

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

17th May 2021

It is somewhat hard to credit that it has been two years since I wrote my last Annual Report but, in truth, I would have to admit that the last fourteen or so months have been rather more challenging than the first twenty-two. And so, as this report covers two years, rather than the usual one, it comes in two parts, pre-pandemic and pandemic...

2019/2020

We started the year by co-opting Dan Mason and Richard Hitt to fill the vacancies that had not been filled by the election, and by welcoming our new District Councillors, Mike Norris and Stephen Phillips, following their successful election.

As usual, our main complication was the almost annual planning application from Poundfield Products, this time to build meeting and office space in front of the current premises. This was a replacement application for one made in 2016, which had lapsed, and was again granted by Mid Suffolk District Council, in spite of our reservations. Interestingly, again nothing has been done to start work on construction.

Poundfield Products was indeed going to be-come the thread which ran through the year, with the Managing Director, Michael Roddy, at-tending our September meeting, and Chris Nicholls, the plant's General Manager, joining us in January. Both meetings were somewhat feisty, with the representatives of the company deter-mined that they would breach the planning conditions placed upon them in relation to working hours regardless of the views of local residents. It would be fair to say that the outcome was rather unsatisfactory but, in the absence of enforcement action from Mid Suffolk District Council, it is hard to envisage what meaningful remedy could be achieved.

The January meeting also saw a presentation in advance of a second planning application to build on the site of 'Meadows' in the heart of the village, more on which later.

Council finances remained healthy, and we were able to slightly reduce the annual precept for 2020/21 by 0.26% to allow for an effective freeze in the Band D charge at £52.26 (down from £52.27 in 2019/20).

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 remained adequate for our purposes.

2020/2021

As we left 2019/20, it was already clear that the pandemic was going to make life challenging for everyone, and Parish Councils were no exception. The legal framework which dictates how we are supposed to operate was never de-signed for a situation where we couldn't meet in person and, whilst the Government in Whitehall decided how we could get around those restrictions and operate legally, we lost our Annual Meeting.

Council agreed, via e-mail, that I should continue as Chair for another year, and we focussed our attention on offering help to anyone in the village who might need it.

What made the year more challenging was a series of complex planning applications, starting with a revised application for the 'Meadows' site in May. This was a somewhat different application to its predecessor, in that some, but not all, of our concerns had been addressed. However, the core problem was the policy of Mid Suffolk District Council in terms of the planning envelope for the village, which left no scope for the application to be successful. It came as little surprise when Mid Suffolk District Council turned down the application for a second time.

By late summer, the pandemic restrictions were eased somewhat, but the Parish Council (and the village) faced the new challenge of the pro-posed Gateway 14 development on the land bounded by the A1120, the A14 and the main rail-way line.

I must acknowledge that, whilst the development is not exactly what we would want on our door-step, and has a severe impact on residents at Clamp Farm in particular, the consultation process was at least a genuine opportunity for residents to put their views to the developer and we have had an impact in terms of improved screening, revisions to the rerouting of the footpath that links our village with Cedars Park, and the addition of a shuttle bus service linking the development with Stowmarket.

The village has rallied round to challenge the developer and the District Council, who own the site, and I must pay tribute to the Gateway 14 Residents Group who have done more than anyone to draw public attention to the potential pitfalls of the project. The Parish Council submitted a lengthy response to the planning application when it finally emerged, and we await the out-come with a degree of trepidation.

Seemingly inevitably, Poundfield Products returned with an application to extend their facility nearer to the River Gipping and, despite our stated concerns, once again, Mid Suffolk District Council granted permission. We are still awaiting an out-come to their application to increase their hours of operation and continue to press for enforcement action, so far without success.

We declared a climate emergency which, as I noted at the time, might seem like a bit of a gesture.

However, as we all become increasingly aware of the fragility of the environment around us, even small Parish Councils can, and should, do what they can to improve the way that they operate.

In terms of our finances, we were able to effectively freeze the precept again for 2021/22, with the band D charge rising from £52.26 to £52.27, which means that residents have seen no increase in their Council Tax bill from the Parish Council for two years.

Again, we have successfully carried out a full Financial Risk Assessment, as well as a review of our Internal Audit processes, and our Financial Regulations remain adequate for our purposes.

