

## **Chairman's Annual Report 2012-2013**

Once again this has been an eventful year. We have managed to install the third security camera at Jubilee Field as well as improving the security lighting. Jubilee Field is owned by the Parish Council and contains a number of valuable assets including the sports pavilion and the skate park. It is also home to the Guides and we consider that this new installation should provide additional security; the two cameras already installed in the village have already proved their worth.

We have continued to fund our own street cleaning service to ensure that the streets in our village are cleaned to the highest standard. Therefore with this in mind we remain extremely concerned at the state of the Parade. Unfortunately due to the fact that it is privately owned it remains out of our direct control. However, despite its ownership it does represent a public space and we are working closely with Maidstone Borough Council to try to ensure that proper standards are maintained.

On a more positive note many residents will have noticed that we have expanded the number of planters. These were initially installed in Bell Lane and proved to have been such a success that we decided to add additional ones at certain key points in the village; we believe these help to enhance the overall appearance of Staplehurst. We have now been offered at no cost a strip of land by the side of the Marden Road where we hope to establish wild flowers. We continue successfully to manage the Bell Lane toilets and we fund a youth worker for the village's youth club; this has proved to have been very beneficial. Remaining for the moment with youth matters the UpRockin event at the skate park was a great success and it is our intention to hold a similar event this year.

Two main issues have occupied our minds during 2012/13. Firstly we had two applications to develop a supermarket near the Station. The Parish Council has considered both applications very carefully and has organised a number of public meetings. Residents will probably be aware that we have recommended approval of one application and refusal of the other. The Council remains especially concerned at possible development north of the railway line; these concerns are set out in the Parish Council's detailed response to MBC. We note that one of the applications has now been approved by MBC whilst the other is waiting to be reconsidered.

The second issue concerns the Concurrent Functions Grant and the proposal by MBC to replace it by a Parish Services Scheme. Negotiations have been going on for over two years. The vast majority of the parishes have opposed this change and believe the change is completely unnecessary as well as being extremely unfair.

Negotiations have been carried out by a review team set up by the Maidstone Area of the Kent Association of Local Councils and Staplehurst has played a major role, including the presentation of the petition carried out by the parishes in support of the Concurrent Functions Grant. As a result of the petition we managed to get MBC's Cabinet to reconsider the matter, but sadly they refused to change their position, although we did win some concessions, including a delay in the introduction of the

new scheme and the recognition that parishes spend considerable sums on street lighting.

We are now reviewing the position and given the nature of these special expenses and the services they represent the parishes will need to consider the next steps to be taken. In the meantime, the parishes have little option but to accept the offers made by MBC which for Staplehurst means a 66% reduction in the grant received for the financial year 2013/14.

The Parish Council has funded restoration work on the Village War Memorial which resides in All Saints Church. This included correcting some errors and omissions on the First World War Memorial and adding the name of Sergeant Reginald Fitzgerald to the Second World War Memorial. Sergeant Fitzgerald went missing in action in 1944 and although he was based at Slaney Farm his name had been left off the War Memorial and until now has never been acknowledged each Remembrance Day.

A Service of Remembrance was held on the 23rd of March at All Saints Church and I should like to thank all those who contributed to making this such a special event for the Fitzgerald family and for Staplehurst. My particular thanks go Rector Silke Tetzlaff for her support, Ted Sergison for his historical research, Lt. Col. Vic Holdaway for his organising abilities on the day, the Kings Head for their hospitality and Councillor Peter Spearink for all the hard work he put in and his sheer determination to ensure the success of this event.

Under the localism agenda parishes have the opportunity to establish Neighbourhood Plans. These plans should have significant force since they will be supported by local referenda. Staplehurst Parish Council has signalled its intention to produce a Neighbourhood Plan and has taken the first steps towards achieving this goal. It is recognised that any plan will need to respect MBC's overall development plan, but in our view having our own plan will enable us to take a proactive rather than a reactive approach to future development in our community. Nevertheless it is our aim to work closely with MBC. The work is being overseen by a Rural Settlement Group set up by the Parish Council and comprises both parish councillors and residents.

Our stated aim has been to be a proactive council and as can be seen from the above this continues to be the case. However, the sensitivity surrounding both the loss of the concurrent functions grant and the supermarket planning applications has inevitably created tensions between us and MBC. It remains our aim to work closely with MBC and with both our Borough Councillors to ensure the best outcomes for Staplehurst and I should like to thank both Councillor Hotson and Councillor Lusty for the help they have given to the Council and to the community as a whole.

Our thanks also go to our MP Helen Grant for her support and the fact that she has always found time in a busy schedule to listen to our concerns. We also much appreciate the work of PCSO Pete Gardner and Community Warden Mira Martin; their presence and contributions are much appreciated and are essential to the wellbeing of our village.

I should like to thank all Council Members for their support and their contributions to the Parish. My particular thanks go to Vice-Chairmen Councillor Tom Burnham and Councillor Paul Kelly and Chairman of the Planning Committee Councillor Paul Butcher whose advice and support are invaluable. I should also like to take this opportunity to welcome Neal Kemp to the Council who has taken the place of John Kelly; I am pleased to say that John continues as Chairman of our Rural Settlement Group.

Finally, I should like to emphasise the key role that the Parish Office plays in supporting our community; this is becoming increasingly important with the advent of localism and the Parish Council has a strong supporting team. I should like to welcome our new Parish Clerk, Mick Westwood, who has taken over from Sue Bassett. Mick was already familiar with many of the issues affecting our community and he has very quickly settled into the role. I am also pleased that Sue has taken over the important role of Responsible Finance Officer so the experience she has gained over many years has not been lost.

Our thanks also go to Deborah Jenkins our Assistant to the Clerk who plays a major role in respect of planning issues and our Caretaker Les Reeve. Deborah is also Clerk to Frittenden Parish Council and her experience is extremely useful.

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 quarterly Village Update remains an important channel for 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*