

MINUTES OF THE WOOLPIT ANNUAL PARISH MEETING HELD ON
TUESDAY 23 APRIL 2024 AT 7.30 P.M. IN WOOLPIT INSTITUTE

Present: Dr Geake (Chair), County Cllr Mellen, District Cllrs Mansel and Overett
17 members of the public.

1. **Apologies for absence** were received from Mrs Walker, Mr Bailey, Rev. Farrell and Mrs Grant.

2. **Minutes** of the 2023 Annual Parish Meeting having been circulated were approved and signed.

3. Parish Council Report, Dr Geake

I would like to thank all the parish councillors for their work on behalf of the village this year, the first year of its four-year term. We have had quite a bit of change this year, with several councillors standing down. I'd like to particularly thank past chairs John Guyler, Trevor Howard and Julia Ewans for their stalwart service, and all the other councillors who have stood down. We are currently in the middle of the recruitment process for two new councillors, and at that point we will be back up to our full strength of nine.

We meet once a month for general formal public meetings, and in addition we have a meeting once a quarter to look at and decide on Community Infrastructure Levy applications, more about those in a minute.

Our parish clerk, Peggy Fuller, and our volunteer deputy clerk Julia Ewans, they put into effect the decisions of the parish council. In other words, they actually do all the work to keep everything running smoothly and make sure the village hardly notices all the hard work. They also keep an eye on our legal obligations. They are a fantastic team and do an incredible amount for the village.

In 2023-4 our meetings have generally been well attended, with residents who come to offer their expertise or have their say at the start of meetings, or who come to keep an eye on parish matters.

So, what have we been doing over the last year?

Public Realm

Firstly, what you might loosely call the public realm. We work out who's responsible for which path, pavement, road, verge, ditch, bollard, streetlight, sign, fence, tree, hedge and so on, and we nudge them to fix problems. Many items are the responsibility of the County Council, so we encourage members of the public to report problems such as flooding and potholes using the County Council's reporting website. We can't do it all; we are reliant on all residents to keep their eyes open and report a problem.

For those public realm items that we manage or we can fix ourselves, such as grit bins, litter picking, keeping the roads and streets tidy, we have two part-time staff. Our litter picker Keith Harknett has been keeping Woolpit tidy for almost twenty years, and is looking forward to a well-earned retirement in June. Our Highways Ranger, Martin Gardiner, does pretty much everything else, and has picked up a lot of the tasks that in theory ought to be done by the County Council, but which it's quicker and in fact more cost-effective to do ourselves.

For those things we can't fix ourselves, we keep on reminding the people who are responsible. Things like signage to the Health Centre's new entrance through the car park and the bad state of the pavement down Heath Road.

Planning applications

Planning applications also take up a fair bit of our time. We are consulted by the district council on these and asked for our comments. Although we can't decide the outcome, as this is a district council responsibility and ultimately has to be done under planning law which is dictated by central government, we have on-the-ground knowledge, can talk to our district councillors, and our comments are heard.

Traffic speeds

As you heard last year, we're still working to try to get vehicle speeds down throughout the parish. We've installed several Speed Indicator Devices or SIDs, and are working towards getting more. We have jumped through all the hoops needed for a 20mph speed limit in the centre of the village, and we are now just waiting for the relevant CC cabinet member to allow it.

Streetlights

We are responsible for quite a few of the older streetlights in the village. The old inefficient ones are being converted to LED versions, which are cheaper to run and no worse for wildlife. This has been started, and we hope should be finished within the year.

Buses

We are also working with neighbouring parishes of Elmswell, Beyton and Thurston on a community bus service. This is using school buses in between their drop-off and pick-up times and, with the help of County and District council staff, is going well, with buses to Bury a couple of times a week. These run on Wednesdays and Saturdays throughout the year, even during the school holidays. It doesn't replace the comprehensive bus service that existed through the village until about five or six years ago, but it's a very useful addition to the reduced service we have now. In fact, we get more use out of it than any other parish, and we all put the same subsidy in, but the other parishes don't seem to mind that it's mostly used by Woolpit people.

Others

So those are our main projects, but we are also working on a few smaller things. We need some additional places to sit and rest around the parish, so benches on several footpaths are about to be installed.

We are trying to set up a dedicated dog exercise area within the village. We already provide the dog poo bins and pay for their emptying; and other litter bins. We manage the allotments down at Warren Lane. These are all currently let, but they do come up for rent every now and then and if you are interested, Peggy can put you on a waiting list.

We organise occasional parties, which have mostly in the past been for what you might call civic occasions such as the Jubilees and the Coronation, but could in the future be for other things. And we generally try to encourage people to take part in communal, community life.

