



**Okehampton Hamlets Parish Council
Annual Report 2023-24**

Councillor 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.

At the end of the last term of office we said goodbye to our former and long-standing Chairman Derek Webber who stood down from the council because of ill health. We also said goodbye to Ruth Maile who had served as a parish councillor for fourteen years and had decided that she had reached the age where she should take it easy and just concentrate on her family business. Fellow councillors treated them to lunch and gave them mementoes to recognise their contributions.



Elections were held in May and Dr Stuart Norris and Jan Goffey were elected to replace them. During those elections Julie Yelland lost her Borough Seat, and we thank her for the work she did representing Okehampton South during her tenure.

Grant Applications

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

The organisations we supported included: -

Okehampton & District Community Transport Group
Tor Support Services
Okehampton Friendship Group
Wren Music
Meldon Viaduct Company
Immersion in the Community
Royal British Legion
Friends of St James School
Everything Okehampton
Okehampton Carnival Committee
OCRA (Okehampton Community Recreation Association)
Okehampton Music Day
Friends of Okehampton Library
Meldon Wildlife Day
North Dartmoor Search & Rescue



Presentation of the grant cheque towards the new Incident Control Unit.

Budget and Administration

Conscious of the growing financial demands on parishioners and increasing costs to the council we raised the Council Tax Precept by £5.39 per annum for a Band D property.

Our External Audit was rated good. We updated a few policies and continued to have written reports to the council by County and Borough Members as well as from the Clerk, these make the meetings more efficient and reduce the time of the meetings. Thanks go to the various councillors for their regular contributions.

We have continued to employ 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 has proven invaluable in supporting the Clerk and setting to work various volunteers in our woods.

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 very final stage before a referendum to adopt (or not). Again, thanks must be given to Alison Duckers, the (volunteer) chair of the group for all her hard work to get to this stage.

We also worked jointly with OTC on the Kings Coronation Celebrations and hosted a very well attended cream tea in Meldon Village Hall. We planted two flowering cherries in each of Meldon Fields and Romansfield to mark the occasion.



Meldon Village Hall was an ideal location and was attended by over one hundred parishioners and visitors.



The Chairman had plenty of helpers at the plantings

With Everything Okehampton, Okehampton Town Council, Okehampton United Charities, and the Museum of Dartmoor Life we celebrated three anniversaries on July 9th in Simmons Park. The Town Charter being four hundred years old; United Charities being one hundred and fifty years old and the Parish Council being formed one hundred and twenty-five years ago.



Three tiers of cake enjoyed whilst the OHPC fun quiz proved a great success.

We continue to be part of Oke Rail and are looking forward to the planned opening of the West Devon Borough Council Transport Hub in Stockley Hamlet during 2025. The Chairman attended a birthday celebration of the reintroduced rail service at Okehampton Station.



We continue to work with a few others on the Beacon Path which will be a cycleway from Sticklepath to Okehampton that should link with Parkway station.

We continue to work as a member of Okehampton Regeneration Board, working with Devon County Council, West Devon Borough Council, Okehampton Town Council and business representative. We agreed to support the formation of a Business Improvement District (BID) for Okehampton.

We attended several meetings with other bodies such as Northwest Devon Matters (police and community safety), Superlinks (DCC and WDBC), Dartmoor National Park and Okehampton Wellbeing Alliance. Many of our councillors serve as individuals on local charities, governing bodies, and associations.

We have continued planning (with OTC) 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 soon.

Speedwatch

Working with Sampford Courtney parish, we now have trained volunteers from within the town and Hamlets and will be working with those currently training in Inwardleigh and Sticklepath parishes. We are seeking a co-ordinator to progress this scheme.

Training

Individual councillors and the Clerk have attended more online courses this year, especially important as we have two new councillors.

Open Spaces

Our working group is still chaired by John Heard and continues to support the work of the council in managing our two woods which we visit regularly to inspect the trees and implemented works associated with the tree surveys and any storm damage. We are still assisted by a local naturalist, Matt Parkins with this work. Amongst his skills, Matt is licensed to handle Dormice and works for several organisations including the Woodland Trust. Dr Stuart Norris has added to the skills of this group with his firsthand knowledge of ecology and nature. He has also authored leaflets about both our woods which will be available to download or pick up from the Museum of Dartmoor Life. A Woodland Management Plan is soon to be formally adopted and the annual tree works will be carried out at the appropriate times to keep the woods safe for visitors. The Bluebell displays were as always, attractive in May.

As in previous years, 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.

Again, 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 several 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. Work has just started on improving the footpaths in Old Town Park Local Nature Reserve. They were rewarded in the customary fashion with hot pasties by the Chairman. There is plenty more to do in the following years to enhance the habitats for wildlife and visitors alike.



Some members of StOC who restored a footpath.

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

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

Ian Brooker is still active in our woods and organised Men in Sheds to build bird boxes for Pied Flycatchers, who migrate annually to Meldon Woods. The boxes were constructed of oak felled in our woods and milled locally.



Matt Parkins was nominated for the Mayor of West Devon Green Award which he received from the Leader of the Council.



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



Exhibitors setting up for the day.

Our allotment provision is still ably managed by Okehampton United Charities for which we contribute towards the costs. Demand for these continues.

Emergency Plans and Environmental Issues

We continue to be members of the DCC Snow Warden Plan and have distributed salt/grit around the parish. We hold stocks of several tonnes of grit/salt at two locations owned by individual councillors, for which I again give my thanks.

The Brightley Flood Plan is being reviewed by Cllr Ewen and myself and an updated version will be available soon.

The councillors accepted an invitation by Forthglade to visit their premises and see the new environmental measures that they have put in place. These should manage the odours that hitherto may have caused some nuisance smells.

Planning

We continue to be consulted by West Devon Borough Council and Dartmoor National Park Authority on planning applications, (twenty-eight in total).

Community Governance Review

On 20th February 2023, West Devon Borough Council decided to accept a proposal that the majority of the OHPC properties be moved within the OTC boundary. This was against the wishes of the majority of OHPC parishioner's and Councillors. The implications of this unexpected decision and future management of the council and its assets have yet to be considered in full.

Parish Clerk

During October Jane Gillard, our Parish Clerk, indicated to me that she wished to retire from that role and recently confirmed this by resigning. We have now started the recruitment process to fill the vacuum that she will leave. She has served us diligently

for 17 years and is one of the most experienced parish Clerks in Devon. Personally, I will sorely miss her and the knowledge and experience that she has used to support the parish council; a feeling I am sure is shared by my fellow councillors. During a planned holiday absence she was substituted by Marion Pratt, who similarly retired from her role in Samford Courtney. She must also be thanked for supporting the parish.

Thanks

This goes to my fellow councillors, who like me are all volunteers and give up their time to help the community. Generally, it is unusual for us to ask for expenses for travel within the parish or for equipment we have used. I would also like to thank the Vice Chairman Martin Littlejohns who has stood in for me when I have been out of the country.

Lastly a Dormouse was spotted recently nesting in Old Town Park Loal Nature Reserve by our Parish Ranger. The conservation work seems to be very successful.

