Shorne Parish Council

Borough of Gravesham

Minutes of the Parish Assembly held on 25th April 2024

PRESENT:	Mr R Lane (Chairman) Mr R Theobald Ms P Clifton Mrs S Lindley Mr J Bugg Mr C Rea Mr R Hardy Mrs L Williams Mr T Rochard-Pullen Mrs D Salmon (Clerk)
IN ATTENDANCE	Cllr Bryan Sweetland (KCC) PC Jo Hammond PC Haines 19 Parishioners

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Cllr Bob Lane welcomed parishioners to the Parish Assembly at Shorne Village Hall and thanked them for attending.

1. Minutes of the Parish Assembly held on 26th April 2023

The minutes were **agreed** as a true record.

2. Chairman's Report

Cllr Lane presented his report. He thanked Council colleagues for their work on behalf of the Parish, including Robin Theobald for supporting him as Vice Chairman, to Pauline Clifton for her excellent work as Chair of the Footpaths, Properties & Greens Committee, and to Susan Lindley for her continuing diligence as Chair of the Planning & Highways Committee and for her excellent work in representing Shorne's interests during the Lower Thames Crossing Development Consent Order examination. The amount of work Susan put in on our behalf and the high standard of her submissions was truly astonishing, and we should all thank her for her efforts.

Cllr Lane welcomed Diane Salmon and Tom Rochard-Pullen to their first Parish Assemblies. Diane became the new Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer last August, and Tom was co-opted to fill the councillor vacancy following last year's elections.

Shorne Parish Council has nine councillors, six in Shorne and three in Shorne West. Parish Councillors are not paid, and do not represent political parties. They voluntarily put themselves up for election every four years and give up their own free time, doing the best they can to improve the community and to make sure our voice is heard by other authorities.

Cllr Lane reported on Parish Council achievements during the past year, including:

- The village car park has been resurfaced and laid out with wider parking spaces and a disabled parking bay. We have also got rid of the old pebbled surface around the perimeter, re-laid it with block paving, and installed a new sign.

- We have also refurbished the two bus shelters at Shorne Crossroads, repairing the roofs, replacing the gutters and downpipes, bricking up the recesses which were a haven for antisocial activities, and installing new seating so that people can now see buses approaching. We are also planning to install solar-powered lighting in the shelters.

- In Shorne West, we have installed a defibrillator at the entrance to Michael Gardens park and play area, which required the installation of its own electricity supply. We were fortunate in getting a grant to cover the full cost, and thanks go to Cllr Clive Rea for making all this possible.

- And the Council has awarded a generous grant to the Village Hall towards renewing their kitchen equipment.

Despite this expense, the Parish precept charge per property has been cut by 4.9%. There are a number of reasons for this, including success in obtaining grants, carrying out projects under budget, and the fact that we have now paid off the Public Works Board loan taken out over 10 years ago towards the cost of the footpath extension in Forge Lane.

And after 4 years of negotiations with Kent County Council, we finally succeeded in getting the 20 mph zone throughout the village centre, and Cllr Lane thanked County Councillor Bryan Sweetland for his support in this matter. As local residents, we should set an example by keeping to the speed limit.

The Council has had its speed indicator device for four years now, recording data on over 1.2 million vehicle movements. During that time, the data shows that average speeds, 85th percentile speeds, and the number of drivers exceeding the speed limit has progressively reduced, demonstrating that the speed indicator device is having a positive effect in educating drivers and reducing speed.

We continue to meet with Kent County Council to request highway improvements in various parts of the parish, but with over 300 other parishes in the county, we are limited in the number of proposals that we can ask KCC to consider, so we have to select priorities. One of the areas which is always high on our list of priorities is Shorne Crossroads, where one of our parishioners tragically lost his life in February. We will continue to urge KCC to introduce effective measures to reduce the frequency and severity of accidents at this location, and to this end we have recently submitted a petition from over 1300 residents and users of the crossroads to Kent County Council.

3. Report from the Chair of the Planning & Highways Committee

Cllr Susan Lindley presented her report on behalf of the Planning & Highways Committee. Cllr Lindley thanked her Vice-Chairman John Bugg and our Parish Clerks during the year for their assistance, and all the members of the Parish Council for their advice and input.

