

MINUTES OF THE WOOLPIT ANNUAL PARISH MEETING HELD ON
TUESDAY 22 APRIL 2025 AT 7.30 P.M. IN WOOLPIT INSTITUTE

Present: Dr Geake (Chair), County Cllr Mellen (in part), District Cllr Overett and 12 members of the public.

1. **Apologies for absence** were received from District Cllr Mansel. Mr Sparkes, Mr Bailey, Mrs Osborne-Lomax and Mrs Moore.

2. **Minutes** of the 2024 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 second year of its four-year term. We have had quite a bit of change this year, with four councillors standing down: Tom Gallagher, Brenda Robinson, Alex Walker and Matthew Watkins. I'd like to thank all of them for their service on the council.

We have also welcomed Tracey Osbourne-Lomax as a new councillor, and welcomed John Guyler back to the parish council.

We are currently trying to recruit three new councillors to bring us 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 2024-5 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 things 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.

There are some public realm items that we manage, or we can at any rate fix ourselves, such as grit bins, litter picking, and keeping the roads and streets tidy. Our litter picker Keith Harknett retired last June after almost twenty years. Our Highways Ranger, Martin Gardiner, has taken on this as well and so he now does pretty much everything, including many 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.

This year the most controversial applications have been to the north of the A14. They have included the Lawn Farm business park, and the EG petrol station at the A14 junction. We have spoken at district council planning committee meetings for both of these.

Planning enforcement

Another aspect of our work is keeping an eye on new and current developments to make sure that the developers are working with the community in the way that they should be. We have succeeded in getting parish liaison meetings with the developers of the new estate at Bury Road, and the developers of Lawn Farm business park, so that, ideally, any problems can be nipped in the bud before they really annoy residents.

Traffic speeds

As you heard last year, and the year before, we're still working to try to get vehicle speeds down throughout the parish. This was identified in the Neighbourhood Plan in 2022, as one of the most-needed improvements to the village.

We've finished our installation of Speed Indicator Devices or SIDs, with 5 SIDs and 6 or 7 poles now up throughout the village – we can turn them around and move them from pole to pole. If anyone feels any others are necessary, do let us know, but we can't guarantee to have one outside your house specifically, because there are criteria set by SCC which have to be met; to do with bends and junctions and so on.

We are still working on a 20mph speed limit in the centre of the village, but takes a long time to get these things in place. We've had our public consultation with over 250 letters sent out. The next stage is the formal *legal* consultation with notices put up in the area and in the paper to allow anyone to object. Then Suffolk County Council will look at all of this and write a final report with recommendations. Once that's been signed off, then they will start installing and eventually send us the bill.

Streetlights

We are responsible for some (but not all) of the streetlights in the village, and over the last year ours have all been converted to LED versions, which are cheaper to run and should be no worse for wildlife.

Cycle Path

Another of our projects is the cycle and footpath between Elmswell and Woolpit, so that we can safely get to the station without using a car, and they can safely

get to the Health Centre. We have spent some time over the last year meeting with the County Council who will be responsible for designing and building the path, and the District Council who will be providing the funding.

We have a design for the Elmswell section, and a short length has already been built along School Road. We are now waiting for the design of the Woolpit leg, which has been delayed by the change in highways contractor. The funding is ultimately coming from the Community Infrastructure Levy on the new houses built in both villages.

Others

So those are our main projects, but we are also working on a few smaller things. We host the village website, which is run by Julia.

Some of the public spaces in the village are leased by a separate charity, the Woolpit Recreation Ground Charity. This leases the cricket field, which is leased out partly to the cricket club and partly to the tennis club, and the village hall field on which the play area sits. The Parish Council is currently the sole trustee of this charity though, so in practice the management of this comes back to us and is done by Peggy and Julia.

The Parish Council also owns and manages 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 monitor the condition of the footpaths, and this year have installed simple benches on several of them, thanks mainly to Mike Hardiman and Bob Baker.

We organise occasional parties and events, which have mostly in the past been for what you might call civic occasions such as the Jubilees and the Coronation, and this year the VE day commemoration that's coming up early in May, thanks mainly to Trevor Howard, Nick Foster and Michael Hardiman. We also supported the outdoor film night at the cricket club which was a huge success, thanks very much to the hard work of the club, so we hope to have another one soon.

