

REPORT TO THE ANNUAL COUNCIL MEETING OF AYLESFORD PARISH COUNCIL

FROM THE CHAIRMAN OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES COMMITTEE

May 2017

To the outside observer it may appear that this year has been a quieter period for this Committee than for some while. Nothing could be further from the truth. Although absent this year are the larger-scale Parish projects - Skateboard parks, multi-use games areas, tennis courts, that characterised previous reports.

That this is so perhaps reflects the vast changes that have taken place within the wider Council. Including the loss of indirect funding from the Borough Council and its replacement entirely with a directly funded precept via the Council Tax system, and the introduction of more appropriate and better-value banking systems and accounts.

Improvement this year has rather been taking place mainly in the background, with new purchases of equipment for our dedicated front-line staff and with considerable work in the planning of larger improvement/replacement projects for the coming years. As well as entering into longer-term and hopefully better-value contracts for some of our activities; and providing incremental improvements and repair to existing facilities.

We have also contributed to a number of projects that lie outside of direct Parish Council control; most particularly £20,000 towards the million-pound plus work to restore the tow-path between Aylesford and Maidstone, via Allington lock.

Some projects did not proceed, most notably the Pedestrian 'Zebra' Crossing in Eccles, which Aylesford Parish were co-funding with Kent County Council. After failing to find any agreement as to the best location for this; it was decided instead to join efforts in campaigning for better safety at the Bull Lane/Pilgrims Lane junction. I am pleased to say that following considerable local effort by the Bull Lane Safety Group and a traffic survey; KCC have offered £20,000 for immediate improvements.

Within Aylesford a new design for the village square, following consultation with residents, is eagerly awaited. This much-delayed project is too overdue for my liking and I hope to make this a priority for the next year.

Small contributions to the street-scene have been made in Blue Bell Hill Village with the purchase and installation of new planters. And thankfully KCC have now agreed to fund a no HGV picture-sign to avoid the confusion between the village entrance and the A229 turning. Likewise a number of old payphone boxes have been removed and I am keen to keep up the momentum for removing no-longer useful street furniture.

Our recreation grounds are a real asset locally and well used by residents and visitors alike.

Ferryfield continues to host a wide range of events, both sporting and otherwise; whilst Forstal Road recreation ground continues to improve as a footballing and fitness venue. To this end this year we are reviewing our grounds maintenance contracts with a view to bringing some items back in-house and focussing our contracts on the work where larger machinery is required. In support of this change we have purchased a new heavy-duty strimmer and telescopic pruner.

Play equipment and its repair takes, quite rightly, many man-hours to ensure its safety; and we continue to spend quite considerable sums to ensure this. This year I am very pleased that we have also purchased and installed a swing designed for use with younger disabled children within the play-area on the Forstal Road Recreation Ground. Replacement of some of the older Ferryfield play equipment, including the large Log-World which is reaching the end of its life, is now in the planning stages and will result in significant expenditure in the coming years.

We have also begun a multi-year project to revert Podkin Meadow back to its eponymous eco-system. This has initially been a question of bramble-clearance and future funding of around £11,000 should ensure a wonderful space in the future.

One eco-system however that we wish to discourage is a super-abundance of rats. Mild winters, building works, as well as the illicit dumping of residential grass cuttings, has probably been behind the rise in activity within Aylesford village. This committee initially funded a rodent survey within parish-owned Old Bridge Gardens; and a control system is now operational.

Allotments, for me anyway, continue to be a vital pillar of community; as well as providing a source of wonderful produce to their users. Within the Aylesford allotments many of the larger plots have now been divided, partly to reflect the smaller amount of time folk wish to devote to the activity, and this has considerably reduced the waiting-list for these spaces.

Administratively we have also sought to simplify, clarify and make appropriate both our fees and our rules. This year attention turned amongst other items, to a review of Ferryfield Cemetery regulations and charges. I think we are now much better served as a community by the changes voted on. Also, with the diminishing number of plots available, the Council has agreed to look at expanding the cemetery into a small area of the ferryfield. This will be a time consuming process and will take a number of years to complete.

In addition to spending and projects we must not forget that we are part of a larger multi-layered legislature and that campaigning for the good of the Parish within other agencies is part and parcel of what we do. Traffic is the most often heard complaint, and the Environmental Services Committee has been active in responding to many consultations from Kent County Council / Kent Highways: Not least with the continued disruption all along the local stretch of the A20 and particularly at the Hermitage Lane and Quarry Wood junctions.

As in previous years, my sincere thanks go to all those who serve on this Committee. I am rightly proud of their efforts to ensure diverse, well-ordered, and well used public spaces and sport facilities; for the benefit of all within our Parish and beyond.

With best regards,

Michael Base

(Chairman of the Environmental Services Committee)