This report only covers a few of the matters that the Committee has dealt with during the past year. More detailed information is in the Minutes of the Planning and Highways Committee meetings which can be found on the Parish Council website.

Planning

This year the Parish Council was consulted by Gravesham Borough Council (GBC, the decision makers) concerning 55 planning applications of various kinds affecting the Parish, down from 86 the previous year. This reduction was a mercy given the amount of work needed on the Lower Thames Crossing proposals (see below).

Of the 55 applications, 2 were located just outside the Parish boundary (Cobham Lodge on Valley Drive; Northfleet Embankment) and 3 were non-residential (stable on the Gravesend Road; 1000sq m of cold storage at New Green Farm; Nuralite Industrial Estate, which although entered via Higham is located mostly in Shorne).

There was a total of 50 residential applications. There were 10 in Shorne West ward on 6 properties (one refused twice and now submitted an Appeal; one third time lucky; one second time lucky and three straightforward and permitted) and 3 in Thong (all on one property, one refused and two permitted).

That leaves 37 applications in Shorne Village ward of which 8 are currently still pending a decision. 11 were at least initially refused, the most noteworthy being: two applications for a house on the infilled chalkpit in Green Farm Lane; one for a demolition and over-modern rebuild on Pear Tree Lane; and the usual overlarge extensions. Also as usual, well considered and reasonable proposals did not encounter any problems.

All applications are examined very carefully, and generally some kind of comments, of varying levels of detail, have to be submitted. All comments sent in by SPC can be viewed on the GBC website plus are recorded in the Planning and Highways Committee minutes, as is information about individual planning problems.

As reported in previous years, we have to guess which applications might go to appeal if refused by GBC, and submit very detailed comments in anticipation. This is because, due to the changes in the way Appeals are handled by the Planning Inspectorate, we may only get one chance to ensure that parishioners views are adequately put forward.

There have been 11 Appeals on the go this year: 5 have been dismissed and one allowed, with 6 others being currently in progress. The most important dismissed Appeal to mention is the application for a large house in open countryside at New Green Farm.

There is some frustration though with GBC that they sometimes go on to permit applications very similar to those which were previously refused or dismissed.

Planning matters particularly worth mentioning:

Lower Thames Crossing (LTC):

This continued to be our biggest planning issue and cause of concern. National Highways (NH) had submitted their second attempt at achieving a Development Consent Order to the Planning Inspectorate in October 2022 - the application was accepted and, NH having at the same time inserted a “Minor Refinements Consultation”, proceeded to the Examination stage which lasted from 20th June to 20th December 2023. There were 5 Inspectors and over 2,800 documents submitted all of which had to be reviewed, over 30 hearings to be attended or viewed. There were 13 deadlines by which our responses to all the above had to be submitted, and we sent in 40 documents of up to 36 pages of text. Cllr Lindley remarked that while it was an interesting life experience, it is one that she hopes to never have to repeat!

The Inspectors submitted their recommendation to the Secretary of State for Transport on 20th March 2024 (not published at this stage) and a decision is awaited. Recently there have been requests from the Department for Transport for some updated information so more documents presently require review. NH has meanwhile entered into contracts with prospective construction partners but that does not mean that the project has been approved.

Developments in the wider area:

We continue to keep a watch on developments in the wider area that might impact on Shorne.

- We previously submitted comments about the Ebbsfleet Central proposals as these will impact on residents' ability to access and park at Ebbsfleet International Station. More recently there are also proposals for redevelopment of the Ebbsfleet football stadium and surrounding area with yet more housing and volume demands on the station.
- The London Resort development proposals remain in turmoil with the developer being sued by Paramount and having declared bankruptcy in avoidance of possible debt. Some of the same individuals are however involved in many of the Ebbsfleet projects.
- Development on the Hoo Peninsula, both residential and industrial, is proceeding piecemeal, with resulting increased pressure on the local road network. Although £170M had been awarded for transport infrastructure improvements, this was subsequently withdrawn due to lack of progress – not overall a good situation.

