

Elmswell Parish Council

Chairman's Report to the Annual Meeting of Council on 15th May 2023

Council has met 11 times in a thankfully 'normal' post-covid year and the reports to the Elmswell Newsletter accurately reflect the year's activities.

In no particular order, I list here some of the points arising as a result of results of Council's efforts since our last Annual meeting in May 2022.

- Council has supported ElmsWild in their hard working initiative to restore Town Field as a sustainable resource for the village by undertaking to pay the annual rent due to the Poor's Land Charity.
- Having kick-started the Elmswell Community Land Trust with its specific first brief to take further Council's aspirations for affordable community homes on the Greene king site at School Road we have made some progress towards finding a partner towards unlocking governmental Housing Revenue Grant support but have had to suspend the initiative pending the review by MSDC Cabinet of their proposals for 50 homes at School Road with a high proportion of affordable units apparently mooted.
- I have personally brought to the fore, with the considerable help of Cllr David Brown, road safety issues which become more pressing by the week as more houses are built-out. There is a comprehensive scheme to mitigate problems at the New Road / Cooks Road / The Street junction to be triggered now that the School Road closure is lifted. We have agreed to a traffic count at Warren Lane to ascertain the level of misuse by HGV's, particularly during the A14 long-term works. If this proves to be a substantive problem, it will be addressed with new signage. We have been involved in the efforts to mitigate the dangers of poor parking behaviours at the school and SCC are in process of additional restrictions here.
- We were the first local council in Suffolk to install electric vehicle charging points both at Blackbourne and at Wesley. As early claimants under the SCC 'Plug In Suffolk' scheme, this future-proofing facility came at no up-front cost to the village.
- The long-held aspiration to somehow address the shortfall in community transport links to Bury finally came to fruition by co-operating with 3 neighbouring villages to provide a twice-weekly taxi-bus service to begin as a month long experiment on 3rd June.
- Council was central to the community objections to the MSDC proposal for an 'exemplar' development of 50 houses at School Road on land which we have identified in talks with SCC Education Officers and others as a potential site to allow primary school provision for Elmswell children to stay in the village. This culminated, as above, in staying the hand of the proposers of the Mid Suffolk scheme and allows the chance for full and proper consultation with the long-term interests of Elmswell at stake.
- The publication of a NALC Local Government Code of Conduct gave us the chance to adopt a rather tighter control of what is required of your councillors over and above the Suffolk Local Code and this was duly adopted. We have had no issues in that regard, neither has the standing Complaints Committee had to meet to deal with any public referrals. Council has retained its General Power of Competence which, effectively, allows it to act outwith Specific Powers and to do anything an individual can do provided it is not prohibited by other legislation.
- We have finally lodged a draft Neighbourhood Plan with Mid Suffolk and an Inspector has been appointed. If it is compliant the Plan will be the subject of a Referendum later this year.
- A long-term project, much affected by covid, has been completed with the provision of 6 rooflights in the Chamberlayne Hall at Blackbourne together with rain-check and blackout blinds. This addresses the ventilation problem in the hall which is now often used by large groups not anticipated when first built in 1998.
- We have also upgraded security and management at Blackbourne by having installed comprehensive CCTV coverage of all outside areas. The increasing use of the facilities there makes it essential that we can see what is going on without necessarily being on site.

- Procedural problems relating to the drainage swale on the new 6 acre site at Blackbourne have taken up considerable time and effort and, again, my thanks to David Brown for his very specific professional advice on the matter. This having been resolved, we would be looking to have the ground levelled, drained and seeded this year.
- Issues arising from the closure of School Road have been pursued throughout the process on behalf of residents suggesting that the refusal to use Cooks Road to split the traffic was ill advised. We are now trying to have an input to the final Safety Audit on the resulting layout to have the dangerous pinch points re-engineered. Similarly, we have consulted with and continue to monitor the contractor regarding the concrete replacement works on A14.
- Over the year, the team behind Council's administration has been strengthened by the addition of our Caretaker/Handyman, David Austen, who undertakes all minor works formerly contracted out as well as caretaking & cleaning duties at Blackbourne, Wesley and the Elmswell Tavern as necessary and by the further training of our Clerical Assistant, Lucy Holt, who is assuming certain management responsibilities including at Wesley and for the licensed bar service now offered at Blackbourne. The gradual widening of the responsibility base between employees is a deliberate policy of succession planning looking to the day when our existing Clerk, who has been a Jack-of-all-trades for many years, gives way to a replacement who might expect a rather more conventional pattern of working.
- Wesley has continued to grow as a vital community hub. It has featured as a 'Warm Place' over the fuel crisis months and, as trading figures confirm, is increasingly popular with residents and visitors alike. It links in, by virtue of vouchers for food and drink, with the Elmswell Food Bank which Council has supported over the winter, not least by providing an operating base in the Elmswell Tavern on Monday and Friday mornings until building works begin.
- The Council has continued its support of the Elmswell Community Enterprise group as it moves closer to funding the refurbishment of the Tavern as a community pub. The Lease agreement whereby the premises are passed over to the Community Benefit Society is currently under discussion.
- I was pleased to meet with our Internal Auditor during his examination of Council's policies, procedures and accounts in a year when the Precept was held at last year's level in recognition of difficult financial times for many people. He confirmed, as per his Report, the probity and efficiency in which the Clerk's office is run and my thanks to The Clerk and his staff for maintaining a consistently high standard in parallel with excellent service to the public.
- As one of only 6 of Mid Suffolk's 123 parishes in which a contested election was required, Elmswell can assure its electorate that its Council members are democratically chosen. The change of just 1 member suggests broad support for the Council over the past 4 years. However, the loss of David Brown is significant given the professional skills and personal energy he brought to further Council's initiatives. It is to be hoped that he will continue to serve as selflessly as before as a volunteer. We welcome Cllr Arnold as bringing different energies and talents. My personal thanks to our Ward members, Cllrs Mellen, Mansel and Geake, the latter having give way to Cllr Jen Overett. We have always enjoyed full co-operation from our Ward Members over the past 4 years and their attendance at most of our Council meetings has been helpful and supportive.
- Over a very busy year I must make mention of the excellent support and administration from the Clerk and his staff. They have absorbed considerable new workloads and challenges and seem by all accounts, and as confirmed by the recent Audit, to be serving the village to a very high standard.

I look forward to Elmswell Parish Council's next 4 years with several exciting projects already under way – our community Taxi-Bus, a wind turbine at Blackbourne, extended car parking at an ever-busier Wesley, and with a personal commitment to the innovation and forward-thinking that has enabled the Council to serve the village so well under the undoubted and continuing pressures of housing development.

At the recent Annual Parish Meeting, Cllr Andy Mellen, who has wide and frequent contact with the parish councils within his jurisdictions as both a District and a County Councillor, suggested that Elmswell should be aware that they enjoy the benefit of an outstanding council. I trust that we can continue to live up to his informed assessment.

Cllr Fred Pallett

15.05.2023