And we generally try to encourage people to take part in communal, community life; we hope at some stage to run a kind of fair for all the organisations in the village, to show new residents how much there is to do and to get involved in here.

We are trying to increase provision for wildlife in the parish, especially at Warren Lane, behind the allotments, at what used to be called the Pleasure; this now has its own dedicated group working on it with new trees, including fruit trees, recently planted. Thanks to Claire Wootton, Julia Ewans and Angus Wainwright, who have been working with Richard Parmee from the district council. If you haven't yet visited to see what's going on, please do try to pop down and have a look, and why not join the group to benefit from some time spent outdoor in nature every now and then.

Lastly, we make small grants to charities which benefit the people of Woolpit, including the local Citizens Advice Bureau and SARS (Suffolk Accident Rescue Service).

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 £1.24 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 and officially it is “to be spent on projects that deliver the infrastructure needed to support development in their area.” So this pot is what will be paying for the cycle path to Elmswell.

But a small amount comes to the parish council, and we have used it to make a variety of grants which mitigate the impact of new development. Firstly, there have been small infrastructure grants to village organisations such as the Institute [Teacups windows], the ARC [outdoor space], and the Cricket Club [nets].

Secondly, we have funded some village infrastructure projects including moving the Beacon from Lady’s Well to the cricket field, upgrading the street lights to LEDs [Dec 2024 £18k] and the costs of the 20mph zone [Sep 2024].

Finally, we have earmarked contributions to other, larger projects as part of wider fundraising – these projects include electric vehicle charging points in the car park opposite the church and a skate park on the Bury Road development. We are also talking to the Village Hall trustees about their proposed renovation of the Village Hall.

One last thing that I should say is that because CIL is levied on new house building, it is now tailing off. It won’t last forever and any new projects need to make sure that they are financially self-sustaining after CIL has come to an end. In any case, next year we may find that local government has completely changed.....

Dr West asked that the Parish Council considers additional street lighting in Heath Road. He also asked that there be some form of commemoration for VJ 80 as well as VE80.

4. County Councillor’s Report, Andy Mellen

Motions

My group passed three successful motions at council over the year:

1. In May 2024, we proposed that the council lobby the government for proper, long-term funding for local councils and support policies to address the long-term funding of adult social care. We tabled this motion as the Local Government Association had recently estimated that councils in England will have a funding gap totalling £4bn over the next two years. Suffolk County Council is predicting a ‘budget gap’ of £33.1m for 2026-27 so this is a very real concern for Suffolk and will affect Suffolk’s local services.
2. In July 2024, my group tabled a motion that the council would do everything it could to avoid delays with local infrastructure funded by developer contributions. We were aware that a lot of local projects that are due to be paid for by developers are very overdue, in some cases for years – for example, new pedestrian crossings for roads where there is new housing. Sometimes these works are due to be undertaken by the developer and the delay is caused by them, but our motion acknowledged that the design and programming of works by Suffolk County Council was also often delayed.
3. In December 2024, my group successfully proposed a policy for the council of ‘Roofs before Rural’ regarding solar panels. The motion noted

that the new Labour government was proposing to triple the amount of solar power in the UK by 2030 and set out the council's position that rooftop solar was preferable to 'solar farms' which are becoming an increasing sight across the county. The council agreed to write to the government to seek assurances Suffolk's best quality agricultural land would be protected.

My group also proposed the following motions which were voted down by the Conservative administration at council:

In October 2024, my group tabled a motion to revise the Highways Maintenance Operating Procedure so that repairs to footways and pavements would be prioritized in areas with heavy footfall, or where a recent fall had been reported. This motion was rejected by the Conservatives.

Devolution and Local Government Reorganization

Since the publication of the government's White Paper in December, Suffolk councils have been scrambling to develop their proposals for reorganizing local government. Under the new system, Norfolk and Suffolk will have a joint mayor (with elections held in May 2026) leading a mayoral authority, with two tier government (county councils and district/borough councils) replaced by unitary councils – single councils that undertake all local services like education, adult care, waste collection, housing and highways. Suffolk County Council's administration have been clear that they would prefer a single unitary council for Suffolk, and they ratified this decision by voting for it in the council chamber on 13 March and at Cabinet on 18 March. Opposition councillors, like my group and the Labour group, are less convinced that one massive council would bring decision-making closer to the communities, which is what devolution is supposed to enable. Councils have to submit interim plans to the government by 21 March, then detailed proposals in September, with a decision from government by the end of the year on what will happen. It is likely that councillors for the new council/s would be elected by Suffolk residents in May 2027, a year after the mayoral elections.

