

Parish Clerk's Report to the Annual Meeting on 20th May 2024

- 1 We part company with Dave Crimmin who has conducted so thoroughly our Internal Audit for the past 3 years. Over and above the consistently clean bill of financial health which he has been able to sign-off, Dave has advised and nudged various procedures and practices very constructively. He has appreciated EPC's 'can-do' attitude and considers that the results recommend this approach to the wider T&PC sector. Our in-house rule that we change our auditor every 3 years ensures fresh eyes, hopefully new perspectives and encourages an independent and professional annual assessment of our finances, processes and procedures.
- 2 The ambition to expand the taxi-bus scheme is having to deal with the problems face by Vertas in costing any new initiative at a level that will allow an affordable service. The original deal remains but is heavily discounted by Vertas and this concession cannot be rolled forward into new routes or runs. The project has secured finance from the Department of Transport's Bus Service Improvement Plan and I will meet with the other 3 villages later this month to identify possible ways forward.
Meanwhile, the contention that there might be a better way to provide public transport in rural areas than the traditional bus service model remains a matter of discussion. I am talking with County & District officers and members along with principals of the developing Brett Valley scheme and established examples in Lincolnshire and Hertfordshire that go some way to addressing the underlying issues. I have regular meetings with SCC Enhanced Partnership Passenger Group which reinforce, to my mind, that a Demand Responsive Transport model using locally based electric vehicles is, eventually, inevitable if a public service is to be continued.
- 3 The Options Report commissioned from Anthony Collins Solicitors suggests several pragmatic ways forward towards securing our community affordable homes without Right to Buy or Right to Acquire legislation being triggered. This is with Councillors and comments are invited. I met on line with the Chairman and Vice chairman with the lead solicitor involved on 16th May and confirmed next steps based on his report. Consequently, I am in touch with the National Community Land Trust Network towards identifying a suitably experienced Valuer to assess a baseline valuation of the land before once again approaching Registered Providers to gauge their interest in a partnership deal.
- 4 The proposed revision to Council's Standing Orders at agenda item 33 relate to a statutory uplift in procurement parameters. The new Financial Regulations at item 34 are customised from a NALC pro-forma. The refinements to the model relate to 'housekeeping' matters, leaving things very much as before, and I think that, having benefitted from the hands-on input from our RFO they adequately cover our activities. The only innovation would seem to be at 4.7 relating to prohibition on any Member owing Council Tax.
I can supply copies of the original FSO's on request for comparison should any Councillor have mislaid their file copy.
- 5 I think it is important that Council has access to guidance from an appropriate third-party body and this, for many years, has been SALC. At one time we also subscribed to SLCC – the Society of Local Council Clerks. As EPC has grown it has required less general guidance and tended to have recourse to specialist advice from external professionals. Training opportunities are now accessible on-line and often come from commercial providers via SALC, available through other channels. From the Clerk's office perspective, the training is tending to expand into, from an Elmswell standpoint, more ephemeral areas better suited to larger urban communities.
The renewal premium for SALC membership for this year is £1,146.82 net. Membership of SLCC costs £377.00 net. The main practical benefit of subscribing is access to legislative guidance etc as per the changes to Standing Orders & Financial Standing orders on this agenda. I consider that this is adequately covered by SLCC.

- 6 The car park at Wesley is up and running and now firmly in the category of things that we can't recall how we ever managed without. The pedestrian / cycle access from Rose Lane is proving to be of real benefit. Once the user-behaviour is established the intention is to encourage safe and sensible parking by delineating bays, at which stage there will be a prohibition of overnight parking by adjacent residents in anticipation of increased use by users of the facility. I am looking with Cllr Pallett at options for dealing with the newly-revealed end wall on the Tavern boundary. It is in a poor state and requires fairly prompt attention.
- 7 Following adoption of the Babergh and Mid Suffolk Joint Local Plan [Part 1 2018-2037 Development Plan Document] (DPD) in November 2023, the Councils have prepared three draft Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs) relating to Biodiversity and Trees; Housing; and Intensive Livestock and Poultry for consultation. The draft SPDs provide further guidance and detail for development proposals, supporting the implementation of planning policies contained within the adopted Babergh and Mid Suffolk Joint Local Plan Part 1 DPD.
- The draft Biodiversity and Trees SPD provides supplementary information to further explain the policies on biodiversity, protected species and habitats, and trees to inform the preparation, consideration and determination of planning applications, to ensure biodiversity enhancement is provided through the planning process.
 - The draft Housing SPD provides further guidance and detail for addressing housing needs and affordable housing delivery within development proposals in the two Districts.
 - The draft Intensive Livestock and Poultry SPD provides supplementary information on the issues and considerations that are of relevance to the determination of intensive livestock and poultry planning applications.
- The Councils are inviting comments on the SPDs for five weeks before 19th June. I have further details as per the relevant websites and will include the matter on the June agenda on request.
- 8 As discussed with the BWMA, I have attended on site at Turners' Field with a drainage contractor to begin the process of having the land levelled, drained and seeded for use. These initial findings will inform strategies, decision-making and the formal costing process. I have had several requests that the field which is blighted by the incursion of the swale might best be reserved for informal recreational activity / walking and this will form part of the discussions as the project develops.
- 9 The Annual Parish Meeting, held on 15th May, once again demonstrated an apparent lack of public concern regarding EPC processes and outcomes. 11 members of the public attended and there was nothing to be brought forward for EPC action.
- 10 I have been working with Cllr Hancock in liaison with SCC Rights of Way officers, Ward Members and others, towards realising one of the aspirations expressed through the recent BMSDC consultation exercise to develop and improve footpath access in the village. 2 major schemes have come forward for consideration: (a) Creating / making good / improving off-road access from Ashfield Road up to Grove Lane and (b) improvements to the route from Blackbourne over Lord's Bridge to Eastern Way. If EPC expressed willingness to contribute some £11,250, being 25% of the estimated joint cost, this work could be undertaken. A third scheme through Lukeswood to the green cemetery and allotments would be funded entirely by BMSDC. I will test the feeling of Monday's meeting on the matter.

Peter Dow
19.05.2024