

ELMSWELL PARISH COUNCIL

Parish Clerk's Report to the Ordinary Meeting 16th December 2024

- 1 I attended, representing EPC as an *ex officio* Member of the Bowls Club Committee of Management, the Club's AGM on 20th November. The Club is celebrating its best year ever with promotions for several of its teams and victory in the prestigious Guinness Cup competition. Finances remain healthy and a donation of £550.00 was agreed to EPC in recognition of their continuing support. The failure of the irrigation pump after some 24 years' use has prompted an initiative to ensure back-up and I am consulting with a Work Party from the membership to this end. Meanwhile, it was noted that the green looks Immaculate and the green-keepers were congratulated. It was agreed that the annual Club membership fee be increased by 20% to £30.00.
- 2 Cllr Pallett and I met with Robert Feakes, Housing Enabling Officer with BMSDC, together with Bethanny Taylor, our BMSDC Communities Officer, on 19th November towards continuing the exploration of possible ways forward for an Elmswell Affordable Homes initiative avoiding the possible loss of the homes through Right to Buy or Right to Acquire legislation. It remains the case that there is no cast iron guarantee of security of community ownership. Furthermore, Registered Providers (RP's) – Housing Associations – have many calls on their funding as developers seek partnership deals towards delivering affordable units required under s106 Agreements. There was discussion around the possibility of building almshouses which remain, under the protection of charitable status, immune from being sold on into the private market. There would remain the considerable problem of funding the build without the Government grants available to RP's. Recent developments at Stoke by Nayland & Creeting St Mary may be instructive and the idea might be taken further when more details of these initiatives are to hand. It is worth noting that almshouses need not be designed and provided solely for elderly tenants. Rather, housing need across the whole host community is what they can seek to address.
- 3 Cllrs Brown, Pallett and I met with Andrew Moore, our SCC Highways Community Liaison Engineer, on 27th November to try to revive the road safety initiative promised, with a funding input from EPC, in 2023 and never delivered other than the renewal of the zebra crossing markings which had benefitted from direct intervention by Cllr Andy Mellen as Ward Member. It was agreed that the scheme is to be revisited and revived.
Meanwhile, it transpired that the recent work on the A1088 roundabout to cut back vegetation to allow for safe visibility had nothing to do with EPC appeals or references to The National Highways Design Manual for Roads & Bridges section CD 116, Geometric Design of Roundabouts. Our reference to the text-book documents was in response to SCC having forwarded photographic evidence purporting to illustrate the safety of the roundabout as was, but using angles and perspectives which did not reflect the reality of the risk and which masked the contravention of proper regulation. The work had, in fact, been carried out by a company called Marketing Force under licence from SCC Highways to provide advertising on roundabouts. Andrew Moore had not known of the arrangement. It leaves the smaller 'splitter islands' still in a very poor state and much to the detriment of the main access into Elmswell - however, these are the responsibility of BMSDC Public Realm who must be approached separately.
In personal later discussion between Councillors it was suggested that the transfer of responsibility to a new highways services provider at SCC has been of no material benefit. The culture remains one of, 'clear your desk by passing the buck and then keep your head down'. It is possible to suggest that a possible change of administration in May next year could provide an opportunity for some intelligence of approach towards a new business model for Highways administration and, perhaps, some accountability.

- 4 A Budget Training Session for Councillors held on 3rd December covered the process & procedures whereby the Tax Base is applied and considered in detail various outcomes including the outturn from a precept yielding the same income as last year, the precept needed to increase the cost to charge payers of 5% or of 1% and the result of holding the levy as last year. Reference was made to the RFO's forecast of next year's I&E which included the usual raft of purely discretionary expenditure as, 'schemes'. It was noted that Elmswell is, as has been the case for several years, 5th in the league table of Council Tax levied by T&PC's across Mid Suffolk and it was suggested that this is a reflection of the facilities enjoyed and the constant development and expansion of those facilities making Elmswell attractive to incomers. The many hundreds of new households who have joined the village over the past few years have done so in full knowledge of the Council Tax level and possibly aware of the benefits this has allowed. It was accepted that comparisons are difficult and Woolpit was instanced as having a village hall but no other Council-managed letting options and no allotments, cemetery, bowls green or football club facilities. It was noted that the employer's extra burden resulting from the recent budget had not been factored into the forecast but the RFO undertook to do this and to modify outcomes accordingly now that an Employer's Contribution Calculator is available. A suggestion was floated that a 5% uplift on the amount levied would allow the continuing improvement of Elmswell as a thriving community. This found general favour.
- 5 Councillors should be aware of consultations from the Police & Crime Commissioner on his Police & Crime Plan, from Railfuture East Anglia re proposals for the new East West Rail project, and from BMSDC re Supplementary Planning Documents (SPD's) dealing, separately, with Housing and Intensive Livestock and Poultry Farming. The Housing SPD includes reference at 2.2 to the Councils' overall strategy for Affordable Housing.
- 6 I have re-presented figure re agenda item 12, the consideration of adjustment to allotment tenancy fees, in light of comments from and discussion with Councillors, particularly regarding the capital expenditure on the car park. I have presented 2 different outcomes, both without the car park costs being directly attributed to the allotments. In 'A' there is an assumption that there will always be some capital works done and therefore an annual allowance of £1250.00 is made. In 'B' there is no contribution to capital costs. In both scenarios the outturn would appear to leave reasonable scope to accept an increase in the contribution made by allotment tenants to the costs of provision. Meanwhile, at 1 above, there is an indication in the Bowls Club 's decision regarding fee increases. of what is considered reasonable elsewhere.

Peter Dow
15.12.2024