



## The report of the Chair of the Parish Council to the Annual Parish Meeting

One of the joys of being Chair of the Parish Council is having the opportunity to look back at the year past, pick out some of the highlights, and thank those people who have done, and continue to do, so much to enhance our community.

I'd also like to take this opportunity to look forward to the coming year...

### Council

Council has met eight times, with the usual bi-monthly meetings, plus two Extraordinary meetings to deal with planning issues - the first relating to an application by Poundfield Products to extend its operating hours (*which has been refused!*), the second last month to consider the planning application at "Meadows".

Council has been at its full complement of five councillors throughout the year, and I am lucky to have such a strong, committed team to work with.

Our Clerk, **Jennie Blackburn**, completed her professional training during the course of the past year, and has worked hard to support the Council in its work.

The Council finances are healthy, with reserve funds established to cover the play area and for street lighting replacement, in addition to dedicated funds held to finance the nature reserve at Fen Alder Carr and general reserves as recommended to all local authorities. At the County and District Councils face increased financial pressures, these are passed down to us by means of higher charges, but our cautious financial management has enabled us to keep the increase in our precept to 2.27% for 2019/20 - that represents a charge of £52.27 for a band D property.

We are required to carry out a full Financial Risk Assessment each year, as well as a review of our Internal Audit processes, and these were both successfully completed during the year. Our Financial Regulations remain adequate for our purposes.

### Changes

Ours is not a village with an awful lot of infrastructure. However, this year has seen a few significant changes, all of which have resulted from hard work by Councillors over an extended period.

Firstly, the 20 mph speed limit for the core village was finally introduced, with first the road signs put in place and then, some months later, road decals added for emphasis. First indications are that most village residents are adhering to the limit, but there are still too many drivers passing through the village at unwarranted speeds.

Second, a new **defibrillator** was sited on the village green. Fortunately, it has not had cause to be used yet, but given how remote we are from the emergency services, it is reassuring to have it. Many thanks must go to the Community Heartbeat Trust, whose support in helping us to bid for the funds necessary to finance the project was essential.

Finally, we have a new **Parish Noticeboard**, again placed on the village green. Many thanks to County Councillor Gary Green, for his support for the project from his Locality Budget.

However, the biggest change during the year was the **connection of the village to high-speed broadband**. The ability to connect to the outside world via the internet is now so important as more and more transactions take place online, and the lack of broadband was having a negative impact on village life.

### Ongoing activities

As we're a small Parish, the services we provide are relatively few in number;

- Dog waste bins
- Grass cutting
- Maintenance of the play area
- Maintenance of the Fen Alder Carr nature reserve

Residents will be aware that Fen Alder Carr remains closed for safety reasons, and it is likely to remain so going forward due to the vast cost of making it safe.

## **An opportunity to say “Thank you!”**

No successful village thrives without the support of groups and individuals, whose efforts go mostly unsung, but without whom, many of the good things that happen now simply wouldn't.

So, firstly, I'd like to thank the Parochial Church Council, not simply for their Herculean efforts to maintain St Peter's, but for organising the village's social life. Coffee mornings, pub nights, the summer Garden Party - all of these do so much to build and maintain our village community.

Liz Sawyer has stoically administered the Village Lottery again over the past year, and her efforts have enabled us to keep the Play Area in good condition. We're lucky to live in a village with more children than some similarly sized ones, and part of supporting that is to give parents and their young children somewhere to go. Her efforts have been crucial to that support.

Virginia Taylor has continued in her role as Tree Warden and Wildlife Group organiser and, again, has made a valued contribution towards maintaining and improving our local environment. Two litter picks have been organised and, whilst there doesn't appear to be much litter around the Parish, it's amazing how much has been collected.

My fellow Parish Councillors, Machala Peacock, Dan Mason, Richard Hitt and Sue Lawson have been hugely supportive to me in my first year as Chair, and their knowledge, experience and good humour has been a big part of making the Parish Council as successful as it is. Sue announced her intention to stand down at the end of this term of office, and we will miss her knowledge of the village's recent history as we go forward.

Our Clerk, Jennie Blackburn, has shown patience and skill in supporting our efforts to work for the good of the community. I was delighted when she completed her professional training and hope that she will remain with us for a long time to come.

And finally, a big thank you, and a farewell, to our outgoing District Councillor, Keith Welham. Boundary changes have moved us from Stowupland ward to Needham Market ward, and thus whilst Keith is hoping to remain on the Council, he won't be representing us any more. He has been an exemplar as our local representative, attending Parish Council meetings and coffee mornings, supporting the Parish Council with sound advice and strategic thinking. His successors will have a very tough act to follow, and we wish him well in his future endeavours.

## **Looking forward**

One of the emerging trends in village life is the increased use of social media to engage and involve residents. The WhatsApp group, and the new community Facebook page (both independent of the Parish Council) have enabled residents to receive and exchange information more readily than ever before, as evidenced by the use of the Facebook page to rally comments on the planning application at “Meadows”.

As a Council, we haven't made as much use of social media as we might, possibly because it doesn't come naturally to many of us. However, the events of the last month have led me to wonder whether or not we could communicate with residents better, and that's something I would like to consider further. Can we use the Parish newsletter more effectively, for example?

The outstanding infrastructure project for the village is the street lights. Whilst there are only ten of them, they never all seem to be working at the same time. They are aging, increasingly obsolete and expensive to run and maintain. Unfortunately, we own them, which means that, if we want to replace them, we will have to find the funds locally. We have initiated a capital fund but, at the current rate of progress, it is likely to be many years before we could raise sufficient to purchase and install new LED street lighting, so we may need to be more creative in finding a solution.

Finally, a new Council takes office on 7 May. There were only three candidates (Machala Peacock, Terry Taylor and myself) who successfully filed valid nomination papers, and so we will be seeking to fill the remaining two vacancies at our meeting on 9 May.