

Chairmans Report 2024

At our annual meeting on May 8th 2023 we said farewell to Dick Thomas our chairman for 3 years (parish council for 6.5 years before that). In the council meeting immediately following I was voted in as the Chairman of Ockley Parish Council (OPC). I am Amanda Barclay and I have been a parish councillor since 2019 and have lived in Ockley for a period of 10 years. The first task in this my chairmans report must be to thank Dick Thomas for all his years of service to the Parish Council. Whilst it is a year since he left us, and we did of course thank him at the time, it seems only fitting to convey our thanks to him formally here. I started my time as chair somewhat overwhelmed by the task in hand. Having been self employed for 30 years, never having worked in a corporate field, I had to find confidence to fulfil this role. This last year has been something of challenge given the scale of work that the parish council has had to undertake, more of that to come shortly, and I have been learning on the job very fast !

Planning:

Planning has been the largest workload for the parish council this year. Mole Valley District Council (MVDC) decision to pause the District Local Plan, resulted in "free for all" situation being created for developers to launch applications in Ockley and in many of the local surrounding villages. At times it has felt like a constant battle with numerous planning applications submitted and this has caused great concern for many parishioners. The situation has awakened many people to the potential of development in Ockley and the Parish Council meetings have been the busiest I have ever known. Whilst the circumstances were worrying for many, and the subjects emotive, it was a positive thing to see such high public attendance and to hear the community voice. In my 5 years on the council this was the first time I had had seen parishioners at meetings and this was most welcome. We hope that such community engagement will continue. Whilst it is generally accepted that we need new family housing to sustain our village, we are now faced with a less than palatable position of MVDC increasing the new housing numbers for Ockley from 75 to 135. Ockley Parish Council is disappointed to be facing what is a more than modest expansion of our village. The parish council continues to press the case that any new housing should be the right type for the village and come with improved infrastructure and services to cope with additional residents. The MVDC Local plan is expected to be finalised and adopted this year and once this happens it will bring to an end the uncertainty that the pausing of the Local Plan caused. I would like to mention our new district councillors who have been present for many of our meetings and their comments and input in respect of planning have been most welcome.

Other topics this year:

In addition to the many planning applications mentioned above we have been busy on some other subjects too.

The flooding at the southern end of the village on the A29 at the entrance to Randhawa Farm will be familiar to you all. OPC have been in discussion with the Planning enforcement department at MVDC and Surrey County Council to get to the bottom of the problem and to request effective measures to prevent this happening. Whilst the matter is not resolved as yet it will remain on our agenda until such times as the situation is remedied.

Play Area:

We are currently applying for grant funding to make some improvements to the village play area. Our first task will be new perimeter fencing and then if we can secure further funding we would ideally like to upgrade and improve the play equipment and surfaces in the area. This is a well used part of our village and would benefit greatly from some improvements. Grant funding can be a slow process so whilst this may not happen quickly it is a medium to long term goal for the council.

Footpaths:

Our former Chairman Dick Thomas has volunteered to be a footpath warden in Ockley. He previously carried out an in depth survey of the stiles and footpaths. The Countryside Access Team are arranging for Dick to receive training for this role, although a date for this has not yet been set.

Gatwick:

The expansion of Gatwick Airport remains an important local issue. We are updated on this subject regularly by GAAC and continue to monitor this matter closely.

The old school buildings

The old school buildings are sadly still empty. Our former chair formed a committee to have discussions with the Diocese to convert these buildings into a community hub which would serve the village alongside the village hall and the cricket pavilion. Whilst changing their use is a very long term project, with many legal hurdles to overcome, we do still hope to find a positive community use for this site. It will require a huge amount of effort and we will need to source funding, but the Parish Council remains committed to moving a suitable scheme forward. It is the aim this year to reopen the discussions on how the buildings could best be used and we would welcome any ideas from the community as to what you think would be the most useful way to transform the space.

A29 Traffic:

The traffic on using the A29 continues to be an issue for the village. We would like to thank the Community Speed watch Team for their continued efforts to monitor and report speeding in Ockley. It would be nice to see a police presence in the village on a more regular basis but alas the patrols are few and far between, most likely due to reduced funding and other matters taking police priority. The issue of speeding in the village is always raised when the council respond to planning applications and we remain of the opinion that the only viable solution is average speed cameras along the village stretch of the A29.

Staffing:

For the entire duration of my service on the parish council we have been under our full quota of 7 parish councillors. This means fewer people sharing the work load, however I am delighted to end this year with a full quota of councillors having recently welcomed LJ Clarke and Charles Calvert to our team. Zoe Ward who has been with us for 2 years now has recently announced that she is expecting her first child. She will be taking some time out from her councillor duties this summer and we wish her well with the impending new arrival. Lesley Fletcher who was our clerk for over 30 years returned to for a short time to assist us when our clerk, Sam, had to take some time off. I'm pleased to say that Sam is now back to work. Lesley remains with us in a minor support role for the moment but is expected to step back this summer. We would like to thank Lesley for her help, I personally found her support invaluable.

Summary:

It would be safe to say that I have had a challenging first year finding my feet as chair of the parish council.

My aim working forwards is to progress Ockley Parish Council towards being a modernised, smooth functioning, community accessible, public body. We aim to work hard for the community and to operate in a direct and approachable manner, in the hope of dispelling the historic perception of OPC being "closed" to the village. I want us all to work and communicate together in order to strive for the best in our village.

Amanda Barclay - Chairman, Ockley Parish Council