

ELMSWELL PARISH COUNCIL

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

1 I met at Wesley on 24th July with representatives of the 3 other participating villages plus officers from SCC & BMSDC to discuss the way forward in light of the BSIP2 grant of £12,000 over 2 years towards continuing the pilot scheme. It was agreed that an across-the-board fare of £4.00 return should be offered to test the price-sensitivity of the service in light of the sudden improvement in ordinary scheduled bus services which have also benefited from grant funding. It was noted that the social and personal benefits to a core of regular users added considerably to the value of what the scheme offers over and above the convenience of the outings.

2 The Executive Team at BMSDC have added Thurston and Elmswell to the cohort of larger councils with which they meet every 6 months and I joined an on-line session on 5th August chaired by Arthur Charvonia, the BMSDC Chief Executive. Amongst the points raised were:

- That in a forthcoming liaison meeting with SCC, the frequent, common and serious shortcomings on the part of the Highways administrators should be an urgent agenda item. The lack of local liaison and subsequent chaos regarding road closures, diversions and signage suggests an underlying culture which serves the community very poorly.
- Impending moves by central government towards streamlining the Planning process will, inevitable, mean pressure away from Members' decisions via Committee meetings and towards more frequent delegation to officers. I expressed the concern regarding the need for consistency in the process and for there to be a mechanism for clarification when there seems to be disparity.

3 After some discussion our insurers have conceded that the serious breakdown in the Blackbourne Ground Source Heating system was covered under our policy and some £4,975.80 has been recovered against engineering bills of £5,325.80, all as detailed in published financial reports.

4 Lengthy negotiations with Mid Suffolk and the Valuations Office Agency have resulted in the substitution of Wesley for the Cemetery as one of the nominated properties receiving Council Tax Small Business Relief. Given the higher Rating Valuation on Wesley this allows a saving which, backdated to when EPC bought the property, amounts to £7,287.00.

5 There are several initiatives deserving of an update, viz:

- Increased solar pv installation plus battery storage at Blackbourne; 3 quotations secured by Cllr Brown and CIL funding bid supported by Cllr Mansell in for consideration in next round beginning 1st October
- Play areas at Crown Mill; Pre-app Planning advice formally sought for the 2 sites on scheme progressed by T&FWP (Cllrs Brown, Roots & Schofield) + BWMA. 3 contractors providing revised scheme to avoid extending existing facility towards road. Amenities Association has granted £25k towards a 2 site solution.
- New land at Blackbourne; Cllr Brown chasing a 3rd quote for levelling, draining & seeding the 2 amenity grass areas. Contact made with Suffolk FA re funding once preferred contractor identified. Path now made through to conservation area and advice sought from ElmsWild on maintenance regime.
- Community Affordables; Cllrs Pallett, Barker and I met 03.09 with chosen Chartered Surveyors towards confirming Land Value estimates so that we are in a position to open negotiations with Registered Providers following advice in the Options Report commissioned from specialist solicitor. The valuation is pending.
- Elmswell Tavern; Council's ring-fenced fund, including donations from former ECE Shareholders and the £50k resolved at the July Council meeting, now stands at c£150k. The dissolution of ECE should be completed by 1st October at which point there is access to the s106 Mid Suffolk funding of £500k. Meanwhile, Tender packs have gone to the 5 contractors selected from those who formally expressed an interest in response to the Press advertising. Their submissions are due back on or before 7th October.

6 I met at Wesley with SCC & BMSDC officers and representatives of Woolpit PC on 9th September to view the latest engineering proposals for the Elmswell – Woolpit community path. There remain several pinch-points requiring compromise and innovation but these are adequately dealt with towards a submission for CIL funding by the end of October for a decision in March. Some £470k of CIL is already earmarked but there is no costing as yet. However, previous discussions and recent experience suggests a scheme costing £2-3m. Highways England could be significant contributors if they agree that the scheme deserves priority. Should funding be in place in parallel with the CIL programme, works could be completed in October 2025.

7 I attended with Cllr Brown at Woolpit a meeting of the neighbouring PC's including Bacton, Haughley, Old Newton, Stowupland, Wetherden & Woolpit to discuss matters of common interest. The Agenda invited the sharing of recent experience regarding traffic, Planning, the recent unauthorised incursion of caravans camped at Haughley, Aggmax quarry, footpaths and biodiversity. The discussion was wide-ranging and informal. No actions were determined.

8 The proposal for expenditure for the Blackbourne doors specifies a preferred contractor identified by Cllr Hancock from 3 quotes for 5 external doors to improve security, disabled access and insulation. The work has been building-up for a couple of years and certain elements are now urgent. The whole package is the subject of a CIL bid which could grant 20% and other possible funds are being pursued. It would be judicious to have authority to proceed on the understanding that best efforts are made to reduce the expenditure through grant aid.

9 On 10th September I attended an on-line meeting of the Suffolk Bus Passenger Group in which we have an interest as it administers the Government's Bus Service Improvement Plan which provides funding for our taxi-bus pilot and through which, by accessing further funding, I would hope to develop a Demand Responsive Transport scheme. There is the possibility of working on DRT with Thurston PC and with Sudbury CAB and I am in touch with both.

10 We have received CIL grant totalling £46,490.00 towards the joint scheme with SCC to rationalise and improve footpath access with a view to offering a real alternative to private car use as our roads become increasingly busy and in anticipation of the increased crossing-gates down time when the Haughley Junction Rail Improvement project receives its trigger funding. EPC is committed to a contribution of £11,500.00 to the programme.

11 Prompted by several complaints from residents regarding the closure of School Road for 4 weeks during the refurbishment works at the fire station, I have, in liaison with Cllrs Pallett & Brown, sought detailed responses from the relevant Portfolio Holders at SCC and am dealing with what they offer as explanation. I have pressed through SALC and MSDC for there to be a county-wide reconsideration of the current roadworks business model and more stringent requirements for local consultation. In advance of SCC elections this may be a productive time for pursuing this.

12 I have been in liaison with the Police regarding an incident on 10th August at 04.45 when the lock was smashed off the access gate at Blackbourne and a car was driven onto the pitches, executed a handbrake-turn and drove off. Our CCTV was able to identify the suspects and Police have interviewed an individual under caution. The full force of the law means that we might receive a letter of apology and we might receive restitution for the lock. If the individual concerned agrees.

13 I have been approached by the Fire Service who wish to re-locate the clothing bank at the fire station to where one of the village notice board stands. This, it is suggested, will require the removal of the notice board. I am in discussion towards re-location, if necessary, on site as the 6 boards EPC owns and maintains, all refurbished this year, serve a valuable role in providing community information. I have included Suffolk Constabulary in the discussion. They have a notice board adjacent which has not been used for some years and the adoption of that site might be a solution. The location near the takeaways and on a well-used pedestrian route makes this, probably, the most effective site we have. Total removal would seem to be retrograde and, hopefully, avoidable.