

Our Annual Assembly took place virtually on 5th May 2021 at 7.30pm.

Attendance: Mr A Michaelides, Mrs F Weston, Mr T Martin, Mr C Haslam, Mr C Tavare, Mr R Bourne, Mr A Bullied, Councillor Gough, Councillor Thornton, Councillor Hogarth

Also present the clerk, Mrs Butler, Mrs Saunders, Mrs Davies and 9 parishioners

1 Welcome by Chairman – Fidelity Weston

The chairman welcomed everyone attending the Annual Assembly and was delighted with the attendance and hoped all had received reports which had been circulated prior to the meeting.

2 Apologises: Mr Brown

3 The minutes of the last meeting were agreed and signed. Proposed by Mr Michaelides and Mr Martin seconded and agreed unanimously.

4 Chairman’s Report – Fidelity Weston

The Chairman acknowledged everyone’s contribution to each other and to the community during this very difficult year. and thanked all those involved. She hoped that the coming months would see a return to normal and continue to do so.

Our Parish Councillors have attended meetings via zoom and this has proved to be an effective way of communicating and progressing ongoing projects. We have launched a new website which we encourage parishioners to view and engage with. She particularly highlighting the work that Mr Tavare was doing with the wildlife verges, which couldn’t be delivered last year due to the pandemic but would be launched this spring. She encouraged parishioners to help with this exciting new project and make a difference to our community.

Mr Bourne has been heading up our speed watch and we are delighted to see this up and running again. It really makes a difference to the speed vehicles travel. Volunteers are also needed to help to run sessions and make this effective and rewarding for everyone involved.

We have vacancies available to become a parish councillor and if you are interested, we would be delighted to discuss this further and any parish councillor or the clerk would be more than willing to discuss this with you.

The Chairman asked whether anyone had any questions and no comments were made.

5 Planning Report – Tim Martin – Planning Chairman

Mr Martin thanked the committee who all work very hard and despite the lockdown the last 12 months have been busier than any other over the last 4 years. The committee has considered applications for new dwellings or extensions and recently new playing fields at the Wildernesse site. They have continued to respond to the affordable housing applications at at Foxbury Farm and social housing at Mills Crescent.

Seal Primary School expansion is complete, and the committee has dealt with a great expansion in applications from local schools. The Parish Council commented extensively on the new Sevenoaks Local Plan, and in particular sought a clear policy for the development of the Tarmac quarry with up to 800 dwellings.

We also objected to 3,000 dwellings nearby at Borough Green proposed in the Tonbridge and Malling Local Plan because of its impact on A25 traffic through the Parish.

Both of these local plans failed to complete their public 'Examination' by independent Planning Inspectors, and their future is now uncertain in the light of major reforms to the Planning system on which the Government has recently consulted. The Parish Council has submitted its concerns about those reforms, which could remove or reduce the opportunity to comment on planning applications as they are made.

The Chairman thanked Mr Martin for his hard work and leadership of the Planning Committee; he brings his expertise to bear on our responses which are carefully thought through by the planning committee and we are very grateful for his input.

The Chairman asked whether anyone had any questions and no comments made.

6 Finance report – Mr Andrew Michaelides

Details circulated; the precept share of council tax to fund the services it offers. The total precept for 2020/21 was set by Seal Parish Council at 2.0% higher than 2019/20. But because there were more dwellings to share this load in 2018/19, Seal Parish Council share of a B and D property council tax fell slightly from £58.48 to £57.37 per annum. This lies roughly in the middle of the range for town and parish councils in SDC. A £10,000 grant was received from Sevenoaks District Council to alleviate the financial impact of COVID-19. The Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) is a tax on residential developments which contributes to funds for local infrastructure. Seal Parish Council received £7,637 of CIL in 2019/20 which was spent on improvements to the Recreation Ground.

The Chairman asked whether anyone had any questions and no comments made.

7 Councillor Julia Thornton Report

It has been 2 years since she had delivered an annual report for the parish and she and Cllr Hogarth have been re-elected as councillors and are in their third term as district councillors and half way through, and what a year it has been. It was some 11 years ago that SDC first introduced a visionary if not revolutionary 10-year budget giving them a strong planning platform that has been award winning, and widely admired and adopted by other local authorities nationwide. A strong financial planning tool in place and even an global pandemic has not had SDC blown off its financial course. Last year, had a huge impact on housing, employment, training, benefits, funding and council tax as well support and advice led to £4.6m of increased costs. With some government funding and £300,000 that they had had to find themselves from additional income, this did not impact on frontline services. She reported how SDC needs to support businesses and communities as we come out of the recovery stages. 1500 residents signed up for the SDC Volunteer Scheme to help the vulnerable. 63 rough sleepers were found temporary accommodation and the Council continues to work with them to find a more permanent solution. £80m government grants were given to 2000 qualifying businesses. 100 tons per week of household waste were dealt with, which has rocketed due to the pandemic. Traffic Wardens delivered 250 emergency boxes for people who were not able to provide for themselves or who are shielding.

