

Parish Council Report - Annual Parish Meeting 2024

Richard Nicol - Chairman Swilland & Winesham Grouped Parish Council



A year of Flood, Fire and Frustration.

We started on a high, with local celebrations of the new King's coronation on 6th May, the Gibraltar Crossroads made safer at last, two new Quiet Lanes in place and new Speed Indicator devices appearing. Soon followed the usual issues caused by SCC failure to repair and maintain our roads and footpaths, and strained relations with East Suffolk District Council planners.



Then came 'flood, and fire' with Storm Babet in October, flooding homes in Swilland and Winesham and a fire that destroyed the book exchange telephone kiosk near the Swilland High Road. Attempts to get help from SCC and ESC to ensure that such flooding of homes can never happen again resemble 'herding cats'. On the bright side a successful insurance claim will allow us to install a replacement book exchange.

Membership

Sadly Pauline Offord resigned due to health reasons; we look forward to her possible return when she is fully recovered. We welcomed Tracey Hardy and Susan Ross early this year. To my relief and gratitude, Simon Barlow continued as Vice-Chairman and Jerry Hindle, Chair of Planning

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 remain convinced he does far more!

Finance

The Council's core income is from the precept, a part of the Council Tax paid by all householders. This amounted to £15,444.36 last year, (23/24), an increase on the previous year due to more households and a 5% rise in precept. A further £1152 was received from the fees charged for the use of the playing field and the allotments.

Further inflation in our core expenditure has made it necessary to again seek an increase of 5% for 24/25, this amounts to £2.20 per year for a band E property, ie from £44.16 to £46.37.

Our expenditure largely matches our income for our day-to-day responsibilities and we draw on reserves and grants for extra items that need funding.

The Council also receives 15% of the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) paid by developers. In the last year no Neighbourhood CIL was received and none spent, leaving the CIL restricted reserves held at £1,546.94.

Looking ahead Council will be receiving approx £105,000 from the Wittens Meadow development on Mow Hill to be paid over the next two years.

There are restrictions on the deployment of CIL. Essentially it is provided for the local provision of infrastructure.

Our district councillor, Dan Clery donated £500 from his locality budget for a replacement picnic table at the play area next to the school.

Planning

All planning applications submitted to East Suffolk Council for Swilland and Witnesham are passed to the Parish Council for comment, often at short notice. 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, Unfortunately there is scant evidence that ESC put much weight on our views and detailed local knowledge in coming to their final decisions The Parish Council holds meetings reactively to look at applications and any other related planning matters.

Jerry Hindle chairs planning, bringing tenacity and years of experience in local government to this busy role. 5 meetings were held this year, to address 9 applications for single dwellings, extensions and alterations The two major developments, Street Farm - 20 dwellings and Mow Hill (now named Wittens Meadow) were also discussed at length throughout the year, With Wittens Meadow there have been many ongoing detailed planning issues (foot-paths, access to B1077, planting etc as well as a departure from the planning requirements that was instrumental in contributing to properties being flooded . In the case of Street Farm, given the clear and demonstrated flood risk we are now of the opinion that the site is not developable, yet ESC planners are still pursuing the application for reasons that are unfathomable; it is clear it should be rejected completely, if only for the safety of its future residents.

Storm Babet

Like many communities elsewhere, residents across our community were severely affected by this high category storm, with 20 properties in Witnesham and 4 in Swilland being flooded. For some it severely affected their future life plans and left their homes uninhabitable for 6 months or more. We hosted a well attended public meeting about the flooding in January. The evening allowed residents to meet others affected and share what happened. Some of the experiences shared were heart rending. Detailed notes of the meeting are on the home page of the PC website. In addition Brain Williams coordinated and Jerry Hindle chaired a meeting between those flooded in Swilland and relevant Landowners with the aim of developing a plan to avoid water entering properties in the future.

Overall Babet and its consequences have dominated Parish Council activities for the last six months. Our focus has been on obtaining help and support for those affected and ensuring that such devastation to people's lives can never happen again. We are fortunate that our vice-chair Simon Barlow is an employee of The Environment Agency and has expertise in surface water management; he also knows his way around the numerous public bodies who are involved and understands Riparian law, something that most of us had never heard about until Babet.

Sadly it is clear that the vast majority of the damage to homes caused by the storm need not have happened if ditches had been maintained, drains kept clear and been fit for purpose. In Witnesham unrestricted flooding from the Wittens Meadow development added to the misery, compounded by East Suffolk Council's failure of care to ensure planning requirements were met and SCC's rejection of flood concerns at the planning stage. Particularly damning has been the complete denial of responsibility by all parties for the damage to people's lives and properties that their actions, decisions or incompetence has caused.

As I write we continue to attempt to get SCC as Lead Flood Authority to simply provide resource to address the complex drainage issues in Witnesham. At least 4 public authorities are involved with our flooding issues, with no apparent overall coordination and no single point of contact. In short the current arrangements are unfit for purpose, generating lots of words on paper but little practical action.

