

# Drinks tone Annual Parish Meeting

## Parish Council **Chairman's** Report May 2017

For the Parish Council this has been a year of losses and gains. Our first loss was Councillor Cora Munford, our longest serving councillor and former Chair, who died last September. There have already been many tributes recognising her enormous contribution to the village life over many decades, so I will not repeat them here. Suffice it to say that we as a Council miss her knowledge, experience and wisdom.

It was also with sadness that we learned of the death of Henry Riches. Henry was a former councillor and clerk, and for many years carried out the internal audit of our accounts. His help and support is missed.

Another loss for the council was the departure of our Clerk, Paula. She was with us for only 18 months, but during that time reorganised our financial affairs, and massively improved the quality of information given to councillors to support us in decision making. Her expertise and quietly efficient support was of enormous help to us all, but especially to me as Chair.

We have been able to welcome two new members of our team. Tim Moss as a councillor and Peter Dow as our new clerk. Peter is a very experienced parish Clerk, and has taken us on alongside his work as clerk to Elmswell Parish Council - a very different beast.

Before he knew he would be our clerk, Peter had already booked a holiday this week. So a big welcome for Sharon, who has womanfully agreed to minute these meetings for us this evening. We are very grateful that she is able to stand in, and reprise her role as clerk, even if for only one night.

During this last financial year, we succeeded in holding our precept at a low level, with only a small increase to take account of higher costs, especially for bin emptying and subscriptions. Drinkstone's parish precept is significantly lower than similar councils nearby. Our precept is less than a third of what Beyton, Hessel or Felsham raise, so we have to be scrupulous in our budgeting and inventive in raising funds externally to deliver services which will benefit the community. This year we brought in nearly £1400 in external grant funding. Councillor Penny Otton generously paid for 4 new grit bins out of her locality budget. Thank you again, Penny for helping in this way.

Suffolk County Council informed us that from now on they will not replenish grit piles unless there is a bin. Helpfully they did this after we had completed our budget and precept setting for the coming year. We will need to look at how we can raise funds to install another 4 bins before the winter.

We also received £988 in funding from the Suffolk Rural Fund to purchase 2 strimmers, a wheeled one and a hand held. These will enable our volunteers to keep footpaths clear and walkable in the summer months.

I'm still plugging away at my self imposed task of trying to find out when fibre broadband will finally come to the village. We have signed the agreement with BT Openreach for a fibre cabinet to be installed on the parish land at the junction of Garden House Lane and Rattlesden Road. But the question is when?

This is proving somewhat difficult to establish. The most detailed information I have from BT is that there will be fibre to the cabinet on Rattlesden Road in the first quarter of the financial year 2018/19, so this time next year, giving speeds of up to 80Mbps. The Village Hall/Chapel Lane area is promised fibre to the cabinet in the second quarter of 2017/18, i.e. this summer, with speeds greater than 24Mbps. Though there's no sign of anything happening yet.

For the parts of the village on the 01359 code the picture is less rosy. In the Park Road area there appear to be no plans to do anything in the current funding round beyond what is already in place - leaving residents on speeds of 2-5Mbps. On the other hand the church/rectory area is promised speeds of 24Mbps in third quarter of 2017/18.

The situation is highly fluid, so don't quote me on any of this!

It has also been a lively year on the planning front. As many of you may be aware, the government has declared that Mid Suffolk's local plan to be out of date, as Mid Suffolk did not have a 5 year forward land supply sufficient to meet new government targets for house building. Because of this there is now a presumption in favour of sustainable development.

Obviously this has the potential to conflict with Drinkstone's status as a village in the countryside, under which any development of housing for sale on the open market is not allowed. In the 9 months since the local plan was overturned by the men from the ministry in London, we have received 3 planning applications to date which would, if approved, have resulted in 7 new houses being built in the village - equivalent to another half a Cherry Tree estate.

As a council we have argued strongly that Drinkstone does not meet the criteria for sustainable development as set out in Mid Suffolk's core strategy and in the National Planning Policy Framework. To date our arguments have been successful, and all 3 applications have been refused. One applicant appealed to the planning inspectorate. Although the inspector dismissed the appeal, his ruling on whether Drinkstone is a sustainable location for market housing was finely balanced, and I believe that we will face increasing difficulty in maintaining this position.

The only way in which we, as a community, can have a real say in the type and location of new housing in the village is by developing what is called a neighbourhood plan. This is not an updating of the parish plan we produced in 2008. Unlike a parish plan, a neighbourhood plan has force in law and Mid Suffolk and other planning authorities have to take its recommendations into account when considering any planning application affecting the parish.

Producing a neighbourhood plan is not a trivial undertaking. It would require time, effort and money far in excess of what we needed to produce the parish plan. I believe we should begin to think about it, particularly if planning applications begin to be approved. I don't believe that all development is bad, but I also believe that we as a community should have more power to influence what sort of houses are built, rather than leaving to the whim of individual developers. After all, they will build what makes them the biggest profit, not necessarily the sort of houses we want or need.

Finally I would like to thank my fellow councillors for their enthusiasm, dedication and hard work over the last year. We are a small council with limited responsibilities, but the efforts of this team mean we can maintain what is and hopefully contribute more to make Drinkstone a good place to live in.