

Parish Council Report - Annual Parish Meeting 2022

Richard Nicol - Chairman Swilland & Winesham Grouped Parish Council

This is the first Annual Meeting that we have been able to hold in the Village Hall for 3 years. In early 2020 the Corona-Virus pandemic arrived, so we were unable to have a meeting at all and in 2021 we met using videoconferencing.

Last year my predecessor, Chris Rush, commented how Covid had brought out a strong community spirit and that we appeared to be in the final throes of the Pandemic. Who would have thought that a year later, and as I write, the number of Covid cases in Suffolk, and indeed in our two villages, is higher than the peaks during lockdown. Thanks to the vaccines, the latest phase appears to be having a less serious impact on health than in the past.

Parish Council Activities 21/22

Membership

After 28 years as a member of the Parish Council and the last 7 as Chairman, Chris Rush stood down at the AGM in May 2021. His contribution over the years has been enormous, ranging over all aspects of the council's activities. From planning, where the activity continues to increase, to regenerating the recreation areas (twice) to the campaign against the Ipswich Northern by-pass. I was elected Chairman and am finding him a tough act to follow! I was delighted that Simon Barlow agreed to become Vice-Chair at the same time.

I'm pleased to report that after next month we look like having our full complement of Councillors for the first time in years. We lost Paul Hill early in the year due to work commitments in the NHS, but gained Faye Ellis, and Tracy Theunissen, early in the year and recently Pauline Offord and Tim Burrows. We also have an additional candidate for our remaining vacancy which I hope we can co-opt at the AGM in May.

There are clouds on the horizon though as two members have indicated that they will be resigning later in the year as they are relocating.

We are all assisted by our excellent Parish Clerk Steve Barron, without whom we would hardly function. Our clerk is paid to work for us for 7 hours a week. I'm convinced he does far more!

Finance

The main income is from the precept, a part of the Council Tax paid by all householders, This amounted to £14,116 last year, a slight increase on the previous year due to an increase in households. We have held the charge per household flat in recent times, it amounts to around £42 per year for a band E property.

There is additional income from rent charged on the playing field (reduced by 50% during Covid), Allotments and the Community Infrastructure Levy on developments (CIL).

Typically our expenditure matches our income (less the CIL) for the day-to-day running of the Council and we draw on reserves for extra activities, some of which I mention later. In the last year our actual turnover was of the order of £50,000 due to the completion of the

enhancements to the play areas, the extra income being covered by grants from SCC and ESC, a draw down of reserves and CIL funds.

On CIL, the PC receives 15% of the CIL paid by developers. Over the last few years this has amounted to a total of £6300. It was used on the enhancements to the play areas, the installation of two defibrillators and the Village Hall acoustic treatment.

Planning

All planning applications submitted to East Suffolk Council for Swiland and Witnesham are passed to the Parish Council for comment. This is part of the formal consultation process and our views are sent to ESC in a set time-scale to fit their decision process.

The Parish Council holds meetings specifically to look at applications and any other related planning matters. These are held in public from time to time as related to the flow of business and within the set time scale.

We are fortunate that we have Jerry Hindle as chairman of planning, Jerry brings years of experience in local government to this important and very busy role. 13 meetings were held this year, to address 20 applications for single dwellings, extensions alterations etc. plus two major developments, Street Farm - 20 dwellings and Mow Hill 32. The major developments are the largest the Council has had in generations. The street farm one has been through several revisions and is still awaiting a final decision from ESC. The Mow Hill one is the subject of a specially arranged meeting later this month when members of the community are encouraged to attend and express their views.

Planning committee also encourages ESC planning enforcement to pursue situations where residents are causing nuisance or blatantly breaking planning rules to the detriment of the community. Unfortunately this seems to be an item on most planning meetings.

Many communities in Suffolk have or are in the process of producing a Neighbourhood Plan. These primarily focus on future development. They are significant pieces of work, typically 100 pages or more, involve the whole community, and result in the calling of a referendum. We organised a public presentation via Zoom on the production and advantages of a Neighbourhood Plan during the year. Participation was very low so the PC concluded that there was no enthusiasm at present for such an undertaking.

Highways

Many of our activities on highways seem to revolve around trying to persuade SCC to maintain our roads and footpaths to a reasonable standard. A typical response being - 'there's no budget'!

After what seems like years of trying to persuade SCC that the Gibraltar crossroads is dangerous, being on a short 60mph stretch between two 40mph sections, the intervention of our new County Councillor (Elaine Bryce) has at last brought some sense to the situation. A continuous 40mph section should be in place within the next year. This has involved funding from our reserves, the ESC (thanks to the strong support of our Councillor Tony Fryatt) , surrounding Parish Councils and a large injection of Councillor Bryce's locality budget.

Tuddenham Lane and Kirby Lane will soon have signs indicating they are Quiet Lanes, hopefully this will make both safer for walkers and cyclists.

