

Beech Parish Council

Annual Report 2019/20

As we near the end of the parish council's financial year on 31st March, I am pleased to provide this summary of the council's activities over the past twelve months.

Election of the new parish council

Parish council elections were held in May 2019. Standing down from the council were David Woodroffe (the chairman), Ian Hardy and David Fazakerley. The council thanks these gentlemen for their years of valuable service, especially David Woodroffe, who was a councillor for 12 years and chairman for 8 years.

Re-elected unopposed were Ruth Duffin, Daniel Gordon and Graham Webb, with Tony Ransley elected, unopposed, for the first time. Subsequently Graham Webb was elected as chairman and Alana Coombes was co-opted as a fifth councillor. Two more are still needed!

Neighbourhood Plan

The first public consultation on the draft Neighbourhood Plan was completed in April 2019. After its amendment by the parish council in the light of comments received, East Hampshire District Council (EHDC) conducted a second public consultation on the Plan in July to September 2019.

The draft Plan, together with the further consultation comments, is now with the Independent Examiner, an experienced planning professional, who is deciding what further amendments need to be made to the Plan in order to make it fully compliant with national planning policy and compatible with EHDC's current Local Plan. As part of the process we hosted, for the Examiner, a public hearing on aspects of the Plan at the village hall on 12 February 2020.

Publication of the Independent Examiner's report and recommendations is imminent. If the Plan, with amendments, meets the statutory criteria there will then be a parish referendum on whether to implement the Plan.

EHDC New Local Plan 2017-2036

In March 2019 the parish council submitted extensive comments, including some firm objections (including to a proposed housing site on the A339 on the Alton side of the parish boundary), as part of EHDC's first public consultation on its draft new Local Plan.

Then in September 2019 the council commented during EHDC's consultation on ten candidate large housing development sites, including a strong objection to the site (for up to 1,200 houses) in Chawton parish, immediately south of Bushy Leaze Wood.

We expect that the next draft of EHDC's new Local Plan will be published in summer 2020.

Development

Since the last Annual Parish Meeting the council has considered 25 planning applications sited within the parish. These can be broken down into:

- Eleven applications concerning the construction of new houses or other buildings (this figure includes multiple applications at some sites);
- Six applications for extensions, annexes, outbuildings or conversions;
- Four applications seeking Lawful Development Certificates for existing use;
- One application concerning change of use of non-residential land;
- One application concerning groundworks on non-residential land;
- One application for work to trees covered by Tree Preservation Orders; and
- One application for the removal of an occupancy condition at a house.

The council also commented on a planning application just beyond the parish boundary for the establishment of a traveller site.

As the emerging Beech Neighbourhood Plan has progressed, the council has commented to EHDC on where planning applications breach the Plan's proposed policies. Until the Plan is in final form EHDC may give its policies only limited weight when coming to its planning decisions. Recent planning decisions have reinforced the importance of bringing the Neighbourhood Plan into force as quickly as possible.

Roads and Footpaths

The parish council had Hampshire Highways install additional road signs and whitelining with the aim of slowing down traffic (and protecting pedestrians) on Medstead Road and Kings Hill, deterring HGVs from using the village as a through route, and preventing vehicles from using the track from the head of Wellhouse Road down to Medstead Road. This work is being paid for from EHDC's S106 developer contributions earmarked for Beech.

Most people in Beech seem to agree that, longer term, the village needs more substantial traffic calming, footpath and/or road safety measures. After some preliminary investigative work and much debate in council, it was decided to take forward a project to further improve road safety in the village by forming a Working Group for the task. Following a village presentation on 24th January 2020 the Road Safety Working Group was set up, currently with nine members (all bar one being non-councillors). The Group has started the initial information gathering stage. It is currently seeking a representative from Kings Hill.

In February the council responded to EHDC's consultation on its Local Walking & Cycling Infrastructure Plan. The gist of our response was that providing walking and cycling infrastructure within village like Beech (where there is practically none existing) is equally, if not more, important to local residents as putting in place the long distance routes set out in EHDC's Plan.

Bushy Leaze Wood

The council applied to EHDC to have the privately-owned northwestern corner of Bushy Leaze Wood registered as an Asset of Community Value. This was to give the village first right of refusal to buy this land if and when it next comes up for sale. Unfortunately EHDC ruled against the application, on the grounds that the public use of footpaths through the land does not qualify the whole of the land to be a community asset.

The council has, however, applied to Hampshire County Council (HCC) for the footpaths through this land to be registered as public rights of way. HCC has a large backlog of these applications, and so it may take some years before they tackle our application.

Community

In June 2019 the council organised a training session by St John Ambulance on how to use our defibrillator installed at the village hall. Over 20 people attended. Note that the machine is designed to be used by untrained people – it talks to you, giving you the correct instructions.

Finance

The parish council decided to raise its precept to £15,410 for the year commencing 1st April 2020, up from £13,400. This is because the council has been operating at a loss in recent years, and we do not wish to deplete our reserves any further as we expect to wish to put them towards capital projects. Regular internal and external checks continue to be made in order to ensure that all the correct financial procedures are being followed.

Acknowledgements

We thank our East Hampshire District Councillor, Tony Costigan, and our Hampshire County Councillor, Mark Kemp-Gee, for their continuing support for the parish at district and county council levels.

I would like to thank my fellow parish councillors and our parish clerk, Louisa Thomson, for their energy, diligence and support over this past year.