

ANNUAL PARISH COUNCIL REPORT

By Cllr Kate Tippen, Chairman, Marden Parish Council

All of us Parish Councillors, and our Clerks, would agree that our work for the Parish Council is often frustrating, dependent on others and can take a long time to achieve even the smallest benefit for the community. However, to start on a positive note I was beyond proud to receive the Quality Gold Award from the National Association of Local Councils on behalf of Marden Parish Council last November. The Gold Award is the highest award of the Local Council Award Scheme and Marden is one of the very few Parish and Town Councils in Kent to be awarded the accreditation. The award recognises that the Council achieves good practice in governance, community engagement and council improvement. We are not resting on our laurels and will continue to strive to improve our offer to the community doing as much as we can to deliver services whilst continuing to be efficient and cost effective.

The allotment saga at Highwood Green continues. As I said this time last year and the year before the Redrow wheels continue to turn slowly and sometimes it feels like they are in reverse. Again, as I said last year and the year before we will persevere and maybe there will be better news later this year!

Highway issues continue to be a cause for concern for us and our residents. We have a Highways Improvement Plan, which finally is starting to see some benefits. We have long been concerned about pedestrian safety at the top of Pattenden Lane where the very wide road mouth meant that pedestrians were often taking their life in their hands when crossing the road. Kent Highways produced a carefully measured plan to widen the pavement and put in much needed dropped kerbs all of which have been installed since January. We asked Highways to widen the pavement on the shops side of the junction, as well as the other side, but they said this was not possible as it would restrict the width of the junction too much. I am sure those of you who use this crossing will agree that it is now much easier. It is of course not helped by those motorists who feel it is ok for them to flout highway regulations and routinely park on double yellow lines, they clearly do not appreciate or care about the danger their selfish actions have on pedestrians and other motorists. Other highway improvements that are now in progress include the continuation of single yellow lines along Goudhurst Road, which should help to reduce all day parking and provide more space for parents to park at School drop off and pick up. Double yellow lines in Albion Road around the junctions of Seymour Drive and Stanley Road are also in the pipeline. We will shortly be deciding on or next five highway improvements to put to KCC Highways for implementation. I am grateful to those residents who attended our open morning on 22nd March and gave us their input.

As residents will be aware the Primary Academy has submitted an application for a significant extension to accommodate 2 form entry. The Parish Council was supportive of the application but has serious concerns about highway safety at drop off and pick up times. As yet we have not heard if the application has been approved.

The finger post at the Thorn Road/Plain Road junction, which was demolished in December 2022, has been a source of immense frustration to us. Having secured a contractor to remove the post and a contractor to repair it we were then advised at

the 11th hour by Kent Highways that we are not permitted to reinstall a cast iron signpost on safety grounds. We see the signpost as an important heritage asset which must be preserved, we will continue to seek a solution to this issue.

The Parish Council also has an Infrastructure Spend Plan, which identifies all the improvements we would like to see in the village. Some of the small items the Parish Council will be able to fund, but large, more ambitious plans such as a new pavilion at Southons Field are longer term and will require a greater level of funding. We have developed plans to redevelop the old changing rooms at the Playing Field into a community facility and the planning application has recently been submitted to Maidstone Borough Council. Much of the funding for this project will come from S106 money from the Highwood Green, Windsor Meadow and Parsonage developments. If further funding is needed to complete this project then we will seek grants from outside bodies and will not be taking money from the Council Tax precept.

Flooding has continued to be high on our agenda. We were pleased that Southern Water has invested over £800,000 to improve the sewer network in the village. However, the heavy rain at the beginning of January resulted in the Maynards Sewer overflowing yet again, despite the extensive work undertaken by Southern Water, we are still awaiting an explanation from them as to why this happened.

At times Marden feels very isolated and unsupported especially by Kent County Council. Their budgetary problems are well publicised but for our community it means we no longer have a community warden, a Children's Centre or any youth support services. Police reorganisation also means we no longer have a PCSO. The vulnerable members of our community therefore have to rely on other services such as the excellent voluntary work undertaken by the Food Bank and puts more pressure on our already overstretched Medical Centre. Yes, we could have access to a Community Warden if the Parish Council was prepared to pay for it and the same for a youth worker but with an already overstretched budget this is not something we can contemplate. If you lived in the town you would have access to these services, without any additional cost.