Dr Brian Williams and Andy Dungey participate in the ESC Community Partnership meetings where much of the focus is on road safety. This group provided £2.5k towards the Gibraltar Crossroads speed limit project and recently, safety vests for Witnesham schoolchildren.

On speeding, Andy Dungey leads for us with SAVID. We will be participating in the portable ANPR trial involving SCC to help in encouraging drivers to drive within the 30mph limit on the B1077, posts should soon be appearing to take portable cameras that record speed and number plates. We also share a speed indicator device (SID) device with other local Parish Councils. Unfortunately, we remain short of volunteers to help with a SID and to undertake speed limit surveys as part of Community Speed Watch with a handheld radar gun.

Council member Faye Ellis has been assisting in a bid for a school crossing patrol on the B1077 near the Swilland junction with the aim of encouraging more parents to feel safe walking their children to school. Whilst our initial bid was unsuccessful, we are appealing with evidence from a survey of parents undertaken by the school headteacher which indicates that significantly more children would walk to school if a crossing patrol was in place.

Allotments

The allotments in Coopers Close and Hall Lane are all occupied.

The PC has decided to install a water supply at Coopers Close, negotiations with Anglian Water are well advanced.

Playing Field and Recreation Ground.

The enhancements to both play areas organised by Chris Rush were completed during the year and appear to have been popular. Both play areas are regularly inspected for safety by council members Simon Barlow and Kim Shaw. We also procure a professional RoSPA survey each year in accordance with our insurance requirements.

Unfortunately there has been a formal complaint about noise from the zip-wire by a resident, the supplier is being helpful in determining whether there are any modifications that could be made, although we have been assured that our zip-wire is the same as many installed elsewhere.

The PC leases the playing field, car park and play area near the school from SCC. In return for undertaking maintenance (grass, trees, hedge cutting, fencing etc) the lease is at zero cost. In turn we lease the playing field to the WASPS junior football club. The rent charged contributes towards the grass cutting costs. The PC halved the rent in recent years as Wasps funds suffered due to Covid. The lease expires in 2024 and negotiations have begun on its replacement. With support from Councillor Bryce, the PC are seeking to persuade SCC to transfer the freehold on the land to the PC to secure it as a facility for the community in perpetuity.

Queen's Platinum Jubilee.

Council member Steve Henley agreed to be Village Champion for Jubilee celebrations and liaise with The Suffolk Foundation on our behalf. A number of events are planned by Steve and his team of organisers; details have been published in "In Touch" over the past months. Whilst these activities are generally self-funding the PC have filled gaps with modest support for the flower festival and village show and provided portable toilets for "Street Fair" on the school field, as the school facilities are not available.

Council members Chris Collings and Chris Templeman (our tree officer) are organising tree planting as part of The Queen's Canopy initiative. A Jubilee Oak has been planted in the recreation ground car park to be followed by a further 200 trees in the autumn on public land. We will soon be looking for volunteers to join planting parties.

Anti-Social Behaviour.

Kim Shaw has been attending the ASB liaison meeting between Parish Councils, the ESC community team and Suffolk Police. This allows us to influence policing priorities around ASB and to an extent - speeding.

Witnesham Village Hall

Councillor Kim Shaw is our link to the village hall management committee to whom we have provided financial support over the years. The last major item was the acoustic treatment to the ceiling which has reduced echo from 2.3 sec to 0.9 sec.

We are grateful to the VHMC for providing a permanent home for the PC records dating back around 100 years plus those of the village recorder.

Village Recorder

After many years as Village Recorder and Historian, Steve Henley has stood down. Whilst not a formal Parish Council role it is right here to recognise here the large contribution that Steve has brought to the community in these roles, including the embracing of social media in dissemination of information.

The Parish council are grateful to Erica Burrows for agreeing to take over from Steve.

Communications

All Parish Council and committee minutes are available on the Council website, and all meetings open to the public. Main council meetings take place in the Village Hall, committees usually meet in the side-room of the Baptist Chapel. Summaries of Parish Council minutes are published in 'In Touch' magazine.

In addition, our clerk holds an email distribution list of parishioners who have agreed to receive notices, event news etc. and we make use of the Witnesham Community group on Facebook.

Thanks

An efficient Parish Clerk is vital in the smooth running of a Parish Council. In Steve Barron we have a professional manager, well versed in the increasing complexity of the legalities surrounding local government and someone with whom it is a pleasure to work. I had no idea of the number of day-to day issues that need attention with even a small PC such as our own, without Steve much would be missed.

I finish by thanking our Parish Councillors. All are volunteers who give up their time to help the community, it's not glamorous and is often frustrating. They bring a vast range of experience, expertise and specialisms to the Council. Their individual contributions are many, various and often unsung. In addition, I am personally grateful to them all for the support and help that they have given me over my first year as Chairman.

Richard Nicol

Chairman Swiland & Witnesham Grouped Parish Council.