for their advice.
- ✓ Lexie Datta, and her team for continued work on the Triangle.
- ✓ Those residents who pick up litter when they see it, especially Peter Dahlhoff and Janet Tidd.
- ✓ David Izzard for clearing the bottom of the hedge along Poplar Road while we wait for KCC Highways to do it!
- ✓ Tony Bullock for personally contacting KCC Highways with highway matters, and those residents who use the online fault reporting tool to report problems.
- ✓ Paul Stern for starting to rectify the problem of flooding in the gateway of PROW AT82.
- ✓ David Chesson for being our Internal Auditor.

We are very fortunate to have residents who are supportive and work with the PC in order to improve our village and its community. I know the PC are very grateful to them all ~ so I thank them, on behalf of the Parish Council, for their not inconsiderable time spent over the last twelve months.

Now, to shamelessly misquote Monty Python's Flying Circus: '***So what has your Parish Council ever done for you?***' Quite a lot over the last twelve months, actually!

We started the year with the PC elections that took place in May 2015. As not enough people put their names forward for election, those existing Councillors wishing to stand were elected unopposed. After advertising in the the Outlook-On-Oxney magazine and on the PC Notice Boards, two names were put forward and duly co-opted at the June PC meeting: Cllrs Green and Parkin.

From the election, in no particular order, the PC has carried out the following:

- Rev. Judy Darkins was successfully put forward for the **2015 KALC Community Award**.
- **Highways –**
 - Cleaning of gullies were chased and chased with KCC and eventually cleaned.
 - *Flashing speed sign, towards the Stocks, is now working although maybe not correctly.*
 - Verge fill on the road leaving the village, towards Peasmarsh, was promised by KCC Highways last May ~ but only recently has a small part been completed, despite numerous requests.
 - *Verge markers have been put in at the bottom of Underhill, and the road has been resurfaced, however this road suffers with the same problems as the road to Peasmarsh. Parts have been marked but have yet to be filled and have since been made worse. Verge markers have been demolished and replacements requested.*

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- Necked street light columns – ABC responsibility. They have been told that these were in an area where vulnerable people lived and that replacements should be treated as a priority. No date has been given for their replacement as yet.
- The revised Code of Conduct was adopted on 12th May 2015
- *We considered the request to reinstate the plaque on the front of the remains of the Village Fountain by the Village Hall. The PC suggested that the History Society investigate this and then request a grant from the PC towards the cost.*
- Broadband and Wi-Fi has now been installed in the Village Hall
- *Agreed by KCC that Wittersham could be involved in the pilot for a Volunteer Support Warden. Only 12 councils in Kent had been chosen. Unfortunately, no one in Wittersham put their name forward despite two drop in sessions being carried out locally and a wider advertising campaign by KCC.*
- Community Warden Lee Kidd was promoted and reassigned to Dover in June 2015. Jo Vos replaced him but now covers a bigger area than she had originally.
- *Andrew Hoodless has replaced Gary Carr as our PCSO.*
- An 18-month plan was considered.
 - Suggested that more adult outdoor fitness equipment be purchased - 3 more pieces are due to be installed in June.
 - Finalise more Cemetery space – Plans for additional land are now with the Mallet's solicitors.
 - Future of the Sports Field – John Mallet has made a bequest of the Sports Field (Recreation Ground) to the Parish Council.
 - New website – this is up and running: www.wittershampc.org Most of the usual statutory information is on it plus a planning applications page with links straight to current applications. It also has a page with a link straight to KCC Highways fault reporting page.
 - Village envelope – to be revisited after the Draft Local Plan has been published, as too few people had put their names forward to take part originally.
 - Lack of decent broadband in the village has been followed up – much work has been carried out in the village since.
 - Hedge in front of Coronation Field has been lowered, and can now be more easily maintained.
- *New Standing Orders adopted in July 2015.*
- Agreed to take part in the Community Action Team (CAT) project. CATs will come to the village to meet the young people and provide sessions that are fun and challenging with opportunities for learning. [This is ongoing ~ with Cllr Parkin leading.]
- *Our Caretaker found a car in the ditch at the bottom of Underhill when cleaning a road sign. Luckily no one was in it! Reported to the police and after quite a few months of chasing it was eventually removed.*
- The Caretaker reported a spate of vandalism on Coronation Field and The Green. The police had been informed and were aware of who the culprits were.
- *Community Led Plan (CLP) was delivered to the PC on 25th September at a meeting in the Village Hall. Copies of a summary document went to every household that receives the Outlook-On-Oxney and copies were made available at various points in the Village. The PC is considering the full reports, taken from the Voices website, rather than the summary document.*