Highways

To achieve highway improvements, we regularly discuss our "Highways Improvement Plan" document with KCC, however the ongoing situation is that there are severe budget restraints at KCC which make it extremely difficult to get anything done. This financial year they have an annual budget of only £465 per Parish, which is obviously completely inadequate, but we keep on raising issues about important safety concerns that need to be addressed. To mention just a few:

- Village Centre 20mph scheme: Cllr Lane has mentioned the successful implementation of the 20mph scheme in the village centre, which he had particularly championed – given the financial constraints at KCC we were extremely fortunate to get that both permitted and funded, which was from a separate KCC large schemes budget.
- Shorne Crossroads: We have been drawing this to KCC's attention since 2021 – last summer KCC agreed to undertake a safety review which is in progress.
- HGVs using Green Farm Lane: As a result of our pressure, KCC undertook traffic volume and weight investigations including deploying ANPR cameras. This showed that while there was significant use of the lane by large vehicles, these were for the most part operating legally. However, we are also working with Higham PC and our GBC Councillors to try and influence lorry routes in the area.

This year Cllr Lindley made two pleas, which she will expand upon in the Annual Report:

- Residents are requested to keep hedges cut back (at the appropriate times of the year) so that roads and footpaths are not obstructed by vegetation.
- Residents are also requested to help reduce light pollution in the area and review all their outside lights to ensure that they are necessary, properly angled inside their property, and suitably controlled to only be on when absolutely needed.

4. Report from the Chair of the Footpaths, Properties & Greens Committee

Cllr Clifton presented her report, and has enjoyed another year as chair of the Footpaths, Properties & Greens Committee. Cllr Clifton thanked Vice Chairman Clive Rea, who has worked very hard in getting the defibrillator installed in Shorne West. Cllr Rea is also currently arranging for the solar-powered lighting to be installed in the bus shelters.

Footpaths

On our website you will find maps showing the 13 miles of Public Rights of Way (PROWs) within the parish. These are maintained by KCC, and Cllr Clifton is in regular contact with the PROW Area Officer who schedules the work.

It is important that the paths are walked regularly in order that they are kept clear, but if users notice that a path is overgrown or blocked, please report it directly to KCC via the link on our website. If you are unable to do this, please let Cllr Clifton know.

The closure of NS368 at Shornemead level crossing has been extended until 11th July. Unfortunately, the work on the new footbridge had to be delayed.

Properties

We purchased a new notice board which has been fitted to the front of the refurbished southern bus shelter at Shorne Crossroads. This replaces the old notice board which was fitted to the side of the shelter. A plaque in memory of a former parish councillor has been re-fitted inside this shelter.

Greens

KCC has now filled in the dips in the grass verge at the junction of Court Lodge and Tanyard Hill. Some of the grass has been resown, a replacement tree has been planted, and the verge is now looking more attractive. KCC has also planted a replacement tree on the green at Chestnut Corner.

Between March and June, the Parish Council employs a contractor to carry out supplementary cuts of the verges where daffodils are planted. KCC do not cut these areas (Post Office Green, the green at Chestnut Corner, and the verges at Court Lodge and lower Tanyard Hill) until June to avoid damaging the plants.

There are four areas of land that the Parish Council owns and is responsible for maintaining. These are the Recreation Ground in The Ridgeway, Shorne Common Rough between The Ridgeway and Woodlands Lane, Shorne Common in Mill Hill Lane, and Crabbles Bottom. Gravesham Borough Council cuts the grass at The Recreation Ground, the 'picnic area' at Shorne Common Rough, and Shorne Common.

Each year we have an arboricultural survey carried out to identify trees which could pose a safety risk. These surveys are done on the Recreation Gound, Shorne Common Rough, and Shorne Common in rotation. This year the survey was done for Shorne Common.

The Recreation Ground - Currently there are two football teams who lease the ground, AFC Shorne and Eagles FC. These teams play their home matches on Sundays during the season.

Shorne Common Rough - It has been necessary to fell a number of trees after a survey reported that they were suffering from Ash Dieback. The affected trees were close to the road on Shorne Ridgeway and there had been a risk to the roadway, power and telephone lines.