On a personnel note, we have said goodbye, or perhaps au revoir, to Machala Peacock, who has served the Parish Council with grace and good humour, including a successful spell as Chair. Pressure of work, plus the joys of young children has forced her to stand down, and we hope to fill the vacancy as soon as possible.

And finally, on a personal note, I have unexpectedly found myself on the national stage, at least as far as local government is concerned. I became, in a period of three months, first a Vice Chair of the Mid Suffolk South group of the Suffolk Association of Local Councils, then a board member of the County Association and finally Suffolk's representative on the National Assembly of the National Association of Local Councils, where I hope to act as a voice for small villages generally.

A guide to the Parish Council

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
- Monitoring the defibrillator to ensure that it is in working order

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.

We also act as a statutory consultee for all planning applications within and bordering on the Parish. That can range from Gateway 14 at one end of the spectrum, to residential extensions at the other. We'll generally only meet formally if we have a concern, or are aware of resident concerns.

In addition, we liaise with various organisations and both the District and County Councils on issues of importance to the village, through our various Councillors.

The Council is made up of five elected members and is managed by our Clerk, Jennie Blackburn.

A heartfelt thank you

It goes without saying that this has been a difficult year for many of us, but I have been amazed by the efforts that individuals have made to look out for neighbours, particularly those who are perhaps more vulnerable. So I should start by thanking all those of you who have kept an eye out for neighbours, helped with shopping, or collecting prescriptions, or anything else that has helped a fellow human being. It is, I think, one of the great strengths of a small village that we mostly know each other, and I've certainly gained a huge amount of respect for the effort that goes into making a community work.

From a Parish Council perspective, I must thank **Liz Sawyer** who has managed to keep the village lottery on the road despite the complications of social distancing, and **Virginia Taylor**, whose support and advise on environmental matters has been invaluable in addressing those related issues that crop up when considering planning applications.

I should also thank my fellow Parish Councillors, **Richard Hitt**, **Dan Mason**, **Machala Peacock** and **Terry Taylor**, whose support, hard work and wise counsel has made my job as Chair rather easier than it might otherwise have been.

And finally, the work of **Jennie Blackburn**, our Clerk, has been instrumental in keeping our "show" on the road. Her contacts gained through her similar role in Creeting St Mary, Earl Stonham and Great Bricett connects us into a network of villages with similar interests and issues and makes us better informed and better prepared.

Looking forward

The biggest thing looming on our horizon is, obviously, Gateway 14. Whilst I expect that the hybrid planning application will be approved by Mid Suffolk District Council, the responses from our village will hopefully provide some mitigation, albeit not enough.

However, each building that is intended for Gate-way 14 will require its own planning application, and the Parish Council will do its best to scrutinise each one over the next decade or so. We will support residents in seeking the very best development possible for our community and the towns and villages that might benefit from a well-thought out project.

There are also potential benefits to the village arising from funds that are generated by the development, and a lot of work has already been done to establish a "wishlist" of potential projects that might improve day to day life in Creeting St Peter. I should at this point again acknowledge the work of the Gateway 14 Residents Group, who have gallantly established strong links with both the District Council and the Gateway 14 developers, whilst developing an understanding of the eccentricities of local government.

I had hoped to improve the way that the Parish Council communicates and, in some ways, we have, making better use of the informal village Facebook page to pass on information that might be of use. Distributing an online version of the Parish Newsletter would allow us to cut costs and issue it more frequently, but there is little doubt that using social media and e-mail allows us to get messages out in a more timely manner. We could also use our website more effectively, and that is perhaps something to be addressed in the year ahead.

I do not apologise for returning to the subject of road safety. Having a 20 mph speed limit is one thing, having it enforced is another. We have sought access to an automatic number plate recognition unit which, if successful, will be set up in the village for an unspecified period and may act as a deterrent to some and a reminder to others, we'll keep the village informed as and when we get a response to our request.

And finally, as noted above, we have a vacancy on the Parish Council and, as an election has not been sought, we are able to fill it by co-option. The term expires in May 2023, so a co-optee would serve for approximately two years. If anyone is interested, they are warmly invited to contact our Clerk at pc@creetingstpeter.suffolk.gov.uk or, if you want to know more about what we do and the time that likely time commitment, I'm always happy to answer any questions. I can be reached on 07912 620187, or by e-mail at markv233@aol.com.