

Okehampton Hamlets Parish Council

Annual Report 2022-23

Brian Wood – Chairman

Introduction

This is the Annual Report of the Okehampton Hamlets Parish Council team. This year has been an even busier year than the last one.

Grant Applications

We were able to continue to support local and community organisations with grants.

The organisations we supported included: -

Tor Support Services

Dartmoor National Park Authority

North Dartmoor Search & Rescue

Meldon Viaduct Company

Royal British Legion

Citizens Advice Bureau

Everything Okehampton

OCRA (Okehampton Community Recreation Association)

Okehampton Music Day

Budget and Administration

Conscious of the growing financial demands on parishioners; for the fourth consecutive year we have been able produce a budget that keeps any Precept rise below the level of inflation, at only 3.4%; (RPI 19.4%).

Our External Audit was rated good. We updated a number of policies and continued to have written reports to the council by County and District Members as well as the Clerk, to make the meetings more efficient and reduce the time of the meetings. Thanks go to County Councillor Lois Samuels of Devon County Council and West Devon Borough Councillors and especially to Councillors Julie Yelland and Tony Leech for their regular contributions to our meetings.

We have employed on an ad hoc basis a Parish Ranger to assist the Clerk in the administration and inspection of Old Town Park Local Nature Reserve and Meldon Woods. This was a on a trial basis and we decided to make a more permanent arrangement for the coming year.

Community Work

We have continued working with Okehampton Town Council (OTC) and the local community on the Joint Neighbourhood Development Plan which is now going through the final stages before a referendum to adopt (or not). Thanks must be given to Alison Duckers, the (volunteer) chair of the

group who put the plan together. This year she did an tremendous amount of work to get the Plan to the stage it is now at.

We also worked jointly with OTC on the Queens Platinum Jubilee Celebrations, which included a very successful event we organised at the Okehampton Showground to light The Okehampton Beacon to commemorate the occasion.



The Chairman lighting the beacon



Well alight



Piper started the ceremony

A piper was drafted in to play at the same time as others throughout the country.



Okehampton Silver Excelsior Band

Musical entertainment was provided by a number of groups and the queues for food and drinks never stopped all evening.



I attended two Proclamations for the new King. One in Swanage and one in Okehampton.

We are currently working with OTC on the Coronation Celebrations in May. Final details of these will be published in due course.



A proper cream tea is planned – Cream on First!

With Everything Okehampton we are working with Okehampton Town Council, Okehampton United Charities, and the Museum of Dartmoor Life to celebrate three anniversaries on July 9th. The Town Charter is four hundred years old; United Charities are one hundred and fifty years old and the Parish Council was formed one hundred and twenty five years ago; (pre-dating OTC who is only forty nine years old).

We continue to be part of Oke Rail and welcomed the announcement made by the government that the West Devon Borough Council bid for funding a Transport Hub in Stockley Hamlet. The Okehampton Parkway station should be opened within two years. We have been working with a number of others on the Beacon Path which will be a cycleway from Sticklepath to Okehampton and will link with Parkway station.

We have become members of Okehampton Regeneration Board working with Devon County Council, West Devon Borough Council, Okehampton Town Council and business representative. A project that is being rolled out to seven other towns in Devon.

We have worked with DNPA towards a National Lottery Funding Bid, that would enhance Ashburton, Princetown and Okehampton as access points to the Moor.

We attended a number of meetings with other bodies such as North West Devon Matters (police and community safety), Superlinks (DCC and WDBC) and Okehampton Wellbeing Alliance. Many of our councillors serve as individuals on local charities, governing bodies, and associations.

We have started planning a D-Day commemoration event on 6th June 2024 which will include The Okehampton Beacon being lit again as part of the National Chain. More details will be published next year.

Training

Individual councillors and the Clerk have attended online courses, mostly run by Devon Association of Local Councils) (DALC), Parish Online or Devon Communities Together (DCT).

Open Spaces

Last year to support our work in Meldon Woods and Old Town Park Local Nature Reserve (OTPLNR), we formed a working group. This is chaired by John Heard and has continued to support the work of the council. We visited both woods regularly, inspected the trees and implemented works associated with the recent tree surveys and any storm damage. We were assisted by a local naturalist, Matt Parkins with this work. Amongst his skills, Matt is licensed to handle Dormice and works for a number of organisations including the Woodland Trust.



Matt at work



StOC receiving the WDBC Green Award



StOC members with a dead hedge in OTPLNR

We received Tenders from three contractors for recent works which were carried out in January and February.