Shorne Common in Mill Hill Lane – Tree work was carried out as a result of the arboricultural survey. The logs from the felled trees and branches were left by the contractor in the adjacent car park to be used by parishioners. This proved to be a welcome gesture. The playground continues to be enjoyed by many local children. This year we had repair work done on the roundabout which was showing some signs of damage and corrosion.

Crabbles Bottom - We encourage you all to visit the ancient orchard and pick as many Bramley apples as you wish. The three wildflower meadows are also worth visiting. In all, there are 27 acres including a footpath, bridleway and woodland, and we have a contractor who carries out the necessary cutting back. Access is gained either on foot from Bowesden Lane or by car to the lay-by in Crutches Lane.

This year we have had repairs carried out to the fencing alongside the bridleway in Crabbles Bottom. Parts of the fence on the other side of the orchard, alongside the path, have also been repaired. This, as well as increased police presence and signage, appears to be helping to deter anti-social behaviour.

We have been fortunate in receiving an offer of funding from the Lower Thames Crossing Designated fund. This is to fund a project to restore the traditional Bramley apple orchard, including restorative pruning as well as planting with appropriate varieties where there are gaps. The funding is guaranteed whether or not the crossing goes ahead.

The Designated Fund is also helping to fund work being carried out to make a declaration to Natural England for a new North Kent National Nature Reserve, covering the parishes of Cobham, Cuxton, Shorne and Luddesdown. The sites covered in Shorne are Shorne Common Rough and Crabbles Bottom. There are many Core Partners involved including KCC, GBC, Woodland Trust, and National Trust. It has been suggested that Shorne Parish Council becomes an Affiliate Partner.

Scouts Hut - The licence has been renewed to allow Dandelion Time to continue using the Scout Hut. Dandelion Time is a charity providing a nature-based therapeutic programme for children affected by trauma.

Coronation - For the coronation of King Charles III, the Parish Council ordered commemorative mugs and coins. Coins were given free to all children in the Parish aged 11 and under, and the mugs and any remaining coins were available for sale.

5. Report from Gravesham Borough Councillors

Cllr Lane expressed his disappointment that none of our local Ward Councillors were in attendance and that no report had been received. (Post-meeting note - apologies were received 75 minutes before the meeting began but were not seen in time.) In the absence of the Gravesham Borough Councillors, Cllr Lane invited PC Jo Hammond to speak.

6. Report from Kent Police Local Officer

PC Joanne Hammond introduced herself to parishioners. PC Hammond looks after the Kent Police Gravesham Rural area which includes Shorne and covers the area from Vigo through to Higham and all areas in between. PC Hammond gave a brief update on matters impacting on rural parishes. She holds regular police surgeries in rural areas, and visits the Pop-up Café as often as possible. PC Hammond provides a monthly report to the Parish Council which she is happy to be published on the Shorne Parish Council website as she wants parishioners to know she can be contacted directly should they need her.

7. Report from Kent County Councillor

Cllr Bryan Sweetland provided a brief report in advance, outlining how your KCC council tax is spent:

We have been through an extraordinary period in the last few years with the Covid-19 pandemic followed by the significant economic turbulence, arising from international and national circumstances. KCC significantly overspent its budget last year, mainly on social care services for older people and children and we are seeing similar challenges in this current financial year, with a continuation of the increasing demand for and cost of providing services. As we respond to these challenges, it is even more important that the County Council (and indeed all public services) manage spending within the finances available, otherwise our budget will become unsustainable and threaten the viability of the services we provide. This will require action to reduce spending in the current year and tough choices about the priorities for the future.

Since 2011 KCC has had to make savings of 67p in every £1 we currently spend. Even with Council Tax increases, like in the previous 14 years we will have to find further savings from reducing spending and/or increasing income. Council Tax currently funds 43% of our total spending budget (excluding schools). This increases to just over 67% if you exclude spending that is directly funded from the income from service users and grants provided for a specific purpose, so it is a significant funding source for the services we provide. Each year we set a budget to decide how much we're able to spend on services for Kent residents and businesses for the next financial year, compared to how much income we're likely to get from government and local taxation (Council Tax and Business Rates) to fund this. We continue to do our best.