We also host the village website, which is run by Julia.

Our most recent ideas include a project to increase provision for wildlife; you may have come to last night's meeting about this, but if not, do ask about it and get involved.

In addition, we make small grants to charities which benefit the people of Woolpit, including the local Citizens Advice Bureau, SARS (Suffolk Accident Rescue Service) and most recently the Essex and Herts air ambulance. This last one was prompted by the fundraising work of the girls in the village who lost their father recently despite the best efforts of the Essex and Herts air ambulance and reminds us that it's not always local charities who help us here.

We pay for all this with a parish precept, which is our little sliver of the council tax you pay. This is on average about £1.30 per household per week.

CIL

The other big responsibility that we have is to make grants via the Community Infrastructure Levy or CIL. Developers pay this levy on all new house building in the village; most of it goes to the District Council, but a small amount comes to the parish. The money is there to mitigate the burden on community infrastructure caused by the new houses. We have made a mix of small infrastructure grants to the Institute, the ARC and the primary school, and equipment grants to some of the sports clubs.

And we have earmarked contributions for other larger projects that will need wider fundraising – electric vehicle charging points in the car park opposite the church, a skate park on the Bury Road development, renovation of the Village Hall to reduce its carbon footprint, etc.

Dr Geake was asked regarding the beacon. The current beacon has become worn and at the end of its life without a lot of repairs. The Parish Council has therefore decided to have a new one made which has permission from Woolpit Cricket Club to be erected on land by the cricket pitch. This will be much safer for residents to access at events.

Dr Geake was asked who owns the car park behind the Heath Centre. This is owned by MSDC and it has installed a litter and dog bin which will be emptied weekly. District Cllrs Mansel and Overett meeting with MSDC senior managers to discuss the current issues of the Abbotts Meadow development and then will meet with affected residents.

4. County Councillor's Report, Andy Mellen

Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs) are major infrastructure projects of national importance, and the majority of Suffolk's NSIPs are associated with the generation or transmission of electricity. The decision to allow an NSIP to proceed is made by the relevant Secretary of State, not councils, although the county council is a statutory consultee for many projects. There are a high number of projects in Suffolk currently, with more in the pipeline:

- Drax – a gas power plant on the former Eye Airfield
- East Anglia Three offshore windfarm is under construction
- Two new offshore windfarms, East Anglia One North and East Anglia Two, were approved by the Secretary of State in March 2022
- EDF began construction of Sizewell C nuclear power station in January 2024

- National Grid are proposing grid reinforcement works from Bramford to Twinstead, with a decision expected later this year
- National Grid's Norwich to Tilbury stretch of the 'Great Grid Upgrade' programme, a controversial pylon route proposed for construction through the middle of the county
- SeaLink proposals for an undersea cabling route between Suffolk and Kent is due to see significant onshore infrastructure at Friston, near Aldeburgh
- LionLink (previously known as Eurolink) proposes undersea cabling to link the UK with the Netherlands, with landfall proposed either above or below the Blyth estuary
- Sunnica Solar Farm, a 2,500-acre proposed solar development for Cambridgeshire and West Suffolk, has still not been approved by the government, with a decision due in April
- A new 750-acre solar farm, White Elm, has been proposed for Mendlesham in Mid Suffolk, with consultation due to begin in the autumn

Flooding in Suffolk

From end of October 2023, Suffolk suffered a winter of repeated flooding, most notably Storm Babet, when Debenham, Framlingham and Needham Market were particularly badly affected. Suffolk's total rainfall during October 2023 was 117.9mm (4.5in) which the Met Office report as being 90% more than the average expected rainfall for the month. The drainage systems in the county were unable to cope with the volume of water. Suffolk County Council have committed an extra £1m for flood investigations to try and prevent future incidents; where usually there are only three or four such investigations each year, for 2023 the number is likely to be near 100 investigations.

The government offered funding to households affected by flooding, with many also able to access further money for preventative works.

RAAC/Condition of School Buildings

In September the council held a scrutiny session on the condition of school buildings, which was very timely as the news has just begun reporting on the number of schools with RAAC, some of which had to delay the start of term or close buildings due to safety concerns. RAAC, which stands for Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete, is a lightweight building material, cheaper than concrete, which was used extensively in buildings between 1950 and 1990 but has a lifespan of 30 years. Nine schools in Suffolk reported they had RAAC onsite, out of around 230 nationally.

Councillors were able to question council officers from the council's Schools Infrastructure team about RAAC, the schools in Suffolk affected and the support they were being offered.