We have two Community Police officers who we share with the rest of the Marden, Yalding, Collier Street, Hunton and Nettlestead Ward, all of Staplehurst Ward and all of Headcorn Ward. From west to east their patch is at least 16 miles, along country lanes so it's not surprising we see little of them. Having said that we have a good relationship with our PCs and they are committed to do what they can to support Marden. We recently held a Police surgery at the Village Club which a number of residents attended and raised concerns which will be taken forward. We plan to hold further surgeries with the Police.

During the past year we have held a number of community events including the beacon lighting last June to commemorate 80 years since VE Day, the Children's Summer Play Scheme and Marden at Christmas. All were well attended and much enjoyed. We hope that many of you will join us on 8th May this year for a beacon lighting to commemorate 80 years since VE Day. The Summer Play Scheme will run for 8 days from 23rd July to 1st August, once more run by Jen Ward and her team,

plans are well underway. Marden at Christmas will of course take place on 6th December, Father Christmas will be in his grotto with his elves as usual. Our annual litter pick took place on Saturday 29th March. More than 60 residents were joined by 15 Police Cadets who collected over 200 bags of rubbish from within the village itself and from the surrounding lanes. A huge thank you to everyone who took part and to those who regularly litter pick around the parish. It's a shame we have to do it but reassuring that we have so many committed members of our community who are prepared to give up their time to do a dirty job.

We are committed to maintaining regular communication with residents through a number of different channels. We have continued to produce the newsletter 3 times a year and we are grateful to Cllr Anne Boswell who does such an amazing job compiling it and to Deputy Clerk Rachel Weeks who typesets it and gets it ready for print. Thanks also to Councillors and volunteers who hand deliver to all properties in the village centre. We post to properties in the rural parts of the parish. I hope you find the newsletter useful; we have received very positive feedback about it. We are also very active on social media and regularly use Facebook to update on events, road closures and many other issues. We know that many people do not use social media and we have introduced a weekly e-newsletter that is delivered via e-mail to recipients on a Friday, this contains all the information we have posted that week on social media. If you haven't signed up to receive it then please let Deputy Clerk Rachel know. We also have a network of notice boards which are updated weekly.

Thanks to all my council colleagues for all the hard work and long hours they have put in over the year. During the last year Councillor Matt Besant stood down as he has left the area – we are very grateful to him for the work he did for the Parish during his time in office. We co-opted 2 new councillors, Paul Dobinson and Jon Goda, both of whom have hit the ground running and are making valuable contributions to the Council. We still have one vacancy for a Parish Councillor, if you want to make a positive contribution to your community please come and talk to any of us after the meeting. This will be my last report to you as Chairman of the Council. Our terms of reference state that Chairman should be in post for no more than three years, and I have done four years. Council will vote for a new Chairman in May.

Finally, a huge thanks to our staff, without whom we could not function. Deputy Clerk Rachel throws herself into Parish Council work and her energy and enthusiasm for the role shows itself every day especially in her commitment to communication and all the work that goes into managing the work of the Amenities Committee. Ali, our Clerk, and font of all Marden knowledge, steers the ship and it's not easy with 11 (when we are at full complement) Councillors to contain, but she makes sure that we do what we have to and nothing slips through the gaps. Lisa Stevens is our Administrative Assistant, who supports all aspects of our office work. All of us here tonight are grateful to Ali, Rachel and Lisa for your hard work, dedication and constant good humour.

Ian Jones, our Cemetery Caretaker, retired on 31st March after 38 years looking after the Cemetery. He will be much missed. We are now recruiting for a new Parish Groundsperson.

We are very grateful to Chris Prince, our Village Caretaker, who looks after all our open space and many other jobs that need doing around the village as well.

KALC Community Award for 2025 was awarded to Sue Eltringham.