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- Considered the KCC Consultation documents and on-line questionnaires for both street lighting and Mobile Libraries. All consultation documents are now listed on the website.
- *It has been agreed that the damaged part of the perimeter wall around the Church should be repaired.*
- Permission was given for the Triangle to be replanted and thanks given to Lexie Datta and her team for the pleasure it has given people.
- *Permission also given to the Women's Institute (WI) to replant the garden behind the War Memorial Wall to celebrate 100 years of the WI.*
- Agreed that the Village Sign pole should be repainted.
- *Agreed to Fly the Flag for the Commonwealth on 12th March 2016. Notice of this was put in the Outlook-On-Oxney magazine, Website and on the Notice Boards. 6 children from the village school council attended with one of them raising the flag. A few Councillors attended but, unfortunately, only one member of the public.*
- Agreed to support the Dark Sky Community Initiative and Cllrs Green and Parkin attended a meeting in Woodchurch, arranged by ABC.
- *Unfortunately, since Biffa took over the street cleaning contract, there has been more litter around the village than one would wish. This was reported to ABC and Biffa were instructed to come out and clear it.*
- Various problems with council estate fences and rubbish had been reported to ABC Housing and then attended to.
- *Donations given to Wittersham VOICES, Victim Support, SECAMB Charitable Fund, Wittersham Lunch Club and Outlook-on-Oxney.*
- 18 Planning Applications have been considered, including an Extra-Ordinary Parish Meeting to enable residents to discuss the recent Outline Planning Application for the development of 27 houses, including 10 affordable houses, and proposed vehicular access onto Stocks Road, associated landscaping and open space with some matters reserved.
This resulted in the Clerk writing to ABC stating the facts from the first PC discussion on the application, whilst acknowledging that the Council was aware that there were objections from parishioners to it.
- *9 Interments in the Cemetery.*

So you can see that the PC is very active and involved, wishing to do their best, as they see it, for the good of the whole community it represents.

When I joined the Parish Council, eleven years ago, it was quite a different world that we operated within. The financial prosperity of UK PLC was not considered '*flaky*' and under pressure as it is now. Services were still, on the whole, carried out on our behalf by both KCC and ABC to a greater degree than they are currently. There was never enough money, of course, but it can hardly be compared to today's situation. I mention this not in any Political sense, as, in any case, Parish and Town Councils are not Political, but just to state the facts of how I see it today. Of course, over the last few years, '*Localism*' has come more and more to the fore. Sensing the change of financial climate ahead, five years ago I put it to the Parish Council that it would be a good idea to '*Cluster*' with three other parishes, as aforementioned, in order to attract the funding spent by KCC and ABC with a view to protect and enhance the provision of some services. This led to the '*Wittersham Cluster Caretaker Project*', which is just about to start its fifth year! I am very grateful to the previous two Parish Councils, and the current one, for having faith in what I envisaged and for supporting me over the years. It is something that is now nationally recognised, copied by many, and is the bedrock of current

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conversations KCC Highways is having with Parish and Town Councils across the whole county. We should all be very proud of what we have achieved.

This type of working, picking up roles and responsibilities from either KCC and ABC, is likely to be offered more and more in the coming years. The future of both KCC and ABC, with talk of '*Super District Councils*', or even the possibility of breaking Kent up into three new '*Unitary Authorities*', is currently under discussion. One thing I am very certain of, having talked to various Kent MPs, County and District Councillors over the last year in my role as KALC President, is that we will definitely not be in the same situation in five years' time as we are currently ~ whatever that might look like then.

This has, potentially, tremendous implications for our Parish Council in the future. We could do nothing, but that has not been our way, or we could benefit from these challenges and move forward ~ with the express objective to try and maintain the level of service we currently have, as far as possible, or at least to protect as much of it as we can. The tools, through the Localism Act, are already there. I sense that there is a willingness, on behalf of KCC and ABC, to explore more opportunities to work together over the next few years. Your Parish Council needs to maintain its awareness and stay alert to opportunities, and I have every reason to believe that they will, so that our community is a winner and not a net loser! Thinking '*outside the box*', coupled with high aspirations for our community, can prove both effective and manageable. We know it has worked with the Village Caretaker Scheme ~ it can with others, too!