New Suffolk Fire and Rescue Control Centre

The Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) have recommended that the council leave the current control centre partnership with Peterborough and Cambridgeshire councils and open a new control centre in Suffolk by the end of 2024. This would create significant extra cost, but it was agreed that it was necessary for the safety of Suffolk residents as the Fire Service had significant

concerns about the running of the joint venture, particularly a new IT system which had been significantly delayed. A new temporary site for the control centre was needed from December 2023, and work will now begin to find a more permanent site in the centre of the county close to major roads.

New Highways Contract

From 1 October 2023, Suffolk County Council entered into a new Highways contract with Milestone, following the end of the previous contract with Kier. The new contract promises better communication with councillors and Suffolk residents, and contains incentives for the new contractor to work efficiently – for example, undertaking other works needed in the same geographical area when they are called out. The performance of the contract will be scrutinised after 12 months to assess Milestone's performance and is for an initial period of 10 years, with the option to increase it a further 10 years.

At the same time, a new contract for street lighting was entered into with McCann. This contract is due to last for seven years.

Budget Meeting: Green, LibDem & Independent Amendments Declined

In February 2024, the Council's budget for 2024/25 was voted in. The Conservative budget proposed an increase in council tax of the maximum 4.99%, which breaks down into a 2% rise for the Social Care Precept and a 2.99% increase in general tax.

Council services have faced another year of spiraling demand and additional cost pressures, and the council's administration have had to draw £16m from council reserves to balance their budget. The proposed budget included a 100% cut to arts and museums funding, with a temporary fund set up for 2024-25 using the remaining Covid funding from the government to allow some time for these organizations to adapt and find other sources of income.

It also proposed that all local archives and records be centralised to The Hold in Ipswich, a decision which has been vigorously opposed in both Lowestoft and Bury St Edmunds, where communities want to keep their record office buildings in the area.

My group acknowledged the difficulty of the council's financial position and proposed a minor amendment – that instead of using all of the leftover Covid funding for arts and museums, half should be allocated to supporting young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), a service the Conservatives were planning to cut.

Funding for the Arts

The element of the budget which proved most controversial (and even reached the national press) was the Conservatives' decision to cut 100% of arts funding from April 2025. As mentioned above, their budget proposed to use the last of their Covid funding from the government to provide arts and museums funding for the 2024-25 financial year.

We proposed that £250k of the 2024-25 funding for arts and museums be allocated from the council's core funding, as this is an important distinction for arts organizations when they are applying for other sources of income. This amendment was declined.

The Conservatives backed down on the 100% reduction in funding from April 2025 onwards, and shortly before the budget meeting announced a £500k funding pot which arts and heritage organisations can bid for in the 2025-26

financial year. This could mean the funding for arts and museums is spread more thinly, but means more organizations are likely to benefit. As budget decisions for 2025-25 will not be made until the February 2025 council meeting, this decision is not yet ratified.

Ofsted/CQC Inspection of Suffolk SEND Provision

Suffolk County Council and its NHS partners who provide SEND services (the 'Local Area Partnership') were inspected by Ofsted and CQC in November 2023, with the inspection report being published on 30 January 2024. The inspection found 'widespread and/or systematic failings' in the county's SEND provision and is the second poor inspection result since SEND inspections were introduced in 2016 (the previous inspection being in November 2016). The Local Area Partnership had to submit a priority action plan to Ofsted and CQC by 7 March 2024 detailing how they would address the systemic problems rapidly, including improving the quality and timeliness of EHCP plans (previously known as statements of special education needs) and annual reviews, improving communication with families and reducing school exclusions for young people with special educational needs. As a result of the inspection, the two Cabinet Members for children's services and education at the council stood down, and new Cabinet Members have been appointed to these roles. A new full time and permanent Director for Children's Services (DCS) has also recently been appointed, who will start at the council in July.

Suffolk Devolution Deal

After much talk of devolution in the last few years, it looks like this may now happen in Suffolk – though first it has to be agreed by councillors at a debate in July.

Devolution is a process by which regions or cities in the UK can have greater control over decisions in their areas. The government agrees a deal with the area which gives them more freedom to make local decisions about how to spend government funding. This is due to happen in Suffolk from 2025 in areas such as transport and adult education. There will also be a £16m annual investment fund for economic growth, a £5.8m lump sum to regenerate brownfield sites across the county, and a £3m one off investment in retrofitting homes to make them more energy-efficient.

The devolution deal also means the leader of Suffolk County Council would be directly elected by the people of Suffolk, so every four years residents will have two votes, one to elect their local county councillor and the other for leader of the county council. The first election for the directly elected leader will be in May 2025, which is the next county council election. There could be problems with having an elected leader if they are from a different political group to most of the other councillors; the leader can choose a Cabinet and control the council's agenda, but without the votes in the council chamber they might find it difficult to get things done.

