

ELMSWELL PARISH COUNCIL

Parish Clerk's Report to the Ordinary Council Meeting 16th December 2019

1 I attended the SALC AGM on 26th November held, as in the past few years, at Blackbourne which is, I suggest, a ringing endorsement of the Elmswell facilities chosen by a body which, by definition, has experience of and can choose from halls across the County. The Meeting adopted a revised SALC Constitution and heard an update on his organisation's activities, aims and initiatives from Jonathan Owen, CEO of NALC, the parent organisation to all of the various county bodies throughout the country. There was a presentation on, 'Making Communities Healthier', from Ann Osborn of the Rural Caravan project which, in outlining that organisation's work to address rural isolation and loneliness, clearly echoed the thinking of the BWMA in steering Council towards the, 'community hub', aspect of the emerging Wesley project.

2 I was asked by a resident on 4th November to check whether or not the proposed crossing closure, as flagged up in the Elmswell Newsletter following a Network Rail press release, would allow for pedestrian access. I duly pursued the enquiry through the, 'Highways Interface Team', who insist on a full 20 working day limbo whilst they deal with such enquiries. It was never dealt with. With no physical indication at the crossing I fielded several other queries as to the scale of the possible disruption, but could find no way into the relevant Network Rail point of contact. I finally received an email on Wednesday 4th December from the Community Relations Manager which explains:

We applied for a road closure and Suffolk County Council raised concerns about the impact on residents. We were able to instead arrange to keep the road "open" but restrict access as needed by operating the level crossing as if a normal train was passing. Temporary traffic signals and the normal barriers will be operated by staff based at the crossing whenever the engineering trains, road-rail vehicles etc are passing. These movements will be frequent and slow and the main engineering train is half a mile long, so there will be some extended barrier-down time.

This alternative system was agreed at shorter notice than we would have liked and after the "crossing closure" was publicised. However given the frequency and duration of train movements the road will not be operating at normal capacity, so it is probably helpful for traffic to be discouraged on this occasion. It also appears that the resident notification letter concentrated on the impact of the activities themselves (e.g. noise) rather than crossing access, which is important in Elmswell. I can understand how the uncertainty has caused alarm and am sorry that this has occurred.

Subsequently, the Press notice of the now non-existent full closure (Saturday 7th at 2am – Monday 9th at 4am) appeared in the EADT on Friday 6th December specifying that, 'Access will be open for pedestrians and cyclists'.

The crossing was not closed. Passage for road vehicles was, for a whole glorious weekend, untroubled by barrier down-time other than on a few very infrequent occasions when trains engaged in maintenance activities needed to pass.

I had contact with several concerned residents throughout this process. Some were worried about getting over the line to Christmas events at Blackbourne and some to Church on the Sunday. In at least one instance the journey, and the attendance, was cancelled given the uncertainty of the access. The exercise is to be repeated in early February.

3 I have received no submissions in response to the Report, as circulated to Councillors, on the budget / precept training session held on Monday 2nd December. Unless there is a formal Proposal tendered to the January meeting or substantive suggestions towards a new approach, It would seem appropriate that a Chairman's Proposal comes forward which accords with the tenor of the discussions thus far, ie a Precept pegged to or below the 33p uplift in Band D weekly charge as per the community

consultation exercise. This in no way prejudices the opportunity for further discussion or proposals for amendment at the January meeting.

4 As Council moves further into on-line banking we are having to adjust procedures for authorising and actioning payments. This is much easier if payments are batched and made en bloc in the office during the working day rather than, as has often been the case, after the monthly meeting. To this end, and with a view to rotating signatories (as we do our Internal Auditor), I would appreciate support for the Proposal at 19.12.19 to nominate 3 other Authorised Signatories so that there is a wider pool from which to draw and to allow the retirement from the duty by those of long standing.

5 Following my Report last month on the stalled Neighbourhood Plan (NP) process, and in light of continuing discussion with Cllrs Mansel and Pallett as respective Chairs of the NP Group and of Council, it would seem appropriate to suggest that the Plan be revisited in anticipation of the crucial Planning decision ref DC/18/02146, the 105 dwellings at School Road, given that many issues, away from site specific allocations, might well be taken forward in the meantime.

This might best be effected by a small co-ordinating group drawn from the NP Group membership who begin, in close liaison with MSDC Officers, to pull together the accumulated material garnered and worked-up over recent years into a coherent narrative. They would have reference to NP Group members and to the wider community where specific skills and knowledge suggest this to be appropriate.

