

Parish Clerk's Report to the Ordinary Meeting 17th March 2025

- 1 I met with BMSDC officers on site at the Crown Mill play area where it is proposed that equipment be installed to suit toddler / pre-school aged children who cannot be accommodated on the main play park adjacent to Station Road. The meeting was expedited by Cllr Overett who has been making further enquiries of officers towards firm advice to the T&FWP which is looking to recommend the upgrading of the Crown Mill facilities in line with the MSDC consultation response in 2024 which had 26% support as the 4th priority. The BMSDC position was taken into account at a meeting on 14th March of the T&FWP which has been asked to advise Council on the way forward and which will report to the April meeting.

- 2 I joined a second on-line BMSDC / T&PC Liaison meeting on 10th March to discuss the emerging implications of the decision by SCC to seek Devolution Priority following the Government White Paper published on 12th December aimed at 'levelling-up' local governance by way of the aggregation of County & District Council roles into Unitary Authorities in parallel with the establishment of Mayoral Strategic Authorities.
As per my previous report, these processes are moving at a pace which will require deft handling of the response / consultation processes on offer.
The Mayoral Combined County Authority is out for consultation now and features on this Meeting's Agenda.
The Devolution framework might be seen as having a more direct input at Town & Parish Council level as it would inevitably reduce the number of councillors serving the 'upper' tier and we could not expect the degree of involvement or response from our representatives on a Unitary Authority when their number would be reduced, experience suggests, by some 30%. Consultation on these proposals has not yet begun.

- 3 Along with Cllrs Barker and Hancock, on 6th March I met on site with Network Rail officials to confirm the situation whereby, as part of the current NR Level Crossing Reduction Initiative, Council was served, on 13th February, a Notice to Treat regarding its holdings at Eastern Way. This relates to 2 small areas acquired some 20 years ago to be dedicated as PROW and therefore ensure in perpetuity public access to Lord's Bridge and the ROW network. Council's response was required to be made by 5th March and therefore, in collaboration with the Chairman and Vice chairman, I instructed a specialist solicitor, Holmes & Hills of Marks Tey, to advise with a view to protecting the village's interests. Their advice is that, in light of their researches and enquiries and of our having walked the site with NR, there is no issue which impinges on our ownership, rights or use of the land. Consequently, the matter is in the process of being closed and a formal Claim submitted for our expenses in the matter.

- 4 A second pre-Contract meeting with Stroods Specialist Contractors was held on 7th March within the terms of the formal Agreement signed on 17th December whereby the Contractor, in liaison with Council, proceeds with initial contract activities up to a value of £50,000.00. Meanwhile, the Contract (RIBA Concise 2018), is in draft and soon ready for signing. Advance works including land clearance, removal of fixtures & fittings etc are anticipated to begin in early April.

- 5 The regular on-line meeting with the Suffolk Bus Passenger Group was held on 12th March when Devolution was a main topic. Previous Mayoral appointments have delegated many powers related to public transport away from the existing structure and this has proved, in the main to be innovative and successful. It would seem that the promised October decision date will be the earliest that we can begin to see the shape of public transport within the new framework.

- 6 Cllr Mansel and I met on-line with the BMSDC Sustainable Transport Officer and a SCC Highways officer on 13th March to consider possible restoration measures towards making the link path between Blackbourne and the new Ashfield Road houses adjacent safer and more user-friendly. There is dispute as to how such a poor and potentially dangerous surface was signed off as part of the Planning process. There is reluctance on the part of SCC to take part in remediation as the path is not a designated ROW. Mid Suffolk have suggested that there might be CIL money available towards making the path safe and useable. I have suggested that it is

unfair to penalise Elmswell by losing CIL funds towards covering-up a clear shortcoming on behalf of others.

We have had our preferred contractor provide a quotation to remove the offending materials and lay a surface as per that which he provided on the Blackbourne end of the path.

Cllr Mansel has since approached Cllr Mellen for an appropriate funding route. MSDC have agreed to consider contributing should SCC respond positively.

Meanwhile, the path has more than proved its worth as a link-through to the village facilities from the new estate and beyond with a growing number of users. Use would undoubtedly increase if the surface were made as safe for cyclists, wheelchairs and baby buggies as might be reasonably expected.

I have agreed to approach our PROW Officer towards having the path designated as part of the footpath network.

- 7 I met on site with a lead BMSDC Infrastructure Team officer on 14th March to take further the possibility of grant aid towards the levelling, draining and seeding of the areas of Turners' Field which will be available for recreational games use. The project appears to fit the support criteria and initial papers, as requested, have been forwarded in advance of a formal application when the next CIL assessment round begins on 1st May.
- 8 Next year's schedule of charges from SCC for street lighting is now to hand. There are still some of our units in the village which switch on at 5.30am rather than, as per the majority and as per the SCC standard across the County, at 6.00 am. Given the success of part-night lighting, despite the warnings of ensuing mayhem and peril, I have asked to have the switching time rationalised at 6.00 am across our inventory. As the annual charge (£6,761.89.00 net) is based on actual consumption, this should reduce our bill slightly.
- 9 Cllr Brown agreed back in summer last year to look at a practical maximisation of the roof space at Blackbourne in terms of siting solar PV panels and at the provision of batteries to further reduce the cost of heating, lighting and running the facility. This is a difficult area to explore given the number of supplier/installers in the field, many of whom are recently come to the market and unproven. My thanks to Cllr Brown for relentlessly pinning down detailed quotes to the point where he was able to suggest a reliable firm. I have personal assurance from others that his suggestion as at Agenda item 12 that Greenfuture Energy are capable and reliable. Their bid was extremely competitive and they agreed to hold their price pending a decision on CIL funding which we now have secured in the sum of £35,026.00.
- 10 I am booked in for a MSDC event at Stowmarket on 21st March to discuss Neighbourhood Planning in light of the emerging BMSDC New Local Plan timetable. This will include the mechanism whereby the new NPPF requirement for new homes is met – a significant factor for Elmswell as one of the communities across the District expected to be able to absorb a considerable share of the uplift in new-build numbers. There is another place for Elmswell available if this is of interest.
- 11 There is no let-up in the poor behaviour of the builders engaged in constructing the 5 houses at White House Barns with regard to their clear and unlawful incursion on to land at Blackbourne which resulted in the severing of underground feeder piping to the heat pump causing considerable disruption and cost. A letter has gone to the firm, Willow Walk Homes, and is acknowledged as having been received on 11th March. It requires the removal of the site fencing and notifies them that they are held to be fully liable for all losses both incurred and to be incurred consequent upon their unlawful occupation of our property and of the damage caused.
- 12 The Government's much-anticipated Planning and Infrastructure Bill was published on 11th March with the overall aim of introducing a strategic planning system for England. This suggests a lessening of input and influence at the grass roots stages of the process. Coupled with the almost inevitable reduction in the number of local councillors following the forthcoming Devolution process (see 2 above) and, consequently, of their accessibility and local knowledge, it is likely that the re-drawing of the Local Plan to accord with revised NPPF strictures will be something over which there can be little local control. It would be short-sighted to suggest that this will not result in further tranches of significant housing development in Elmswell (see 10 above).