

ANNUAL PARISH MEETING

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT OF THE YEAR 2008-2009

The Parish Council is now reaching the half-way point in its four-year term of office. We have had an exceptionally busy year with all aspects of Parish business throwing up important issues which have needed resolution.

Planning.

Planning continues to occupy most of the Council's time, particularly as we have needed to attend numerous meetings with Wards and Barretts over the last year regarding Halstead Place. The issues surrounding the possible future development of Fort Halstead are now coming more to the fore, and as the developers, Hines, will be submitting a planning application later this year, this single issue is likely to preoccupy the Council more than any other in the coming year. The Council has already been playing its part as members of the Fort Halstead Working Group for some time, alongside other local parishes, and we are producing a background working document, which we hope will be of value to all the Councils which are asked to respond to Hines' eventual planning application. I am sure that Cllr. Bent will be able to provide more detail about both these developments and the many other applications we have received in the last year.

Parishioners may also be aware that in February and March SDC held a district-wide consultation about the proposals for the Core Strategy of their new Local Development Framework. The Parish Council made some very specific comments about issues which we felt would have a particular impact on the Parish. In particular we felt that their proposals about the future of Major Developed Sites (and it should be remembered that Fort Halstead is classified as a Major Developed Site), made no distinction between those Major Developed Sites in the Green Belt and those outside it. We therefore felt that SDC's proposals were in direct conflict with Government Guidelines on development in the Green Belt.

We were advised at the last Parish Council Meeting that changes are proposed in the way in which many planning issues will be dealt with in the future by the District Council. Two examples of the proposed changes :

- When the parish view on an application differs from that of the planning officer, district councillors will have 7 days to make a case that the application should be heard by the Development Control Committee, rather than being dealt with exclusively by the planning case officer;
- Future site meetings will in many cases be replaced by what are termed "Pre-Committee Site Inspections". These inspections would normally be held without parish representatives and members of the public being present, so the opportunity to make a parish or public case directly to committee members at a site meeting would be lost.

The initial reaction of the Parish Council to this last point was not favourable, and we are concerned that it could result in a diminishing of local democracy, and we will be making our views known to the District Council very soon.

Amenities & Highways

Cllr. Baldwin and I attended a presentation at County Hall during February about the new Highways computer system which is to be put in place, to promote greater efficiency and transparency in the way in which Highways work is carried out. There have been a number of problems with the way in which highways issues are reported under the current system, and the new system should, on the face of it, overcome these problems. However, the system was due to come

on line in March, but it has still not started, and the Council still has no start date for the new system.

The Council is also extremely unhappy about the District Council's decision to withdraw the quarterly freighter service. Over 50 parishioners used the service on the last occasion, many paying numerous visits, and a very large amount of rubbish was removed. The Parish Council has made its position clear to the Chief Executive at SDC and we have been told that the matter will be reviewed again in the future. The decision was particularly unfortunate for a number of reasons :

1. First, it was a much-used and valued service;
2. secondly, the decision to withdraw the service was taken after all Parish Councils had decided on their budgets for the coming year, so, if we wish to pay for this service from our own funds in future, it is something which we have not been able to budget for;
3. and finally, it is also unfortunate that a well-used service of this sort is withdrawn, at the same time that District Councillors allowances are to be increased. The timing is extremely poor and sends entirely the wrong message on priorities to the public throughout the district.

Cllr. Baldwin will be reporting on the specific highways and amenities issues in the Parish.

I would like to express the Council's thanks to the West Kent Extra and to the Rose & Crown for their continued sponsorship of the village flowerbeds, and again to the Rose & Crown for raising money for the flowerbeds by way of one of their monthly quizzes. .

I would also like to thank all the parishioners who gave their time to help us out on the Village Clean-up Day a couple of weekends ago. Thanks are also due to the children at the Primary School, who drew some really great posters about the Clean-up Day, and then went out into Otford Lane to help tidy up the rubbish from the roadway and the hedgerows around the School itself. Many of you will have seen their photo in the Sevenoaks Chronicle last week. The children's involvement was greatly appreciated, and hopefully we will be able to get them involved again next year.

Policing.

As I mentioned, in last year's report, Kent Police were proposing to reorganise the PCSO's duties by wards, rather than by parishes. At a meeting last June, both Halstead and Knockholt made strong representations that the system of PCSO's operating within specific parish boundaries should not be changed. I am pleased to report that Kent Police have agreed to restore the old system. However, the production of the new PCSO contracts was delayed, and when they finally arrived, they were found to contain errors. Many of these errors have now been rectified, and subject to some minor alterations in the wording, the contract should be finalised shortly. We have also taken the opportunity to re-assess the role of our PCSO, and have made representations to the Police that all PCSO's in the county should have extended powers beyond those which they currently enjoy, so that all parishes get even better value for the money they pay. We are still awaiting resolution of this issue, partly because all police forces are awaiting the report of a national body looking at the duties and responsibilities of all PCSO's throughout the country.

Finance.

In the light of the recent downturn in the economy, the Parish Council felt that it was particularly important that any increases in the Parish precept should be kept at as low a level as possible for the coming year. There is therefore an increase of only £14 compared with last year, when our turnover is in excess of £50,000.

Conclusion.

In conclusion, I would like to thank all my fellow parish councillors for the work they have done on behalf of the parish over the last year.

I would like to extend the Council's thanks to Paul Armstrong for all the work he has done as a Parish Councillor over the last 10 years. It came as a surprise and disappointment to all councillors when Paul tendered his resignation at the end of the last Parish Council meeting. It should not be forgotten that this was Paul's second stint as a Parish Councillor, and he has been a stalwart servant of the Parish. Of course, we will now have to start the process of filling the vacancy, so if anyone has considered becoming a parish councillor, now is the time to put their name forward.

Particular thanks must also go to Cllr. Brooker who has done a lot of work recently repairing damage to the Pavilion, replacing broken roof slates, mending guttering and downspouts, and so on. It has saved the parish a good deal of money, and his work is greatly appreciated.

Thanks also to George Elkington who continues to open and close the recreation ground each morning and evening, come rain or shine. I must also extend our apologies to George for keeping him waiting on many occasions when Parish Council meetings have run over time. I'm sure that all Councillors will try to ensure that meetings will be shorter in the coming year.

Thanks to our District Councillors for their support throughout the year, particularly Cllr. John Grint, for his assistance regarding the planning application at Halstead Place.

Thanks also to County Councillor Richard Parry for his continued support, and for his contributions to the parish via the members grant system.

Finally, thanks to our Parish Clerk, for her sterling work on behalf of the parish. I would also like to congratulate Gill on behalf of everyone. She recently passed her Clerks Exams, and she can now call herself a Quality Clerk. As a result of this, in the near future the council must decide whether it wishes to apply for Quality Council status, and we will need to investigate what advantages that status may bring to the parish.