

Annual Report for Okehampton Hamlets Parish Council 2020-21

Owing to COVID-19 regulations it is difficult to arrange a formal in-person Annual Parish Meeting. The council decided that the Chairman should make this written report which is published on the website. Questions can be asked via an online Zoom meeting on 4th May or by email to the Clerk mail@okehamptonhamlets-pc.gov.uk. It is planned to hold a face-to-face meeting with parishioners at a later date.

Owing to the pandemic the council was unable to meet face-to-face during the course of the whole year. The first meeting was in May when we agreed changes to Standing Orders to allow online meetings and agree that the Clerk would make decisions on behalf of the council, in order to comply with the new Regulations. The Chairman retained office without an election. We met online using the published schedule on every first Tuesday of the month including for a change August and twice in March owing to workload and timing of planning application responses. However, the face-to-face work by councillors where we make a difference to the community has been seriously affected.

Despite the pandemic, a total of thirty-one planning matters were discussed, and decisions made on supporting or not the applicants. All decisions then being made by West Devon Borough Council. This included the application for 220 homes on Parcel 3 and the 50 homes South of Exeter Road. We were able to influence changes in the first application when the developer considered our suggestions. There was also an application from DCC for a new Special School in the business park.

The Clerk agreed for the council to hold funds raised by the Okehampton Coronavirus Support Group to support the communities around Okehampton. All claims against these fund then being fully accounted for and it facilitated the group to apply for funds by having a “host” organisation. The Chairman is one of the co-founders of this organisation and the main fundraiser.

During the year, less grant applications were received by the council and those that we were pleased to approve included: -

- Okehampton Town Council, with a contribution to their second-year costs to operate Fairplace toilets.
- Citizen Advice Bureau.
- Meldon Viaduct Co Ltd.
- Okehampton and District Community Transport Group
- British Legion for the commemorative wreath
- Everything Okehampton
- Okement Rivers Improvement Group
- Okehampton Coronavirus Support Group

During the year, our ongoing joint work with Okehampton Town Council and the community on the Joint Neighborhood Plan made significant progress.

We approved many Policies and documents including: -

- Fixed Asset Register
- Governance Statement
- Standing Orders
- Risk Policy
- Freedom of Information
- Internal Control
- Community Grants terms and conditions.

Meldon Wildlife Day was cancelled. *Beating the Bounds* organised by Dartmoor Commoners, and supported by the council was cancelled as well. VE Day celebrations were unable to be held, However, the council gave each pupil at St James School a commemorative mug to mark the occasion. The Okehampton & District Show held in the parish was also cancelled.

Unfortunately, we suffered from actions by certain elements of the community. The bench in Old Town Park Local Nature Reserve was vandalized with emulsion paint, which was subsequently washed off with the heavy winter rains.



Vandalised memorial bench

It was very upsetting to the family of Charlotte that the plaque commemorating her death at Fatherford was initially vandalized with paint and after cleaning completely removed. Many locals have pledged a reward if the perpetrators are identified and arrested. Signs were again vandalized and removed from Meldon Woods.

We sited and filled three additional grit bins for use in the parish which was of benefit to many during the cold snap last winter.

Meldon Woods became the focus of our minds for a variety of reasons.

- At the start of the first *lockdown*, we shut the road through the wood to remove access to the car park in line with national guidance and consistent with DNPA Policy for their areas of responsibility. This led to complaints via email and on social media.
- An unauthorized encampment on a layby occurred, but we allowed it to stay during the Lockdown. The layby was shut after they left.
- Overnight camping occurred on many occasions with signs saying “*No camping*” being damaged.
- An ash tree suddenly fell during August and blocked the road
- Trees along the road did not look healthy and an early inspection did not indicate a reason.
- We arranged for an inspection in October, and it was evident that ash die back had taken hold of many trees.

- High winds and storms resulted in further damage to healthy trees including oaks.
- Works were undertaken to ensure the Woods were safe for public entry.
- It is evident that the woods have been walked more than ever before.
- Litter and anti-social behaviour are problems that we will need to address.
- A Management Plan will have to be developed and actioned after a recent inspection is reported for consideration.
- We will investigate operating Warden schemes to enhance and protect the wildlife and also to monitor security and anti social behaviour.



Tree with ash die back

The proximity of Old Town Park Local Nature Reserve to Okehampton Town has led to a vast increase in footfall during the pandemic. This has resulted in damage to wildlife habitat with new paths being opened up, and areas trampled by dogs and children. Footpaths have been damaged by bicycles being ridden on them in unsuitable weather conditions. It is hoped by careful management that recovery can take place and the significant and important population of dormice can recover. Wind damage and decay required some trees to be trimmed for safety reasons. Ash die back is not so severe as a result of only a few being present in the reserve. ORIG and other local volunteers have offered to help with longer term plans. They already manage the Himalayan Balsam that is to be found within the reserve.



Himalayan Balsam being lifted by A Wood of ORIG.

The information board had to be repaired when the oak posts decayed. During December after the Winter Solstice a spiral of stones near an ancient oak tree appeared. This was found to be a pagan symbol of the circle of life. A photo on Facebook received over 5000 likes and was shared at least 500 times. Another spiral appeared in the meadow two months later. This will be removed as it stops the grass being mown.



Spiral of life by an ancient oak tree

We produced some updated Welcome Leaflets, which will be delivered to the new homes being built.

An additional Parish Noticeboard has been located within Meldon Fields and another planned for Romansfield, part paid for by the developer.

A new wooden bench was purchased and sited at Chicacott Cross to replace one that had decayed.



New bench at Chicacott Cross.

Despite high costs encountered with dealing ash die back the council only increased the Precept by 0.65%. This was in line with the rate of inflation. We have significantly raised the budget for Community Grants for the coming year and welcome applications from community organisations post COVID-19.

At the time of writing, it would appear that after May 7th, all meetings will be face-to-face. We will publish the meeting venues on the website and noticeboards along with Agendas. Any member of the public is welcome to attend and speak for up to 3 minutes on subjects that the council can have an influence over. You can of course raise any such issue with any councillor or the Clerk between meetings.