The Chairman asked whether anyone had any questions and no comments made.

7.1 Councillor Roddy Hogarth Report

The pandemic has been traumatic for everyone especially businesses. We have had great relief support for village hall maintenance and improvements, and we made sure Seal got their share for that. Seal High Street does look good compared to other areas. Well done to businesses in Seal to keep it going and now open, we should continue to support local businesses as we move forward. Cllr Thornton is alert and vigilant to assets of community interests which are registered.

The Chairman asked whether anyone had any questions and no comments made.

7.2 Councillor Roger Gough Report

It has been a great pleasure to work with Mrs Weston, the Clerk and the parish council as well as Councillor Thornton and Councillor Hogarth, District Councillors.

On principle highways issues we are making real progress and there is a new officer leading on speed and safety schemes. KCC is adopting a new approach to road safety and casualty reduction, called Vision Zero, part of which is giving increased weight to community concerns and feedback rather than crash data, which is a more flexible approach and a positive step forward.

We have had a very positive meeting about priorities for the Parish set out in the Highways Improvement Plan (HIP). We are much closer to a resolution on some key issues, such as the speed limit between Kemsing and Seal on Childsbridge Lane, and (although it has perhaps further to go) the anomalous 40mph section on the A25. What remains more intractable is the question of the railway bridge - for example, attempts to secure a priority system here have fallen foul of arguments about visibility, while any measures on the bridge itself require work with Network Rail. Nonetheless, the overall picture is one of progress.

Another very different highways issue that has grown in importance this year is the growing parking problems on St Julian's Road and other roads in the area, reflecting increased visits to Knole Park during lockdown. We have extended the parking restrictions a couple of times to give more opportunity to work towards a longer-term solution, and the Parish Council has been a very active participant in these discussions.

I've also sought to work with the Parish Council and Kent Highways to address a range of individual highways issues, such as flooding on Underriver House Road and significant verge problems in Mill Lane Underriver.

In this last year, I was pleased to be able to support the school with a grant of £3,000 from my Combined Members Fund for the development of the school farm.

In terms of potholes, KCC has just committed another £10 million to this year's pothole blitz, after a year in which Kent Highways filled in almost 50,000 potholes and patched the equivalent of 50 full-size football pitches. This is alongside our £11 million road resurfacing program and five year maintenance plan. This is an area in which resources are going to remain stretched in relation to the need, so the most important thing is to be able to set predictable plans over a number of years so that the money can be spent most efficiently.

On fly tipping, Kent highways officers continue to respond quickly when issues that involve them arise – the initial responsibility for dealing with fly tipping rests with the District Council, unless it is (as is often the case) causing an obstruction in the road. This problem is a very serious one for rural communities not just in Kent, but across the country. Over the last couple of years the County Council has sought to put more resource behind the fight against fly

tipping, supporting district councils in terms of surveillance and using publicity to remind householders of their responsibility for their waste. But I think we all recognize, that more needs to be done, and for the public agencies who share responsibility in this area to work together more effectively. This will be an important priority in the months ahead.

Bus services are starting to return (including some key Go Coach routes for Seal). In addition, and partly in response to the pandemic, Go Coach (working closely with Kent Highways) has introduced and subsequently expanded its on demand Go2 service. This is a pioneering initiative, and in important ways anticipated national developments. Recently the government launched its National Bus Strategy. This is a very important document because it in many ways overthrows the deregulated approach that has characterised bus policy outside major cities for the last 35 years (it also sees a significant role for on demand services such as Go2). So over time, it could have important implications for villages such as Seal (and the still more rural parts of the parish) and it puts a significant responsibility on the County Council as the transport authority. It's early days, but the County Council has to put in a response to government under a very tight timetable and I'm sure we will come back to that issue in the future.

As many people will know, I double up as Leader of the Council as well as local councillor and I would normally say just a few things about wider council issues and activity; however, due to elections, I stick to my local report.

Cllr Thornton thanked Cllr Gough for the work involved and bringing interested parties together for Knole Park. A big thank you for gritting Carters Hill as we had an overturn car for 2 days and for the kerb stones at Seal Chart which got rectified quickly. The visibility of the railway bridge suggested to look at Chipstead as there is no visibility and Seal would stand a far better chance.

The Chairman thanked County Councillor for all his help he has given to Seal Parish Council, it is much appreciated.

The Chairman asked whether anyone had any questions and no comments made.

8 PCSO report – Kent Police PCSO

Unfortunately, PCSO Tim Darling was unable to attend the meeting so his report was read out by Mr Haslam.