Of course, taking a proactive approach to Localism takes time for Councillors involved, but especially for our Clerk! As I stated earlier, we are a very proactive PC ~ we get things done, as far as our position allows, and we make things happen which otherwise might take longer or not happen at all! We are a '*can do*' Parish Council. The same cannot be said for all PCs!

For the last eleven years, I have been amazed at what the PC has achieved: Outdoor gym equipment; War Memorial regular cleaning schedule; Re-paving The Green behind the war memorial; Half-Muga on Coronation Field ~ to name but just a very few. The PC has also supported community groups and initiatives. We have facilitated this good work with the support of our community and, despite some disagreements along the way, all has been achieved in a civilised and constructive way. More on this shortly.

At the beginning of my report, I said that I would return to the subject of a Councillor being a voluntary role within the community. Soon after I became a Parish Councillor, I remember a resident in the village asking me why they could not get hold of me at home during one particular morning? I said that I was sorry but that I had been at work. They said they knew that, so why was I not answering my telephone? You guessed it, the person concerned thought that being a Parish Councillor was a paid full time job! We both had a chuckle, but it brought it home to me that some people do not view Parish Councillors as volunteers within their community, who have stepped up to the plate in order to do their best for everyone. Now I am not looking for a medal, and I certainly didn't become a Councillor in order to gain a T-Shirt, but I think it is worth remembering that we are ordinary folk doing our best and aiming high!

Therefore, some of you may empathise with me when, over the last six months in particular, I say to you that I feel very disappointed as to the way your Parish Council appears to be '*under attack*' on a regular basis. The Parish Council strives to be as open and transparent as it can be, hence the public

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can come along to our meetings each month and participate during the public open session, or matters to be considered by it can be emailed a week before the PC meeting to the Clerk. What I believe to be '*sniping behind the scenes*' does not help ~ it promotes a negative contribution rather than a positive one ~ and serves to undermine the achievements and decisions of your Parish Council. Despite the best efforts and intentions of the PC, it is being challenged by the seemingly concerted action of a group of residents. And to what end? What is the ultimate goal here?

Now I would fight for the right of everyone to have free speech, without fear or favour, and I certainly do not wish to stop disagreements or discussions being voiced at PC meetings, but, frankly, there are ways of achieving said conversations. It is quite acceptable, and no less effective, for those wishing to make a point to the Parish Council to speak in a calm and measured way ~ without resorting to personal attacks.

I believe your Parish Council has conducted itself well ~ so why the sudden animosity from a few towards it now? The catalyst, as I am sure you will recognise, is the Stocks Road Housing Application last year. Planning issues are, have been, and will continue to be the main reason why any group of residents will disagree with any Council, be it at the Parish or District Level (in our case ABC) especially if the decision reached does not agree with their own. Decisions, of course, will not always be what everyone wants, but your Parish Council makes them all the time ~ it is called '*Democracy*'!

The same could be said for actions the Government might take ~ I am sure there have been many occasions over the years when we have disagreed with something to come down from Westminster?

As has been said many times, ABC is the planning authority for this area, not the PC ~ who can only '*support*' or '*not support*' (plus *comments*) ~ at the same level of importance as any individual resident within our parish. The PC has no special weighting ~ as was proven by ABC rejecting the Stocks Road application after the PC supported it.

I wanted to finish my report on a high note but, due to what I believe to be a planned campaign against this Parish Council, I find it very hard to do. I asked what was the purpose of this seemingly constant angst against your PC? Is it to see some of the Councillors leave in frustration? All over one issue ~ after all that has been achieved over the previous year? That seems, to me, to be out of all proportion.

Does it mean that Councillors will fear to approach any planning applications properly in future, as demanded by the (legally obligatory) Nolan Principles, making up their own minds without feeling pressurised by outside influences, because they feel intimidated and/or frightened of the consequences? Is that the future of our Parish Council, because such an outcome would be both illegal and highly detrimental to the future of our village and community.

I certainly hope not!

Thank you.

This document will be available on the PC website: <http://www.wittershampc.org/>