Suffolk's Library Service

At Cabinet in March 2025, the council administration voted to bring Suffolk's libraries back in-house at the end of the current contract for the library on 31 May. Suffolk Libraries, who have held the contract since the service was divested in 2012, were the only bidder for the contract, but negotiations broke down and the council felt it had no alternative but to bring the libraries back under council control. The proposal to do this was passionately opposed not just by Suffolk Libraries, but also Suffolk residents and the many volunteers and Friends groups who work for and raise money for libraries in their communities.

Following the Cabinet meeting, both my group and the Labour group submitted requests that the decision be 'called in' – a process by which an issue can be tabled at a meeting of the council's Scrutiny Committee to be looked at more closely. Both the requests were rejected by the council on Wednesday 27 March after being reviewed by the council's monitoring officer.

Norwich to Tilbury Pylons

At Cabinet in May 2024, the council voted to object to the proposed Norwich to Tilbury 400kV grid reinforcement and call for a pause until alternative options had

been explored. The proposals which were reviewed included 183k of pylons, with four sections of underground cabling through and near the Dedham Vale National Landscape (the new name for an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and the Waveney valley. The council were keen that more underground cabling take place in the Waveney valley than proposed, and it was agreed more generally that energy projects in the county needed to be coordinated better to reduce the impact on residents and the local environment, particularly as so many of them are due to be under construction at the same time. Other councils in the area have also objected to the plans. Since then, the National Grid has confirmed it will not be proposing any further underground cabling in the plans, holding several consultations with local residents which have been largely negatively received.

State of Suffolk's Roads

In July 2024, a report was brought to Scrutiny Committee which looked into the condition of Suffolk's roads, the amount spent by the council to repair them and how repair works were prioritised. The findings were that amount of funding available for repairing highways was around £17m per year, but £50m per year would be needed for an optimal programme of resurfacing. Works are prioritised by the council's Highway Maintenance Operational Plan, which sets out the parameters for repair work and the order of priority repairs. Unsurprisingly, main roads and roads which have a lot of traffic are prioritised over quieter roads which do not. Having said this, the council is currently undertaking a scheme of resurfacing residential roads which have fallen into disrepair, having announced an additional £10m of funding for this project in May 2023.

Council Budget 2025-26

In February 2025, the council voted to adopt its proposed budget for the 2025-26 financial year. This included approving a maximum rise in council tax this year of 4.99%, including the 2% social care precept for adult care. The budget this year does not include borrowing from the council's reserves, which was a concern last year. Instead, the budget relies on delivering £28.4m of savings across many council services. Cost pressures for the council include care purchasing for adult social care, Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and placements for children in care. There is still a lot of concern about the level of debt the council is carrying from the Designated Schools Grant (DSG), a debt which is due to increase this year by £62.175m. Councils are allowed by the government to hold this 'negative reserve' until March 2026. The government is yet to come up with a solution for this issue after that date; many councils are holding enormous levels of this debt which they would not be able to pay off if they had to. In addition, the councils have to borrow money to cover the interest on the debt which affects their finances every year: over 2025-26, the debt will cause a £6.8m cost pressure for the council. The rising DSG debt is mostly for council services for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

The council is also forecasting that in the next few years, it will have budget 'gaps' that will only grow: £33.1m for 2026-27, and £96.2m in 2028-29. The council has lobbied the government for better funding – my group proposed a successful motion on this in May 2024. The council hopes that Local

Government Reorganization will make enough savings to improve the medium and long term picture for local services.