As usual the bluebells were particularly attractive in May. We put up signs to try and keep the public on the paths so that their beauty could be enjoyed by visitors. We will do the same again this year.



We continued the use of Dartmoor Marshalls in the parish again to great success. (They are contracted by Dartmoor National Park (DNP), and we joined their scheme). Their use stopped illegal camping and fires and we able to give lots of information and advice to visitors. We intend to continue their presence this coming year. We worked very closely and had a good relationship with the local Dartmoor Ranger, Ian Brooker, who has now retired. However, we are able to now work with Rob Taylor. We owe a debt of gratitude to Ian for the work has carried out over many years in our parish and others in North Dartmoor. A hard act to follow, however, I am sure Rob will be up to the challenge and is also one of our parishioners.

This year by working directly with the enthusiastic and able local volunteers from Sticklepath and Okehampton Conservation Group (StOC) and Okement Rivers Improvement Group (ORIG); we achieved over four hundred hours of voluntary work being carried out to support our conservation work. This included coppicing, building barriers along footpaths to reduce access, litter clearance, reducing Himalayan Balsam growth, clearing a wet flush and reduction of holly growth. There is plenty more to do in the following years to enhance the habitats for wildlife and visitors alike.

Other works have been carried out by individual councillors, which has also been invaluable.

This year a vigilant and observant member of the public identified Japanese Knotweed in Old Town Park Local Nature Reserve. We will employ a licensed Contractor to deal with this in line with legislation to stop it spreading elsewhere.

We worked with DNPA to host the Meldon Wildlife Day. Again, it was a success with many visitors from outside the county learning important aspects about wildlife and the environment.

We allowed Southwest Endurance to make use of the Aplite quarry car park for one of their events. We have ordered for more signage in both woods. We have a vision for the work to be carried out, and have commissioned a woodland management plan. We took the decision to introduce annual tree inspections to assist in our work of keeping the woods safe for the public to enjoy.

Our allotment provision is still ably managed by Okehampton United Charities for which we contribute towards the costs. Demand for these still continues, which has resulted in a growing waiting list.

We hosted a training course about the reintroduction of Red Squirrels which attracted participants from all over the county.

Presentations

At our September meeting we had a presentation by Speedwatch. As a result we formed our own group and have agreed to work jointly with our neighbours Sampford Courtney PC. Interest has also been shown by Sticklepath PC to work together. Currently we are still recruiting members of the team.

BID (Business Improvement District).

We have been approached by West Devon Borough Council to work with them and OTC to create the above. Discussions are currently still ongoing.

Emergency Plans and Environmental Issues

During the cold snap in November/December we deployed two new salt bins and maintained the others within the parish. We also found individuals in critical rural locations to hold stocks that could be deployed when necessary. We have also found potential locations to deploy more bins over the coming years, should that prove necessary. We hold stocks of several tonnes of grit/salt at two locations owned by individual councillors, for which I give my thanks.

Fortunately, there was no need to utilise our Flood Plan this year.

Planning

We continue to be consulted by West Devon Borough Council on planning applications, (twenty-seven in total). The biggest of which were the sixty homes on off Radford Way by Leander Homes, which we did not support. (Remember parish and town councils do not approve planning, we are just a Statutory Consultee, decisions are made by the Planning Authority, which is either West Devon Borough Council or Dartmoor National Park Authority.)

Community Governance Review

It will not have gone unnoticed that following a Petition by OTC, West Devon Borough Council has commenced a Community Governance Review to consider moving the parish boundary. OHPC opposes the proposition and urges all parishioners to do the same. Not only is there likely to be a fourfold increase in Parish Council Tax Precept if agreed, but there will also be a threat to the viability of OHPC continuing to manage OTPLNR & Meldon Woods as effectively as they are. OHPC does however, welcome a Community Governance Review that covers ALL of West Devon.

Retiring Councillors

The terms of office of two of our long-standing councillors have come to an end

Ruth Maile has decided that after fifteen years' service to OHPC she should devote more time to running her own business. Ruth has done so much for Okehampton and beyond, including being President of the Okehampton & District Agricultural Association.

Derek Webber our immediate past Chairman has decided not to stand for re-election. He has been ill lately and is looking forward to being able to spend more time with his devoted wife Ruby. He has served OHPC for over 20 years and also was a long-serving Member of the Dartmoor National Park Authority. His experience and knowledge will be missed.

Finally, a picture of a happy dormouse which was living in one of the nest boxes made by Men in Sheds a couple of years ago. Makes all the hard work by everyone worthwhile.

