

Cockfield Parish Council
Chair's report for the Annual Parish Meeting 16 May 2024

1. Introduction:

In May 2023 we welcomed 3 new Councillors, Sarah Fletcher, Dale Baber and Nic Knight and Paul Clover as a newly elected District Councillor. We thank Sarah, Dale, Nic and Paul for taking on their role with great enthusiasm. They have however been helped enormously by the ongoing commitment and support of Ralph Turner, Robin Morley, Joe Brinkley, Janne Cutting Keyton, Andy Golding, District Councillor Margaret Maybury and the Parish Clerk Steve Ball. Working together we have made good progress on many matters and we can now report the following.

IT: Website, Broadcasts, Emails – For more than a decade the village has had the benefit of the village website, this being owned, designed and managed by Neil Ashton. Following Neil's decision to move away from the village, and in consultation with the Cockfield Community the Parish Council agreed to take on future responsibility for the website. The website is now owned by the Parish Council and all costs are now borne by the Parish Council. As part of the transition a new hosting provider is in place and the opportunity is being taken for all Parish Councillors to move to a cockfield.org.uk email address for Parish Council business. I would like to thank all Councillors for agreeing to this improvement and we all thank Councillor Dale Baber took on the lead role in this project. We also thank the Parish Clerk Steve Ball, Councillor Dale Baber and Matt Green from the Cockfield Community, for being trained up to send out Community Broadcasts, these previously undertaken by Neil Ashton.

Planning: The Parish Council is one of a dozen or so consultees on planning applications and we have continued to see a steady stream of applications throughout the year. Whether we support or object like everyone else we wait to see the outcome. There is no pattern and occasionally we are very disappointed with not only with a decision but also with the manner in which developments are then carried out.

We make no comment on the detail of individual applications however we had concerns about Babergh approving 3 additional dwellings on Great Green adjacent to Mortimer Close. Following strong representations we had on site meetings with representatives from both Babergh Planning and Suffolk Highways in order to put on record our concerns and to understand better why approval was given. Our concerns were somewhat borne out later with the manner in which verges were damaged and trees were removed and this did lead to some enforcement action from Babergh.

We can now only look to seek the best long term outcome, however we were pleased that Babergh have imposed a Legal Charge of £20k on the developer as recompense for the loss of biodiversity. This £20k can only be spent on improving biodiversity eg trees, hedgerows, ponds and the like and Babergh have offered the £20k to Cockfield Parish Council to be spent within 5 years. This appears to have good potential for being a worthwhile project within the village but one that will take a good deal of thought. Our thinking on this is at a very early stage.

Babergh and Mid Suffolk Joint Local Plan has now been agreed, it is in force and it remains to be seen what an impact this will have throughout the District. Planning applications will continue to be a prime focus for the Parish Council.

Finally new housing has been completed in the village, including much needed additional social housing and we welcome all new residents to the village.

Jeffreys Green: The Jeffreys Green development is well established and we were very pleased to receive confirmation that Jeffreys Green is now officially registered as our ninth village green and the Village Sign on Parsonage Green has been updated accordingly. The bus shelter at Jeffreys Green has been completed and I would thank the Parish Clerk Steve Ball in particular for his tenacity in dealing with solicitors on that project.

Allotments: The allotments have been established now for 12 months but last summer was a challenge as we did not have a water supply other than rainfall. A supply was provided in October, coincidentally immediately before a very wet Winter. We are optimistic that weather permitting this year will see 10 well established and maintained plots. Whether or when to increase the number of plots is a decision for later.

Maintenance: Geographically Cockfield is one of the very largest villages in Suffolk and general maintenance work is a very significant part of Parish Council expenditure.

We take care to use local contractors whenever possible. There is an ongoing programme of grass cutting and the like but we also have undertaken specific works an example being the refurbishment of the Bandstand on the Great Green.

We thank the many volunteers who give their time freely on various activities some of which are perhaps more visible to others eg those who pick litter, maintain Earls Meadow and some whom are perhaps less visible to others eg members of the football club who undertake work in and around the storage shed and inside the pavilion.

Finances: For the past four years the Council has been able to keep the precept, the proportion of the Overall Council Tax which is allocated to the Parish Council unchanged. However, inflation has finally caught up with the Council and we have increased the precept by 4% for the year 2024/25. The precept represents about 6% of Council Tax hence the increase represents about 0.25% of the total Council Tax.

Any increase is regrettable but with all costs, particularly labour and materials all increasing markedly in recent times an increase had to come about at some time.

The rules for discretionary spend are very tight, rightly so and we ensure that our spend is made mainly within and for the benefit of the Parish. In the past year we have made material donations to the School, CATEY Pre School and the Village Group when they took over the running of the Shop, We once again thank our Internal Auditor Lyndon Mills for his auditing of our accounts.

Village Events and Community Engagement

Being open and transparent and welcoming of inputs from all members of the community is how we have gone about our business. We were very pleased to be named Suffolk's Small Village of the Year by SALC, the Suffolk Association of Local Councils. In recognition of the award the Parish Council organized the Small Village of the Year event in January and the turnout from the village on the day was immense. We thank all the organisations in the village who came along and showcased what they do. It was a big effort and summed up the can do spirit that exists in so many quarters within the village. It was also very pleasing that we made the front page of the Bury Free Press and that a number of groups in the village were able to recruit new members and volunteers.

The Village of the Year Event was perhaps the most obvious example of the Parish Council working with others but there are other examples. We were delighted to have good weather and good turnout for the Kings Coronation event on the Great Green in May last year. We thank everyone who helped organize this successful event particularly Councillor Janne Cutting Keyton. The Parish Council has a good working relationship with the School and we thank Councillor Robin Morley for working with the school on a project to plant a tree and snowdrops, a number of the children being actively involved. We have established a good working relationship with John Ward the Acting Leader of Babergh District Council who attended both our November meeting and the Village of the Year Event as indeed did Sally Longmate the CEO of SALC. Having the ability to contact Leaders in Babergh and SALC direct is clearly useful providing it is used only very sparingly.

Ian Levett

Chair, Cockfield Parish Council

May 2024