

Review of the year 2020/21

This has been a year unlike any other. Following an emergency meeting in March 2020 to delegate appropriate powers to the Clerk and the Chairman, we have learned to hold virtual meetings, a situation that still continues. Councillors have responded admirably to this challenge and with the able support of our excellent clerk these meetings have been very successful, such that we no longer use the delegated powers. Sincere thanks are due to Fiona Powell for hosting us on her Go-To meeting website.

Sadly we have lost three councillors during the year as a result of resignations – Anthony Sheppard, Paul Norris, and Martin Cripps. They were all valuable contributors and will be missed, especially Anthony who acted as such a helpful Vice Chairman. However I am pleased to say that we have been joined by Steve Condon, Regan Scott, and Sue Prentice who have all now been co-opted onto the council. I will be standing down as well at this year's annual meeting in May, so another vacancy will need to be filled.

It has been a busy year for new planning applications, some of which have been contentious. In one instance an objector was so concerned that a complaint was lodged with East Suffolk Council (ESC) on the basis that certain councillors handled the application improperly. I am pleased to say that the complaint was dismissed on the basis that there was no case to answer. It did however cause us to consider carefully the Code of Conduct under which we operate, and amendments have been drafted to improve the oversight of conflicts of interest and lobbying, and these will be recommended to the Annual Meeting in May for approval.

It is an unfortunate reflection on the world we live in that such issues can become divisive and common ground can be hard to find. In the great majority of cases however we have reached clear and unanimous views on applications put before us and we have had good support from ESC in the interpretation of our Neighbourhood Plan (NP), even though we have not won every case. We have taken steps to make sure we are aware of any and all comments by residents on applications as they come forward so that wherever possible we reflect the views of those residents in our responses. Such concerns can extend to new developments that impact on neighbouring properties, and we need to make sure we identify such risks when we consider new applications. We also now ensure that we read ESC's planning reports carefully to fully understand how their decisions have been reached.

We have consistently argued that as a result of the NP, we should be party to pre-application discussions between an applicant and ESC. We have not succeeded in achieving this, which can mean that a well-funded applicant supported by advisers that the Council could not possibly afford has an unlimited amount of time to make his case while we still have only 21 days to respond. We believe this puts the Council in an impossible position and we have raised the matter with ESC and our MP. It is an effort that should be maintained.

It is often asked 'why does the Parish Council not act in such and such a way...' It is important to recognise that we are not an enforcement body, or a police force, and we have extremely limited powers. If a resident tells us that a planning matter has arisen and there could be breach of policy or permission, we can report the matter to ESC, the Environment Agency, or other relevant body. But we have no powers of enforcement and have to rely on ESC in such cases. Another example might be the use of secluded parking spaces for criminal activity. We can only pass on such concerns to the police. We do now have operating speed signs on Lodge Road and Boot Street to act as deterrents in relation to speeding and the information from them can be passed to the police. In this context it is pleasing to report that in several cases ESC has responded with impressive speed when fly-tipping – an increasingly common and annoying problem - has been reported.

12 new planning applications have come before the council during the year under review, of which we supported 9, objected to 2 and were neutral on another. We had 1 retrospective application for a development already carried out. These are always especially difficult given that the applicant by definition believes that no permission is needed or that it was not a breach of policy.

The NP has proved its worth and is cited by ESC in many of their decisions. It has helped us 'steer' some applications so that they reflect the objectives of the NP. However due to the new ESC Local Plan there are now sections of it that need to be reviewed so that it is in line with current policy, including relevant supplementary planning guidance. We do not believe that the basis of the NP is under threat and indeed its approach to the environmental and historical context within which the village sits is still as relevant as it was when it was written, if not more so. ESC will assist with this review which needs to be carried out in the next few months. The work of the Parish Council remains crucial in terms of setting out in clear and unambiguous terms why certain developments are contrary to the intent of the NP or are in breach of ESC policies. Such representations are time consuming but need to be accurate and comprehensive.

Pressures on small rural communities such as ours continue to mount. With the withdrawal of the proposed Ipswich Northern Relief Road, we have the threat that 'rat run' traffic will increase, especially along Boot Street. It is therefore especially pleasing that after arguing our case for 4 years, SCC have agreed to extend the 30 mph limit from the Boot Street bridge to the Rosery Lane junction, to include Lower Street and the southern end of Hasketon Road. We much appreciate the support we have had from Andrew Reid at SCC and from Colin Hedgley and Tony Fryatt who have both provided funding support from their allocations so that the Parish Council will not be required to contribute to the £10,000 cost of this scheme. Fortuitously we have also had our nominations accepted for 5 roads to be included in the revised SCC Quiet Lanes scheme – 4 of which adjoin Boot Street and Hall Farm Road. These two schemes should add to the safety and enjoyment of all road users in the parish, not least people using the church car park and having to cross the road on a blind summit.

These pressures will only increase as time passes and will become acute if Sizewell C is approved. A consultation has been launched regarding the A12 and

the roundabouts from Seven Hills to Melton. There are real concerns that if the proposed traffic light system fails to manage competing traffic flows, there will be a greater temptation to use the roads through the village.

During the year we worked with the Parochial Church Council to develop a list of volunteers so that in case of need we could assist with shopping trips, medicine deliveries, or trips to the vaccination centre. So far we have not been called upon but the volunteer list was a much appreciated and speedy response to the pandemic.

As a result of a scheme set up by ESC we have applied for and now received a 'Talking Bench' which has been installed in Lower Street next to the post box. Thanks are due to Sally Johnson for facilitating this. Work has also taken place to improve the green space at the junction of Boot Street and Grundisburgh Road. Thanks also to those who have worked on this. We continue to look for sites to plant more trees, although this can be difficult given the sometimes complex issue of ownership of the verges. Local landowners have however been supportive of this effort which we hope will continue in years to come.

Lastly I would like to thank all my colleagues on the council for their time, effort, and advice. I am especially grateful to Rob Munn for taking over as Vice Chairman after the resignation of Anthony Sheppard. Particular thanks are of course due to Dee Knights, our clerk. I am pleased to say that we have been able to review her pay and conditions this year to make sure she is properly rewarded for her time and effort. While we have been meeting on-line, she has kept us all informed and up to date with policies and developments that affect the work of the council. Her accuracy in terms of the council's accounting records has been consistently praised by the reviewer. We are lucky to have her.