

Chairman's Report to Annual Parish Meeting: 15 May 2018

Welcome to this Annual Parish Meeting, and thank you all for your interest in village matters during the last twelve months. As always, the Parish Council is there to help with local issues, both straightforward and complex, although increasingly these can be handled through on-line reporting programmes, such as HGV violations of restricted roads through the village, which (I am happy to say) many people are now using successfully.

First, my sincere "Thank You's" to my councillor colleagues for their support and for the hard work they have put in on their portfolios during the last twelve months. Gary Clark-Ward, having worked on the village website over the last three years, has sadly now stood down from this portfolio, although remaining as a councillor, and we will be looking to replace Gary in this role as soon as possible. Local government rules dictate that these parish council websites are mandatory, not optional, and I hope that you will help us shape this site as the No.1 source of village information. For the moment, this sits alongside the "Village Voice" magazine, but eventually we will need to take a long look at this, as hard-copy publishing is beginning to prove expensive.

Mention of the magazine is a reminder that Tony and Jill Mayhew took over the editorship in December 2017, and we should thank them for volunteering to take over this responsibility.

Back to "The Team": there have been a number of arrivals and departures in the last twelve months. Wendy Braithwaite resigned last September, due to work commitments, and was replaced by Jill Mayhew, who has lived in the village for a number of years and who attended most council meetings as a member of the public. Earlier this year, Livvy Dawson stood down, for personal reasons, resulting in the current vacancy. My thanks to both Wendy and Livvy for their contributions to the work and deliberations of this council during their periods of office.

As always, our thanks to Beccy Hopfensperger for generally supporting the village in her roles as both County and Borough Councillor. At the borough level, new challenges await her, as, by 2019, St Edmundsbury will probably have disappeared, as will Forest Heath, with both authorities scheduled to merge as West Suffolk District Council. Many thanks also to our Parish Clerk, who continues unfailingly to provide us with good paperwork, sound advice, and updates on impending legislation which may affect our work – in this respect, I repeat the comment I made last year, that parish councillors today have to take a more professional approach to the job than ever before, particularly in the area of internet and IT skills.

Last year, I commented on the Marham Park Housing development and its potential impact on our village, although all the housing, as well as the new link road, is no longer in Fornham All Saints parish. Our boundary now runs along the north-west side of the link road, thus ensuring that the remaining farmland and the country park/Open Access land remain in our parish. We hope that this will contribute to the continuing "villageness" of Fornham All Saints. In the last few weeks, the council has been advised that another planning application for nearly 200 houses is likely to be submitted shortly, effectively only leaving four "zones" to be developed. Thus the final shaping of Marham Park is almost there, and having spent some time looking round the site, I have to say that there are some striking house designs, surrounded by an impressive amount of new planting and

landscaping. The main developers – Countryside Properties – have an very good track record in this respect.

If the housing side of Marham Park has been a success story, the same cannot be said about supporting road infrastructure and the “head in the sand” attitude of local authorities, particularly Suffolk Highways. On one positive note, the link road through the development is forecast to open in its entirety in January 2019, together with the new road layout by Bury Golf Club’s 9-hole course, which will bring some relief to the long-suffering residents of Tut Hill.

That’s the good news.... now the bad news. Despite S106 funding having been provided by Countryside Properties for the upgrading of the Tollgate traffic lights and junction, and for the construction of a middle lane allowing a right turn into Oliver Road from Newmarket Road, no work has been started.... and this despite new residents moving into Marham Park homes since December last year. A meeting in February with Steve Merry, a senior Suffolk Highways Manager, demonstrated a lamentable lack of knowledge about the road network in the village, and even worse, absolutely no strategy from his side about how traffic on Tut Hill can be handled or dealt with, once the Marham Park link road is opened. How can these officers justify their salaries? The excellent meeting on 3 March, outlining the work ad views of the Transport Advisory Group, was attended by 36 villagers, despite the heavy snow, and demonstrated the very real concerns felt by people about the way in which traffic levels are strangling Fornham All Saints. Despite invitations to our elected representatives to attend this key meeting, neither was there, and neither has a long-promised meeting with Suffolk Highways, to understand their operating processes, materialised. All very disappointing, especially in view of the massive amount of work being carried out on village transport matters. I continue to hold my view, that Suffolk Highways is a body not fit for purpose and which should be overhauled particularly in respect of its lamentable management.

The West Suffolk Operational Hub was finally approved in November last year, despite much opposition and some very credible alternatives to the site at Hall Farm, Fornham St Martin. However, the Chairmen of Great Barton, FSM, and FAS parish councils are now on the Community Liaison Group team, so that at least we are involved in both the construction and operational phases. Just for the record, the costs of the project (shared between SEBC, FHDC, and SCC) have risen from an estimated £28.4m in 2015 to £32.0m today, and we would not expect to see these increase further. My own view is that, although the design of the Hub is now finalised, there is still scope for road improvements in the vicinity, enabling visibility, capacity, and safety to be improved. We will continue to monitor Hub traffic and any impact on our village.

You also need to be aware that some ward boundaries in the borough have been proposed for change – and I would emphasise that this covers ward boundaries and not parish boundaries, the latter being unaffected. One of the proposed changes is the creation of what I call a “super –ward”, combining Great Barton and the two Fornhams into a single entity. We understand some of the reasoning behind this, but oppose this change for a variety of reasons – mainly the loss of a single councillor for the Fornhams, and the belief that, if the Fornhams need to be combined with other councils into a single ward, it should be with neighbouring villages in the Lark Valley area. We have concluded that this proposed change has not been fully thought through, and are also disappointed that this was not communicated to us prior to the plan’s publication.

Fornham All Saints is one of the few villages in Suffolk without a defibrillator installed at a central point. This is now being dealt with, through an application to Big Lottery Fund for finance and through acquiring the existing phone kiosk for the usual £1, as a good place to house the device. It is now nearly two years since a proposal was made to install one of these potentially life-saving devices in the village, and it is critical that this project proceeds without further delays. We must have the device in place and working when this report is made next year.

For your information, the Precept for this financial year (2018-2019) has been set at £21,296 – up from £20,006 the previous year. This is a much smaller increase than in previous years. A Band D property will now pay £67.27 per annum (£1.29 per week), and we hope that you agree that this is still value for money.

As in previous years, I would like to thank my fellow councillors for all the support they have given to the village over the last twelve months, and can assure our parishioners that we will always try to look after this lovely village to the best of our ability.