

WITHERSFIELD PARISH COUNCIL

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT – MAY 2023

The last year was the final year of the 4 year electoral cycle and Parish Councillors were required to stand for public election in May. In the event there were less candidates than seats and so each of the seven candidates were declared elected uncontested.

Over the last year the Parish Council has continued to pursue the most significant issues to our residents – traffic speed and volumes through the village; the impact of planned housing developments across the Parish; and the protection of our rural environment. In addition our attention has been drawn to a proposal being promoted by a company called Acorn to develop a large biodigester plant within the parish on land owned by Thurlow Estate at Spring Grove Farm.

Our **Traffic Working Group** has continued to work hard and following the success in securing 40mph zones on roads entering the village is pressing for progress with implementing the approved 20mph zone through the village. They have also continued to press for a resolution to the dangerous unrestricted parking on the blind bend at Meldrum Bridge, pressing for an options appraisal of highways improvements for the access to the Arboretum Estate in the light of the planning increase of 150 homes on the site. The group is also engaged with other neighbouring parishes seeking Suffolk County Council highways attention to the potential impact of the large-scale housing developments at north Haverhill on roads through our village and parish. The support of our County Councillor remains crucial in pressing for appropriate priority and funding to be allocated to these issues.

The **Neighbourhood Plan** has progressed to near completion last year, led by Cllr Julia Korona. We now await final approval from the District Council to us proceeding to a referendum and then its formal adoption. The purpose of the plan is to seek to strengthen our defence against unwanted and inappropriate developments in the village and wider parish, and to ensure that Withersfield retains its unique rural characteristics and we ensure that the parish is not swallowed up by an expanding Haverhill.

The Parish Council has continued to be vigilant in examining **planning proposals** during the last year.

A proposal by a developer to build a 5-house development on the site of Milton House on Thurlow Road had been refused by West Suffolk during 2021-2 and we were delighted the Planning Inspector dismissed the applicant's appeal against refusal in 2022. However a new application has been submitted with a development of only a slightly smaller scale. This application will be considered by the Parish Council at its next meeting.

The most significant issue that has arisen has been the proposal by Acorn to develop a large biodigester on Thurlow Estate owned land at Spring Grove Farm. The company attended a Parish Council meeting to outline their plan and we heard from many residents of their serious concerns about the potential impact on the parish, on the environment, potential for noise and odours, the potential for increased traffic volumes – both on highways and farm tracks and on the quiet enjoyment of residents' home. The Parish Council has sought to raise these concerns with the company, with the Landowner and with the County Council who will determine any application once it's made. The Parish Council also visited an existing plant in Euston, near Thetford to see how they operate and to get a sense of their impact. We have been successful in ensuring that the applicant must undertake and submit a full Environmental Impact Assessment when and if they submit a planning application. This must set out how these risks are to be mitigated.

A large local campaign has been established: Muck Off Acorn, which is entirely separate and independent of the Parish Council and is campaigning against the scheme. The Parish Council awaits the submission of a planning application and will then be able to consider whether the concerns raised by residents have been addressed before coming to a final decision on whether to support or oppose the scheme.

Thanks to all who joined us at the beginning of April to help out with the **annual village Spring Clean**. As ever a mixed array of discarded items were cleared – bags full of the usual fast food packaging, cans, bottles, care tyres and a first – a deer’s head in a plastic bag!

The Parish Council continues to work to be **open and transparent**, this includes regular reports in the Parish Magazine, and more information about how we spend the money that we manage on your behalf. Our partnership with the Parish Church to produce the Parish Magazine is now in its 5th year and it continues to be fully self-financing through advertising. Thanks to Elaine McInnes-Rich who continues to edit the magazine and to Stella Eve who marshals the team of volunteers who deliver it to every home in the parish 6 times a year. We also continue to publish formal business and records on the Parish Council website: www//withersfield/onesuffolk.net

Attached to this report is a summary of our income and expenditure over the last year and our draft **budget for the year ahead**. The Parish Council’s budget comes from a small proportion of the money that we all pay in Council Tax. Our budget is small, but as Councillors we appreciate that we have a duty to use your money well. We hope that we provide value for money but welcome your comments and suggestions for areas that need our attention.

In drawing up the budget for the year ahead we have been aware of some significant increases in costs. Most notably our grounds maintenance contract has risen from £4000 to £5,500 p.a. and is set to increase further next year. We are looking at ways of increasing our income to meet these increased costs including seeking contributions where there are paid-for events on the village green. We have managed to avoid any increase in what the Parish Council costs residents for at least 10 years – however with increasing costs this cannot continue, and we anticipate that we will have to consider an increase in the precept – the amount that we receive from our Council Tax – when we set the budget for 2024 and for future years.

We welcomed two new co-opted Parish Councillors during the year; Gill Jarvis who lives at the Arboretum and Philip Stiles from Silver Street. Post election they have now become elected Parish Councillors and join with vice-chair Cllr Frank Eve and Cllrs Sheila Horton, Julia Korona, Indy Wijanayaka and me as your Parish Councillors for the forthcoming 4-year term. We have 1 vacancy, and I am keen to hear from anyone who is interested in joining the parish council as a co-optee.

Thanks go to Cllr Bobby Bennett our County Councillor and Cllr Peter Stevens our outgoing West Suffolk District Councillor for their support over the past year. And congratulations to Cllr Indy Wijanayaka who was elected as our new West Suffolk District Councillor on 4th May. We look forward to Indy banging the drum for Withersfield in the years to come.

Also, last but by no means least, thanks to Laura Crump our **Parish Clerk** since 2019.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Terry Rich', is written over a light blue rectangular background.

Terry Rich Chairman, Withersfield Parish Council May 2022