Ofsted Inspection of Children's Services

In June 2024, the council was subject to an Ofsted inspection of its social care services for children and young people, known as an ILACS inspection (Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services). These inspections are undertaken approximately every three years to judge how the council are performing in their function to support children who are vulnerable and in need of protection. Previously, in 2019, the council had been rated as 'Outstanding', but in 2024 it had dropped two grades and was assessed as 'Requires Improvement'. This meant that the council had to prepare an action plan for improvement, which was submitted to Ofsted and the Department for Education. The council has recruited extra staff to and has organized peer reviews with other local authority to learn how to improve practice. It has also established a new Strengthening Services for Children and Families Board chaired by the council's Chief Executive, Nicola Beach. The council particularly needs to improve services for care leavers and ensure that young people leaving care are aware of the support they can access until they turn 25.

Improving Services for Special Educational Needs & Disabilities (SEND)

Following the poor Ofsted/CQC inspection report published in January last year, the council has been trying to improve SEND services. In May last year they produced and submitted a SEND Strategy, and in June they produced a Priority Action Plan for improvement, including extra funding of £4.4m to recruit more staff, including Educational Psychologists. In July the council approved an additional £9.1m over three years to increase capacity to clear the council's backlog of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and Annual Reviews. This was funded from council reserves.

In January 2025, the council's Public Health team presented a SEND Needs Assessment for the county at the Health and Wellbeing Board, which forecast that SEND demand in Suffolk has risen sharply in recent years and was likely to continue to rise. It also found that delays in EHCP assessment, ADHD and autism assessment and support, and access to mental health services for young people were unsatisfactory and, in some cases getting worse, like speech and language therapy.

Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service Inspection

In February 2025, the government published a report following its recent inspection of Suffolk's Fire and Rescue Service. Inspections for fire services are relatively new, with the first ones undertaken by the Home Office in 2018. The inspection report was not complimentary; it found that the service was good at preventing fires, protecting the public and that it met requirements for responding to major incidents, but also that it needs improvement in several areas, including improving culture and morale, and behaviour of senior leaders, who it advised should act as role models and show they are committed to the values of the service through their behaviour, improving communication with fire service employees and making sure they felt confident about raising concerns. This report was followed shortly afterwards by allegations in the press by the Fire Brigades Union that Suffolk County Council had made mistakes processing firefighter pay and pensions for years and has not addressed them properly or

listened to employee concerns about the errors. The council subsequently announced additional investment of an extra £1.6 million over two years to improve the service.

Warm Homes in Suffolk

This year saw the end of the Warm Homes Grant fund, in which £5m of government money intended to improve insulation and make houses more energy-efficient was returned to the government unspent by the council. The reason given for this was that the criteria for the scheme, which was set by the government, was too stringent and meant that many Suffolk families who needed help were unable to access the funding. There are still schemes available to help with making homes more energy-efficient though – The Suffolk Loft Insulation Offer is funded by the Suffolk Public Sector Leaders Group (which includes Suffolk County Council) and this scheme will only close once the allocated funding has all been spent. Suffolk County Council is also running a new scheme to offer residents interest-free loans to upgrade the energy efficiency of their homes, that includes insulation but also solar panels, glazing and heat pumps. Loans are from £2k to £15K to be repaid over a maximum of seven years at 0% interest, but in order to be eligible, properties must have an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) band below C. Increasing insulation and making homes more energy-efficient will not only save people money on their heating bills, it is also helping the environment as less fuel will be consumed to keep homes warm.

Update on Flooding

Following the Storm Babet flooding in October 2023, the council announced it was investing an extra £1m in investigating the causes of flooding and taking action to prevent further floods. As the lead local flood authority, the council undertakes investigations into flooding in the county regularly, but the level of flooding in autumn 2023 meant that far more investigations would need to be made than in other years. A year later, in November 2024, the council announced it would be allocating a further £1.5m from its reserves to deal with recommendations made in the 10 investigation reports published so far. A further 38 investigation reports have been commissioned by the council relating to Storm Babet flooding. The council also announced it would be writing to the government to request £20m to protect Suffolk from flooding, given that extreme weather will become more likely due to the effects of climate change.

In October 2024, Cabinet agreed a £2m contribution from the council towards protecting the A12 from flooding at Benacre, south of Lowestoft. Erosion of the coast meant that road would likely be flooded at that location at nearly every high tide within a couple of years. The total cost of the works, which includes two new pumping stations, clay embankments and a new saltmarsh, will be many millions, with the Environment Agency committing over £30m and Sizewell C agreeing to fund the rest. Since then, it has been revealed that the cost may be higher than expected, and the council has agreed to allocate and put aside an additional £2.7m contribution in case it is needed later in the construction period.

