

# **Elmswell Parish Council**

## **Chairman's Report to the Annual Meeting of Council on 20<sup>th</sup> May 2019**

Council has had a busy and productive year.

We have, on the village's behalf, fought our corner in many battles to soften the blows of successive ad hoc development proposals as they have undergone due process, our efforts much hampered by the failure at District Council level to establish a 5 year housing land supply. The situation as I write is that there are 444 houses with Planning Permission to add to the 190 currently being built and sold at the Bacon Factory site. There is a live Application for a further 105 dwellings and pre-application discussions on a further 75 to be added to the Bacon Factory estate. Should all of this activity result in houses built it represents a 48% uplift in our housing stock as at the beginning of the Council year. Council has supported the various village initiatives to stem this tide of growth which comes with only minimal reference to the infrastructure requirements that doubling the size of our village brings. A change in the political landscape at District level may offer the chance of more effective consideration of our concerns which are shared by our neighbours, particularly in Thurston and Woolpit. The recent re-statement of the housing land supply figures may provide some relief, but this could be temporary as the 'target' is constantly moving. Any such relief is watered-down by the fact that the ruling Planning guidance document - the Local Plan - is much weakened by having been written in 1998 and is clearly open to challenge by the highly paid professional retained by the developers. The revised draft Local Plan is promised in June and the Parish Council is taking full advantage of opportunities to have an input on the community's behalf.

It has become increasingly clear that, against this onslaught of unplanned-for growth, we have to be proactive in the provision of community facilities, a process which has included the Council's purchase of the Wesley chapel site on School Road in May 2017, saving it from development of yet more houses. We have made what I consider to be commendably fast progress in finding professional partners and advisers towards realising an exciting scheme to refurbish the Victorian chapel as a meeting / activity space and replace the ageing hall attached into a modern community hub to serve our fast-expanding population. Building work is scheduled to begin in June. Meanwhile, there seems to be wide support for the possibility of a further community venture immediately next door to the Wesley on the Railway Tavern site which has recently come up for sale. The possibility of establishing a Community Land Trust towards building real affordable homes for Elmswell people and with no Right to Buy permitted seems to sit well with the challenge of saving the Elmswell's 2<sup>nd</sup> pub and providing community space / car parking at the heart of the village. At this stage Council simply needs to know that there is community support to investigate these exciting possibilities and this will be tested at our Annual Parish Meeting.

The frustrations surrounding the Neighbourhood Plan process continue as the Steering Group battles with the community aspiration for a Relief Road against fears of the development required to fund it. I would hope and expect that there will be decisive progress soon given that the process has become easier since we began at the very inception of the scheme and suffered in the considerable confusion of the formative years.

Council continues to satisfy all of the stringent audit requirements that governs finances, due processes and governance. The on-going development of the Assistant Parish Clerk post has proved to be very successful towards the Clerk's office keeping up with the ever-increasing work load and the constant legislative and other changes which make running a community of our size, with innovative and ambitious aims, more and more demanding.

One of the disappointments in the year past is the failure to make any progress in reversing the decision to reduce the opening hours at the Post Office. Council has also taken issue with the appropriate agencies on issues such as SCC Highways inadequacies with regard to repairs, closures & road safety initiatives, the mysteries surrounding the Mid Suffolk CIFCO £50 million investment strategy, problems at Lawn Farm Quarry and shortcomings in the current levels of policing. In all cases Councillors have tried hard to reflect the community's disquiet and dissatisfaction, but the current climate of financial constraints across the board often renders their appeals less than successful.

Meanwhile, the day-to day issues and challenges have been well addressed, I believe. Council works with the BWMA to help keep Blackbourne, and, eventually, Wesley as exemplary facilities serving a wide range of village user groups and an ever-increasing number of outside bookings which subsidise use by our residents very successfully. We have worked with other groups, recently, for example in the matter of the new flower tubs on the station, the wild flower project and the new seat at the railway crossing and now directly manage the village speed indicator sign. Our partnership with the various groups who manage the Station Road recycling facility remains of long-standing benefit to the village.

Over my many years in business, I have always taken it to be that, if no-one turns up to shout at The Board at the AGM, all is going reasonably well. We have had no formal complaints over the year and although public input at meetings is welcomed, it tends to be at a low level with no serious shortcomings brought forward.

Another lesson from the commercial world is, however, that resting on laurels is not acceptable. Hence, I look forward to remaining part of a team of councillors who remain dedicated and hard-working in the interests of Elmswell and my thanks goes to those who have been on that team over the past year, as well as to our staff who put the ideas into action.

Fred Pallett  
10.05.2019