Libraries Consultation

On Tuesday 25 March, Cabinet reviewed the results of the recent consultation about the Suffolk library service, which is due to go out to procurement in the summer. Broadly, the members of the public who responded to the survey agreed with what libraries currently provided, including community and digital services, and the mobile library and home library services for people who were

housebound. Recent pop-up libraries in village halls did not score highly in the consultation and it is unlikely these will form part of the service in future. It is also likely that mobile libraries will run from smaller vehicles in future. The successful bidder for the new libraries contract is likely to be announced in November, with the new contract starting from June 2025. The contract will be for six years with an option to renew for a further six years.

Sizewell C Construction Begins

In January 2024, construction work officially began for Sizewell C nuclear power station on the coast near Leiston. EDF are building a two-reactor nuclear power station that will generate 3.2 gigawatts (GW) of electricity that could power the equivalent of six million homes. The development is highly controversial, not only for those opposed to nuclear power, but also to those in the local communities opposed to the upheaval and impact of the construction on the natural environment, the beauty of the coastline and the effect on tourism and transport routes during the construction period. The construction is projected to take between nine and 12 years, but in practice nuclear power stations often take far longer than planned to build – for example, Hinkley Point C nuclear power station, which began construction in 2017, is now predicted to be operational in 2036, 11 years after it was supposed to be finished.

The government and EDF still need to raise an extra £20bn for the project from private investors which they claim will be in place by the end of 2024.

Motions to Council

With the Conservative administration at SCC having a large majority, motions that our opposition group bring to full council meetings are usually voted down. We did manage to get one motion passed successfully during the year to May 2024, which was for the council to work with its partners to better signpost members of the public to benefits they may be entitled to. This motion was raised as a result of reports that over £15bn of means tested benefits are going unclaimed because people were not always aware of the support they could access to help them, even in times when costs of living are putting serious pressures on families all over the country.

Other motions the group had been unable to bring forward or were voted down included solar power 'Roofs before Rural', to ask the council to commit to prioritise solar panels on buildings and brownfield sites over solar farms on good quality agricultural land, and to lobby the government to reduce barriers to community energy projects. Community energy projects enable local people to produce electricity (for example, by solar panels on schools) to reduce bills, with any extra electricity sold to the grid, making a profit which can be reinvested locally.

In July my group proposed a motion to make it easier for communities to lower speed limits on rural roads where the safe speed for driving is clearly lower than the current National Speed Limit. The motion suggested that on these roads, a lower speed limit than 60mph would encourage many drivers to slow to a more appropriate, safer speed, thereby reducing accidents and making roads safer for all users. This motion was voted down by the Conservative administration. We also tabled a motion on flooding in December, which among other things, proposed to increase the frequency of clearing drains and gullies around the county; however, the Conservatives proposed an amendment removing this

recommendation and passed a weaker motion which did not include any changes to the usual schedule of drainage works.

Cllr Mellen was asked for an update on the Elmswell to Woolpit footpath/cycle route as there appeared little progress this year. The hold up with the design which is now with the new contractor Milestone.

Concerns were expressed regarding schooling as Elmswell school is full for reception and year 1 and how this will affect Woolpit and whether a new school will be built on the Bury Road development.

Complaints have been received regarding the new roundabout on Elmswell Road not being big enough and that it will be an issue for larger vehicles.

5. District Councillors' Report, Sarah Mansel.

New administration

The result of the May 2023 elections was that the 24 elected Green Party councillors officially became the administration at Mid Suffolk. Councillor Andy Mellen, as Leader outlined our initial priorities to lead and work with other bodies to address the challenges faced by our communities: cost of living, affordable homes, local services, public transport and climate change. A Plan for the next few years was agreed which placed environmental and social responsibilities at the heart of everything the Council does.

Budget

For 2023/24 the General Fund budget was for approximately £15.5 million with an expected £2.3 million surplus which will go into reserves. Funds have also had to be provided from the Housing Revenue Account for the backlog of repairs that has built up.

For 2024/25, net expenditure on services is budgeted at £18.5 million with a 2% increase in council tax. Council home rents increased by 7% and sheltered housing service charges also increased. This has been done to ensure the Council can afford the repairs and maintenance that are needed. All these increases are due to inflation, costs of energy and other cost increases.

The Council has reserves of over £28 million as at the end of the financial year plus an expected dividend from the Gateway 14 business park. Plans for this are on a variety of work including new foot/cycle paths, land for biodiversity and green spaces, regeneration of Stowmarket town centre, improved sports provision in the district and enabling community-led housing. Approval was also given to increasing council tax on empty homes in 2024/25 and implementing increased council tax on second homes in 2025/26.