Cllr Sweetland was also in attendance at the Assembly and gave a brief overview of the size and budget of Kent County Council. He was able to provide information about the key activities of the council which include:

- Roads
- School placements
- Special educational needs
- Childcare
- School transport
- Libraries
- Country Parks
- History and Heritage
- Trading Standards
- Blue Badge enquiries
- Bus services
- Social Care and Health
- Dispose or recycle rubbish once collected by the Borough Councils
- Public rights of way
- Flooding issues
- Planning applications if not covered by Borough Councils
- Registrar and Coroner services
- Commercial Services – KCC operate a number of commercial companies with all profits going back into the budget.

Cllr Sweetland was also able to provide an update on how he has helped the parish over the past 12 months and will continue to do so going into this next year.

8. Open Forum and questions from Parishioners

- Cllr Lane asked Cllr Sweetland for an update on KCC's Sessions House (County Hall). Cllr Sweetland confirmed that the property is up for sale. It is currently used as a KCC office building but its use has considerably reduced since homeworking was introduced.
- Cllr Theobald referred Cllr Sweetland to the need to co-ordinate bus services within Kent as there is very little information online regarding the co-ordination of bus routes and services, making it difficult to plan journeys. Cllr Sweetland agreed it would be a useful tool for all private bus companies to provide this in co-ordination with each other.
- A parishioner who has resided in Green Farm Lane for 51 years raised her concern regarding the ongoing problems with lorries in the lane. Cllr Lane sympathised with the comments and advised that Shorne Parish Council is in regular contact with the Borough and County Council regarding measures to improve this situation, and he contacts the operators of any HGVs identified in Green Farm Lane without lawful cause. Unfortunately, some drivers choose to ignore the weight restrictions, but the Parish Council will continue to do what is in their powers to reduce these incidents.
- Another parishioner asked the Parish Council if they were happy with the new 20mph signage in the village centre which is not consistent with the signage at Shorne Ridgeway. Cllr Lane responded that legislation no longer requires dual signage at the threshold of speed restrictions. The additional measures taken at The Ridgeway were to warn vehicles entering a residential area from a 40mph rural highway, which is not the situation which exists at the entrance to the 20mph zone. The extent of the proposed signage and road markings were set out in KCC's publicised consultation and no issues were raised. Cllr Lindley pointed out that the scheme was designed and implemented by KCC as the highways authority responsible, and follows the national guidance.

There were no further questions from Parishioners.

9. Reports from Representatives of Local Organisations

- Alan Holt, Chairman of the Village Hall Management Committee gave an update on the Village Hall.
- Ruth Hensman gave an update on the Shorne Pop Up Café.
- Celia Burns gave an update for the Shorne Wildlife Group.
- Hilary Moore gave an update for the Shorne Cottage Garden Society.
- Michael Shulver gave a report of the work being done at Shorne Country Park.
- Susan Lindley gave an update of the Dickens County Protection Society (DCPS).
- Martin Taylor who is a trustee for Shorne Scouts gave an update on the different groups and what they have been doing this year.
- Ian Craig gave an update on the Shorne Local History Society and was pleased to advise the society is continuing.

10. Presentation of Freedom of the Parish to Robin Theobald

At a specially-convened meeting of the Parish Council on 11th April, it was unanimously agreed to award Robin Theobald the honorary title of Freeman of the Parish for his eminent service to Shorne. At the Annual Assembly, the Chairman presented a framed certificate to Robin Theobald, together with a bouquet of flowers to Mrs Juliet Theobald for her support in Robin's service to the parish.

Cllr Theobald thanked his colleagues from the Council, saying that when you receive anything like this from your colleagues, it is meaningful, and if it was unanimous then even better! Cllr Theobald commented that 50 years in local council is a long time and he wondered if anyone else remembered his first Chairman, Colonel Baker? Cllr Theobald said that he has always had a soft spot for Shorne, he cares about the Parish, and will continue to do so until he is bumped off!

There being no further business, the Chairman brought the meeting to a close at 9.51pm, and this was followed by refreshments and informal discussions.

Signed Mr Lane:…….. Dated:……..

Initials: