

Parish Clerk's Report to the Ordinary Council Meeting on 19th February 2024

- 1 The ground-breaking initiative to trial a taxi-bus return-trip service based at Elmswell visiting 4 local villages and into Bury twice weekly has proved successful enough to be continued until the end of March. Meanwhile the application from the group to the Bus Service Improvement Plan fund established by central government and providing £3.6M over 2 years for just this sort of innovation has been successful. We are granted £6,000 for this year and the same again for next year. The managing group, drawn from all 4 parishes, will meet to determine a way forward.

- 2 I met with the MSDC Housing Enabling Officer along with our Mid Suffolk Community Team Liaison officer and Cllrs Mansel & Pallett on 18th January to investigate the possibility that Mid Suffolk involvement in the Elmswell CLT aspirations for community affordable homes with absolute security of tenure might help move the project on. It was agreed that a 3-way discussion with a Registered Housing Provider might be productive and this is now scheduled, on-line, for 22nd February. I have also made enquiry via a Teams session organised by Community Action Suffolk which I attended on 13th February.

- 3 We are consulted on the BMSDC Joint Local Validation List (LVL) which must be reviewed in light of the recent adoption of the Joint Local Plan. The review process includes consultation. For a planning application to be valid, there are statutory and local information requirements which apply to each type of application. These are known informally as the national and local lists. National requirements apply to all planning applications in England. The local planning authority set the local requirements, with regard to local policies and constraints. The substantive new matters covered by the draft LVL for Minor and Major applications are:
Building for a healthy life via a Wellbeing Impact Assessment;
Biodiversity Net Gain;
Flood Risk Assessment for some minor applications.
The full proposals are available on line:
[BMSDC Joint Local Validation List Consultation \(smartsurvey.co.uk\)](https://smartsurvey.co.uk)
and if any Councillor feels the matter worthy of further discussion, please do be in touch.

- 4 A key element of community social provision is storage. This was skimped in the original Blackbourne scheme for reasons of economy, but adequately addressed when Blackbourne was extended to create the Jubilee Hall etc and problems eased when the extension at the Chamberlayne Hall was largely devoted to storage, including the Archive Room. The growth of uses in terms of variety and number has required much more furniture and other kit to be readily available in multiple locations. For practical and historical reasons provision has been made for certain community groups – the carpet bowlers / scout & guide groups / cricket club etc but an important element of the facilities management is resisting calls from many sides for storage space. It has never been proven, but widely suggested that stuff expands to fill available storage space. We have in the past had recourse, reluctantly, to a lorry container at Blackbourne to deal with the transitional situation of building works. Such units are a management problem in that they attract antisocial behaviour (despite anti-climb paint) and are unsightly. This must now be moved as it stands in the line of the pedestrian / cycle path link to the new Ashfield Road housing estate. It may be possible to clear some of the contents which has proven not to be needed over the past few years. Re-location is under consideration if total disposal is impractical. This might fit into any discussion regarding temporary accommodation for the Food Bank until the bowls pavilion becomes available again in September.

In the meantime, I have consulted with members of the recently convened cemetery T&F group regarding the possibility of storing the Baby & Toddler twice-yearly Nearly New Sale clothing racks in the bier shed. This found favour at a site visit and storage will be offered on the understanding that the arrangement could be terminated at short notice should circumstances change.

5 Given the length of the Agenda, the following background might be helpful towards informing discussion on specific items:

At 12: There has been a back-log of pending up-grade works to our street lights over the period of transition at SCC to a new service provider. The accumulated schedule of work is costed beyond the Clerk/Chairman authorisation limit of £7k, hence the need to seek Council approval. All of the works have been inspected on site and are justified.

At 13: Lat year's 'mini-Elmsfest' music event was very successful in bringing a different and varied demographic to Blackbourne. The event is organised by an ad hoc group with no funding or formal structure. Any surplus goes to charity. There is very little chance that the food concessions etc will not cover the hire cost of the hall, but the security of an underwriting agreement encourages what seems to be a very positive initiative. In the past, ElmsFest was similarly underwritten but never need to draw down any support funding. The hiring includes a bar which produced a good return to EPC last year. Full financial figures are made available and published.

At 14: Local contractor Finch Services were chosen in an open tendering process for the demolition of the telephone exchange at Wesley and making-good. Similarly they are the chosen contractor, following a competitive quotation process, to create the new Wesley car park. For small-works such as this, it can be difficult to find small local independent contractors to bid for the job when they often have not succeeded in the past. The schedule of 'Preferred Contractors' was established to deal with this. It is reviewed annually at the May meeting of Council.

At 15: Top Garden Services, a small business originating in Elmswell, have maintained the village's grass areas, excepting Blackbourne, for some 10 years. The contract goes out to tender every 2 years and they have consistently succeeded in securing the job with an extremely competitive quote. Councillors have the figures returned from the invitation to bid for the next 2 years. In normal circumstances, the Top Gardens quote is so low as to suggest that a proper job might not result. The experience since 2014 is that the service is entirely adequate.

At 16: The village's last remaining holding on the part of the Poor's land Charity is Town Field down Spong Lane. Council has agreed, year-on-year, to pay the annual rental due to encourage continued village ownership against the otherwise likely pressure of a private purchase for development. The perimeter hedge is the oldest in the village and recorded as of historic and ecological value. Specialist works to this hedge have recently been completed out under the direction of ElmsWild whose volunteers organise and carry out a maintenance schedule on the land to ensure proper attention to biodiversity and the retention of ancient community-owned green space.

6 Council's initiative to provide householders with a free-of-charge thermal image survey of their property towards suggesting energy-saving measures which might be taken has proved to be very well subscribed over the fortnight of operation. A full report will be carried in the Newsletter. Meanwhile thanks are due to Cllrs Brown and Hancock who visited some 55 properties in the village and to resident Chris Layton who helped make up a very efficient and effective team.

- 7 There is now a complete run of indigenous staggered hedging planted defining the previously bare boundaries of Turners' Field at Blackbourne. This very considerable job was undertaken by the ElmsWild / Lukeswood volunteers on top of their regular community commitments. It involved community planting sessions as well as 'team building' work parties from British Telecom and Bloor Homes. The field is now ready for levelling, draining and seeding and the BWMA will be making recommendations in these regards.
- 8 I have contact details for a public consultation that SCC Transport Strategy Team are running on the latest update of the Local Transport Plan. It runs for 8 weeks.
- 9 My thanks to Cllrs Barker, Brown, and Shaw for attending the Task & Finish WP meeting at the cemetery / allotments on Tuesday 13th. The immediate questions related to the memorial tree avenue were addressed and the session went on to discuss the 'succession planning' issues which might require the shifting of full responsibility in these 2 key areas of Council's obligations more widely than, as at present, it resting wholly with the Clerk. A report will come to the March meeting.
- 10 I have engaged very constructively with Cllr Schofield regarding the need for accommodation of the Food Bank when Council can no longer house it in the bowls pavilion as the playing season begins in April. We had come some way towards a workable solution but an alternative has been found which does not have the logistical constraints posed by the various options at Blackbourne where considerable flexibility was required as the facility is busy and becoming busier. Having overseen arrangements for housing the Food Bank first at the Tavern and recently in the pavilion I am in a position to judge what is needed for the core service to continue and I have suggested that, should the recent new arrangements falter, EPC can find short-term solutions to the scheduling and storage problems and offer a temporary fall-back arrangement until the bowls pavilion becomes available in September.

Peter Dow
18.02.2024