Cllr Mellen was asked if number of councillors would decrease with devolution, he considered that the number of councillors over the District, County and Borough Councils will be reduced overall.

Cllr Mellen was asked if National Highways have given funds to SCC to mend damaged local roads during the closure of A14. Nothing to date.

5. District Councillors' Report, Jen Overett

Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation:

Government's large-scale proposals for reorganisation in recent months are basically bringing an end to our district and county councils in a couple of years, to be replaced with unitary councils covering all services, very probably with fewer councillors to do the work. There is some expectation that parish and town councils will fill the gaps in local community support, but there isn't much Government guidance on this currently. Alongside this, the establishment of an elected mayor for Suffolk and Norfolk combined, with their own offices and staff, may hopefully raise the profile of our county in terms of grants etc., so the character and priorities of that elected mayor will be crucial.

The priority of Mid Suffolk council is to ensure a seamless transfer of our services to the new Unitary system, whatever that may be, and a smooth continuation of those services into the future. Alongside this, we are advocating for retaining transparency and democratic process for residents and local communities.

Budget:

Housing Revenue Account – funding is mainly spent on a continuous process of improving our housing, including a backlog of work from previous years which we've now just about caught up with. We are actively challenging Government's requirement that the HRA is self-funding, as this means the housing budget for all councils is very tight and therefore building or buying more social housing is very difficult, although we're very aware of the urgent need for it.

Our General Fund is comparatively healthy. The council has reserves for ongoing costs such as standard grants, running elections, legal contingency funds, and public emergencies – standing at £28m at the end of the financial year. We are better off than a lot of councils and not raising our council tax for the coming year is a reflection of that. For 25/26, the Administration has committed to a capital programme of £36m across the district. A particular feature of this Administration has been increasing grants to meet local community needs and initiatives across Mid Suffolk, and the application process for many grants has also been simplified so that they're more accessible.

Rural Transport:

The new taxi bus scheme, taking in Woolpit and Elmswell on a circular Stowmarket/Thurston route is now established, with journey fees recently reduced from £6 to £4.

Energy Efficiency and Environmental Sustainability:

The Cosy Homes scheme helps with insulation and energy efficiency in private homes and has made quite a significant difference. Increasing council tax on long-term empty properties and making the process of gaining approval for energy efficiency measures for listed buildings more straightforward have also been welcomed.

Planning and Housing:

Our Joint Local Plan Part 1 has been up to date since 2023 and we've been meeting Government targets and using the Plan to have some control over where and how housing development can happen.

Government have now shifted the goalposts in terms of the number of homes across the district and increasing the powers of developers. Our decisions at planning committee are constrained by this legislation of course, and our local plan is being revised to take Government changes into account.

The main ones in Woolpit have been Tilia Homes, the Hopkins site, Lawn Farm Business Park, and EG on the Move which is still a very live consideration with two lighting applications due for discussion at committee next month.

Supporting the Community:

Our Community Team is friendly, approachable, and happy to help councillors and community groups to access grants within Mid Suffolk and externally. Our Locality Budget has increased to £10,000 per district councillor, and Sarah and I are always pleased to be approached about possible grant applications.

We also wish to express our thanks to the Parish Council for all their work this year.

Dr West stated that the gate from the new car park had not been opened for vaccination day. Cllr Overett will follow this up with officers.

6. Reports from Village Organisation

Reports were given by Dr West (Woolpit Institute, Sir Robert Gardiner Almshouse Trust, Woolpit Cricket Club, Health Centre, Community Responders), Lynn Grant (Luncheon Club), Kathy Parker (Good Neighbours), Gayle Jenkins (Garden Club), Tim Parker (Poor Lands Trust), Liz Kitley (Woolpit WI) Gordon Skinner (Woolpit Carpet Bowls), Julia Ewans (Art Group, village website). The Chair read the report from New Woods for Woolpit.

7. Any Other Business

There was none.

The meeting closed at 8.56 p.m.

Signed.....

Dated.....