Cllr Shaw has agreed to take on the crucially important role of central co-ordinator. His professional skills and experience in related fields and initiatives recommend him well.

There is no quick fix to this procedure. Informed best guesses suggest that 6 months might take it to the point at which a further 6 months are needed for formal inspection, referral & Referendum.

6 There is, understandably, confusion and, predictably, suspicion regarding the proposals for a Community Land Trust (CLT) in Elmswell. As outlined by Debbie Wildridge at the recent 2 public meetings at which the concept was outlined and widely supported, the CLT has a membership entirely made up of local community individuals who hold shares (usually a non-refundable £1). As an organisation of entirely charitable intent, ECLT would strive to meet long term needs of the Elmswell community by acquiring assets, eg building permanently affordable housing, providing premises for a Post Office / shops / etc. The first steps taken by Council have been towards establishing an appropriate legal structure and affiliating to the National CLT Network where support and advice is freely available. Once an appropriate framework in terms of structure and governance has been identified by our specialist solicitors a draft constitution will form the basis of the establishment of the Group proper. The Parish Council will then cease to have a primary role in ECLT, although continued liaison would seem to be a constructive way forward. ECLT will be an autonomous body, controlled by its members drawn entirely from the community and with day-to-day governance as determined by its Management Committee, elected at the AGM which will be open to all and at which all attending will have an equal vote.

I trust that this helps Councillors deal with further queries.

7 With regard to the actual setting-up of the ECLT, Council is now confirmed as an Affiliate Member of the National CLT Network which gives access to advice and guidance including Model Rules and other documentation. This will help establish a firm basis for the creation of the Elmswell trust body at which point, as above, EPC steps back. Meanwhile, the specialist solicitors, Anthony Collins LLP, are properly engaged to prepare a draft Constitution and to liaise with relevant registration bodies and Debbie

Wildridge is appointed to work with Council and the solicitors to produce a scoping document coupled with an aims and ambitions briefing to guide the legal drafting process. Final drafts will be before Council before the public consultation begins towards establishing a membership and a Committee framework drawn from that membership.

8 I was pleased to have secured Borrowing Approval from the Ministry of Housing & Local Government for borrowing of up to £805,000.00 towards the purchase of, 'the 0.5 Hectare at the centre of Elmswell', being the Greene King site at School Road. This opens the door to the application to PWLB for the money which will be made once a time-scale for Exchange of Contracts is determined. Meanwhile, Council's solicitors are negotiating the Contract with the other side, as advised by the Chairman, Vice chairman and myself, towards ratification by Council in the near future.

9 I attended with Cllr Pallett the monthly Wesley project site meeting on Friday 13th. All blockwork is finished with brickwork to plate level and the steelwork all in place presenting the roof structure ready for boarding early in the new year. The chapel 1st fix electrics are in place with the insulation and high level work well on the way to be ready for the installation of the sound attenuation panels. A total of 12 days are logged as lost to the weather, although work in the chapel does not stop. Any assessment as to how much and when the lost time will be made up must wait until further into the job. The GSHP exploratory bore hole is to be drilled on 6th January informing the scope of the full installation to be drilled and fitted before the end of the month. The site closes on 20th December until 6th January. There are no causes for concern and, as the shape emerges, anticipation of a very striking result. My thanks to Colin Gould for providing transport for the substantial timber beams rescued from the demolition of the internal dividing wall in the chapel. They now sit at Blackbourne to be, as fashionable parlance has it, 're-purposed', on the Wesley site as seating.

10 With regard to the extension and improvements to the Chamberlayne Hall at Blackbourne, together with Cllr Pallett and Peter Hancock, our Village Warden whose previous professional experience as a Quantity Surveyor including on such projects is proving to be valuable, I have met with the Architect who drew up the plans for the successful Planning application. These plans are being worked- up for issue on application in response to Expressions of Interest from contractors. Various small matters are in discussion and I have met on site with the M&E Contractor who will specify the all-important improved ventilation system. The next stage will be the agreement of detailed plans sufficient for the invitation from interested contractors to provide a fixed and final price for the works. This will then be advertised and Expressions of Interest invited.

11 As in previous years I have opted for the street lighting to stay on all night on Christmas Eve and on New Year's Eve. I feel that this adequately addresses the imperative to be seasonally merry.

Peter Dow
15.12.2019