The local PCSOs remain the same Tim Darling and George Wilders for Seal. Is hoping that this year everything can get back to normal. His certainly missed attending various local events and fetes, school and store visits. Do let him know if you have any events planned later in the year and he will do his best to attend. The handheld speed guns are back and checks will be completed on Childsbridge Lane again very soon. Where there are other problems on roads that will benefit from this and a location is identified as an issue we are able to request assistance from a PC to be able to enforce these speed limits and issue penalties. They have a new PCSO Task Form Team created who respond to various ongoing issues in the district such as nuisance vehicles and ASB. Obviously if you have any issues that need reporting to the Police this can be done by calling 101 or submitting a report on the Kent Police website. 999 for emergencies. Follow us on Twitter @kentpolice7oaks to see what we're up to on there.

The Chairman asked whether anyone had any questions and no comments made.

8.1 St Lawrence School Report

The reports have been circulated and Alison Saunders said she would like to say a heartfelt thanks to all the staff teachers and TA's and people who have gone above and beyond their role. Teachers and TA's have gone above and beyond for the children of St Lawrence working solidly through breaks and lunches to avoid mixing their bubbles. Many teachers across the county unsung heroes of the pandemic, they have had to find creative ways of working and hopefully you can pick these up from the reports circulated and have had to deal with fragile vulnerable family situations, people struggling emotionally, financially and home-schooling their children and keeping a business going from home.

The Chairman asked whether anyone had any questions and no comments made.

8.2 Seal Primary School Report

Lorraine Butler reiterated all of that from St Lawrence Report, staff at Seal Primary School have worked extremely hard. She wanted to thank the community who obtained computers for us and the fantastic response from food bank and food larder and Councillor Gough for the grant for the school farm and grants which were expected that didn't arrive. This year has been very exhausting, but the staff have been fantastic. We have an exciting new extension and community farm which has been great.

Let's hope we can keep and continue to have a school experience again.

The Chairman asked whether anyone had any questions and no comments made.

8.3 Helen Davies – Beavers & Cubs Update, report circulated

At the moment due to covid we are based at 4th St John's Scout Hut because of restrictions but still very much Seal orientated. We have carried out on zoom meeting throughout the pandemic in cooking over pit fire, making pancakes over a candle, camp songs, celebrated VE day and St Georges day and won 9th beavers best colony and one won cub of the year and beaver of the year.

The Chairman asked whether anyone had any questions and no comments made.

8.4 Marion Gilchurst, report circulated

The Chairman wanted to thank Marion for the amazing job she does for the community. She continues to do club draws monthly, was able to light up the village for the festive period in 2020 and thanked all who came forward to help set this up. She continues to do Friday Group whether this be outdoor spaces or via zoom. KYN volunteers have helped with emergency shopping, collection of prescriptions etc in the early days of lockdown and we thank them for that. Recently have been sharing local newsletters, Seal Church, SDC, Community Connectors, Kent Police and Otford Medical practices, which resident feel is a good source of information and is helpful and hope that this year things can start to return to normal.

Questions raised.

One parishioner asked about the bin emptying and what the perimeter was for how often they should be done as some have been overflowing.

Cllr Thornton said that SDC have had a huge issue with refuse in public open spaces and redirected resources and use of signage to use other bins elsewhere and collapse rubbish. SDC do have a list of hotspots of where these are.

9 Parish Presentation – Community Award

The Chairman awarded Maxine Clark with the Annual Community Award for a resident who has made a significant change to the community. Maxine Clark who even before COVID started, a group Meet and Make, for women to get together every month, knit, crochet etc for charity. Some who host join in and raise money for refugees, hospices, and charities and abroad. They support each other and enjoy creativity and making things for other people. She has helped to coordinate volunteers who are looking after vulnerable people with shopping, cooking and making phone calls. She helped to make masks, receiving £2,000 to date money to go towards poverty for hope and foodbanks etc and contributed to set up an amazing team for PPE. She organises Click and Collect zoom meetings with a speaker, to have a chat and relieve isolation and stress. She led on an idea for Jesus stones to be left around the village and all over the parish. She is a great supporter of the church often working with other people and supporting the community and those in need of support than ever. Huge congratulations to Maxine.

Maxine thanked her for those kind words and said she was chosen and pleased to accept on behalf of Team Underriver, an amazing bunch of individuals and church volunteers who care for individuals during this time.

She said she gave thanks to her husband who has helped and Serena Willoughby, the Vicar and Elizabeth Notely, Church Warden, who has given support, guidance and encouragement and Belinda who has produced ideas. St Margaret's is trying to be a church of action and especially in times in great need, it's not what goes on in the church but outside the church walls that expresses care and love for everyone and of each other and in time of loneliness and depression and I believe our church and will emerge socially and spiritually not cause of covid but in spite of it.

The chairman thanked everyone for attending and said to please come forward if you would like to volunteer in our community as we are interested in hearing from you.

The meeting closed at 8.30pm