Thriving towns and villages

A group of Councillors has been working on issues around sustainable transport. A new rural transport grants scheme with a pot of £600,000 was set up to help provide passenger transport options across the district.

Approval was gained for the financing of a Green Skills and Innovation Centre on Gateway 14 (G14). This will in part act as a centre of excellence for local businesses and a training site for adults needing new skills. Also, on G14, The Range is due to move into the largest building on site and a deal with a sustainable roof products supplier was agreed.

In Stowmarket, the first part of the sports project was approved and work will commence this year for new pitches, an athletics track and other improvements at Chilton Fields and next to the high school.

In conjunction with Suffolk County Council, Mid Suffolk provided much support to residents and businesses affected by the floods of Storm Babet and Storm Ciaran.

The councils of Mid Suffolk and Babergh were jointly awarded *Council of the Year* for their collaboration with different partners, working to improve services and focus on communities.

Environmental sustainability

The Council launched the *Cosy Homes* scheme, a £2 million project to insulate homes for free. Separately a grant of nearly £1 million was received for retrofitting council homes.

A new *Pride in your Place* grant was established to provide every parish with additional funds to improve the environment for their community.

The Council continues to encourage local groups to improve areas for wildlife and a call for sites from landowners was made so that more trees can be planted across the district. The annual Tree for Life scheme was again a success and tree, hedging and wildflower packs for communities across the district.

The Council published its Carbon Reduction Management Plan with a focus for this year on improving sheltered housing and further work on the leisure centres.

Planning and Housing

In November 2023, Part 1 of the Joint Local Plan (JLP) for Mid Suffolk and Babergh was approved and adopted. The JLP sets out a planning framework to guide development in the districts over the period to 2037. JLP Part 1 provides a set of strategic and local development management policies against which planning applications and appeals will be assessed. There are 10 strategic policies (such as on affordable housing, climate change and tourism) and 32 local policies (such as on biodiversity, historic environment and sustainable construction).

The Council is continuing to work on Part 2 as well as publishing Supplementary Planning Documents to support the JLP. The first three, currently at draft stage, are on Housing, Biodiversity and Intensive Livestock and Poultry.

Over £1.5 million was provided to parish and town councils in the form of the Community Infrastructure Levy during the year.

Supporting the community

We support local events and community groups where we can and particularly link local groups with external fundraising via the Mid Suffolk community team.

Almost £550,000 was allocated by Mid Suffolk District Council Direct to communities across the district from the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL).

We supported the following projects in Woolpit from our Locality Budget 2023-24:

Woolpit Institute – funding towards new boiler and stair lift

Woolpit Tennis Club – funding towards new hedging and pathways

Woolpit Cricket Club – funding towards upgrading the electrical system in the clubhouse

Woolpit Bridge Group – funding towards digital scoring software

Woolpit Drama Group – funding towards the April production

Cllrs Mansel and Overett were asked if MSDC would come back to the area, this is highly unlikely. MSDC has held one of its full council meetings at the Blackbourne in Elmswell.

A complaint was received regarding the path along Elmswell Road. The re appeared to be no planning, thought or consultation on the positioning. Cllr Overett will look into this.

A resident asked when the EV points will be installed in the Health Centre3 car park. Cllr Overett advised that there were difficulties between the Health Centre and MSDC and she is working on getting this matter resolved.

6. Reports from Village Organisation

Reports were given by John Bolden (Classic Cars), Lynda Moore (Yoga, Table Tennis and Bridge Clubs), Phil Sparkes (Men's meeting, Woolpit Christian Fellowship), Hayley, New Manager (Woolpit ARC), Gayle Jenkins (Garden Club and Good Neighbours), Gordon Skinner (Woolpit Carpet Bowls), Rosey Skrimshire (Woolpit WI), Tim Parker (Poor Lands Trust, Friends of Woolpit Health Centre) Dr West (Woolpit Institute, Sir Robert Gardiner Almshouse Trust, Woolpit Cricket Club, Health Centre, Community Responders), Rita Burr (Woolpit Museum), Julia Ewans (Woolpit Recreation Ground Charity, Art Group, village website). The Clerk read the report from Woolpit Luncheon Club.

7. Any Other Business

Suffolk Wellbeing organise walks meeting at The Bull and are about an hours in duration.

Benches are to be sited along five of the footpaths and will be a simple wooden design to fit in with the landscape.

The meeting closed at 9.30 p.m.

Signed.....

Dated.....