In contrast, following the flooding, Denbury Homes have provided more practical help to residents than all the public bodies combined, including a new CCTV survey of the current faulty piped drainage structures.

But the issues continue, the system remains unfit for purpose and those responsible for ensuring it is not are failing in their duty of care to the residents who pay their salaries.

Highways & Footpaths

Most of our activities here unfortunately involve liaising, cajoling, pressurising SCC Highways, an organisation that always claims to be short of funds; on the rare occasions it can be persuaded to take action often seems to go about the task most inefficiently.

It took 6 years to install a continuous 40mph along the B1078 at the Gibraltar crossroads. It was eventually installed in August and completed in April

Thanks to the perseverance of Dr Brian Williams, Tuddenham Lane and Kirby Lane eventually became Quiet Lanes.

Several footbridges over the River Fynn were repaired or replaced. Three were damaged by Storm Babet, one was instantly repaired by a nearby resident to whom we were most grateful. SCC repaired the others relatively quickly too - so there is hope.

We are fortunate that the seemingly indefatigable Jerry Hindle leads for us on footpaths, constantly reminding SCC of their responsibilities.

Keeping the footpath clear along the B1077 is an annual challenge, again its SCC's responsibility to ensure this happens., although adjoining landowners have responsibility for cutting back growth from their property. This year it was a combination of volunteers, adjoining landowners and intermittent SCC action that addressed the task, unfortunately not before pedestrians were put in danger though.

It is time consuming for councillors, but we persevere.

We remain active participants in SAVID (PCs working together on Safer Village Driving) being conscientiously represented by Andy Dungey. The portable Speed Indicator Devices now appear regularly, fitted by Andy, to encourage drivers to drive within the 30mph limit

on the B1077. Most residents will no doubt be unaware that the sign changes from Green to Red if 30mph is exceeded!

Allotments

Whilst there have been some changes in tenancy during the year, the allotments in Coopers Close and Hall Lane are all occupied.

After requests from allotment holders, a water supply has been installed at Coopers Close. The installation itself was plagued by problems with contractors., however it is now fully functional and ready for the coming season.

Playing Field and Recreation Ground.

The PC has a peppercorn lease on the playing field, car park and play area near the school from SCC. In return we maintain the area. We sub-lease the playing field to the WASPS junior football club. The rent charged contributes partly towards the grass cutting costs.

The lease expires this year and we have agreement in principle with SCC for its extension and enhancement. whereby freehold will be extended to the PC in the event of some of the land being needed for a permanent structure. Tim Burrows is leading a group of interested parties, eg School , WASPS and play-school to scope out plans for a new building and sports facilities that will benefit the whole community for the future. Tim is seeking help with what could become the largest initiative by the Parish Council in generations, made partly possible by the enhanced CIL receipts and their use as a lever for matched grant funding.

The almost adjoining so-called Poors Land has been under-utilised for many years, With some visionary thinking by the charity trustees this could also become a more valuable community asset and be incorporated in the future plans for the area.

King Charles III Coronation Weekend

Dr Brian Williams represented the Parish Council on a group that was set up to coordinate village events. The PC presented mementoes of the event to every child at the School and all young people up to the age of 16 in Swilland and Witnesham. There was a Street Party for Swilland residents in Church Lane on the Sunday and various private celebrations in Witnesham.

Witnesham Village Hall

Councillors Kim Shaw and Tracey Hardy are members of the Village Hall Management group

Village Recorders

Whilst not a formal Parish Council role it is right here to recognise the contribution of our Witnesham recorder Erica Burrows. Her 'In Touch' reports continue to be informative and entertaining. Also our Swilland recorder Sam Salter.

Communications

All Parish Council and committee minutes and financial records are available on the Council website, (<http://swillandandwitnesham.onesuffolk.net>). All meetings are open to the public. Main council meetings take place in the Village Hall, committees usually meet in the side-room of the Baptist Chapel.

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.

A paper archive of past meetings and Parish Council documents going back in some cases 70 years is kept in the Village Hall

Thanks

I am grateful to for the help and support from our County Councillor Elaine Bryce, and district councillors Dan Clery and Colin Hedgley Unfortunately Elaine has been unable to join us for much of the year due to health issues.

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. The number of day-to day issues that need attention with even a small PC such as our own are unbelievable, without Steve much would be missed.

This is my last Chair's report to the Annual Parish Meeting as I will not be standing for re-election at our AGM in May. I wish my successor well.

I conclude by thanking our Parish Councillors. All are volunteers who give up their time to help the community. They bring a vast range of experience, expertise and specialisms to the Council. Their individual contributions are many, various and usually unsung. We should be grateful to them all.

Richard Nicol
Chairman Swilland & Witnessham Grouped Parish Council.
5th April 2024