

## **Beech Parish Council**

### **Annual Report 2020/21**

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

#### **Parish Council Meetings & COVID-19**

Just before our Annual Parish Meeting scheduled for 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020, the Government ordered us all into the first lockdown. The parish council meeting of 23<sup>rd</sup> March was hurriedly held by email (!), and from April 2020 our meetings were all held by online video call, not in person, as permitted under emergency Government legislation. That same legislation allowed us to cancel the 2020 Annual Parish Meeting, and to defer the 'annual' parish council meeting (at which the chair is elected and other formal administrative business conducted) from May 2020 to May 2021.

As things stand, the emergency legislation will expire on 7<sup>th</sup> May 2021 and we will resume physical council meetings later that month. But it is possible that the legislation will be extended and we continue to meet online.

In September 2020 we were delighted to co-opt Ingrid McCormack as our sixth parish councillor, leaving just one vacancy unfilled.

#### **General Power of Competence & By-Election**

The parish council has long known that it will be advantageous for it to acquire the General Power of Competence (GPC), which will expand its powers of action and allow it to carry out all of the tasks necessary to fulfil its road safety project ambitions. For example, without the GPC the council does not have the legal power to contribute funds towards the construction of new roadside footpaths.

The council needs at least five of its seven seats filled by elected councillors in order to acquire the GPC. In late February our two co-opted councillors resigned and, following a request to EHDC by a sufficient number of residents, a by-election will be held on 6<sup>th</sup> May (alongside the county council elections) to fill those two seats plus the other seat already vacant. Nominations for candidates opened today (22<sup>nd</sup> March) and completed nomination papers must be delivered to EHDC by 8<sup>th</sup> April – if you are interested in standing, please contact the clerk for the nomination paperwork. We hope that our two former co-opted councillors will put themselves forward for election, and that we will achieve our full complement of seven elected councillors. If we have more than three candidates for the three vacant seats, residents will need to vote on 6<sup>th</sup> May. If so, please make sure you do vote!

#### **Neighbourhood Plan**

The Independent Examiner produced her report on the Beech Neighbourhood Plan in early May 2020, and we amended the Plan accordingly. Later in May EHDC published its Decision Notice, accepting the Plan, meaning that the Plan is now given significant weight in EHDC's planning decisions. We have already seen that occurring in practice.

The final stage, a referendum on the Plan among Beech residents, was delayed by COVID-19, but will now be held on 6<sup>th</sup> May alongside the county council elections. When approved (by a simple majority) in the referendum, the Plan effectively becomes an integral part of EHDC's Local Plan. Please make sure you vote, and please vote in favour of the Plan!

## **Development**

Since March 2020 the parish council has considered 16 planning applications sited within the parish. These can be broken down as follows:

- Two applications concerning the construction of new houses;
- Four applications for extensions, or conversions of outbuildings;
- Six applications for work to trees covered by Tree Preservation Orders;
- Two applications for a change of commercial use;
- One application for the installation of solar panels; and
- One application for the removal of an occupancy condition at a house.

We have also considered five appeals against EHDC's refusal of planning applications:

- Two appeals concerning the construction of new houses;
- Two appeals concerning changes of use of non-residential land; and
- One appeal concerning the establishment of a traveller site (in Bentworth parish).

We have also commented on the planning application to build a waste incinerator in Froyle parish, and were consulted on minor matters concerning the Lord Mayor Treloar housing development in Alton, immediately south of Ackender Wood.

There have not been any further public developments on EHDC's draft new Local Plan (which will run to 2036) in the past year. But the council did submit comments in 2020 on the Government's Planning White Paper.

## **Roads and Footpaths**

The Road Safety Working Group, reporting to the parish council, made good progress in the past year. It would have been faster progress had Hampshire County Council (HCC, our chief stakeholder, being the owner of the roads) not been working at reduced speed & capacity owing to COVID-19 restrictions over the entire period.

The Working Group's efforts have culminated in a report that sets out a 'preferred solution' for a pedestrian pathway running the length of the village along Medstead Road and Kings Hill. Broadly, this solution consists of:

- New off-road footpaths at the edge of the woodlands on the south side of Medstead Road; and

- ‘Virtual footpaths’ in the centre of the village and on King’s Hill, where there is no room for separate off-road footpaths. The virtual footpaths are envisaged to be wider versions of what is currently seen on the ‘straight’, but with coloured tarmac and possibly a low kerb instead of a white line, to further emphasise to traffic that this is space shared with pedestrians. Similar schemes are successfully employed elsewhere (outside Hampshire).

This preferred solution has been shared with HCC and is about to undergo a formal ‘safety audit’ by them, which will reveal whether and how the concept will need to be adapted in order to be acceptable. Special thanks to Charles Cockburn, Ian Gibson, Nick Ward and Malcolm Ward-Close of the Working Group for their splendid efforts over the past year.

Meanwhile:

- The council has established that the owner of the western section of Bushy Leaze Wood fully supports, in principle, a roadside footpath on his land. Further discussions need to be had with Forestry England concerning land owned by them.
- We are examining the case for installing automated SpeedWatch-style cameras on Medstead Road, in the event that we can persuade the local police to provide supporting enforcement.
- We continue to collect vehicle speed data from the automated Speed Limit Reminder sign.
- We are engaging with HCC on the removal of dead ash trees alongside the footpath down to the A339. We hope to get HCC to cut back and tidy up all the vegetation alongside the path.
- We have established a good relationship with Alton Ramblers, who have assigned a Footpath Warden to Beech. She regularly walks all the cross-country footpaths in the parish and carries out light clearance of vegetation.

## **Finance**

The parish council decided to maintain its precept unchanged at £15,410 for the year commencing 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021, on the basis that some residents may have been hit financially by the COVID-19 pandemic. This should not impact unduly on the council’s reserves, which we are keeping ready for road safety project expenditure as and when needed.

## **Other Matters**

We contributed to HCC’s consultation on its new Local Transport Plan, to cover the period to 2050 – a period that potentially encompasses major change concerning climate, transport technology and lifestyle. In particular we urged them not to forget the needs of rural communities largely dependant on the private car for mobility.

We contributed to NHS Hampshire’s 2020 preliminary consultation “Modernising our Hospitals & Health Services”, mainly to lambast them for totally ignoring any contribution that could be made by Alton Community Hospital (or even acknowledging its existence). There will be a further public consultation on this subject later this year, which I urge you to engage with.

We supported an initiative driven by resident Charles Cockburn to lobby Hampshire Constabulary to devote more resources to tackling crime (of all sorts) in market towns and the countryside, rather than focus almost exclusively on the larger towns and cities.

We adopted a new Code of Conduct for councillors, based on a model developed in 2020 by the Local Government Association.

### **Acknowledgements**

Many thanks to my fellow parish councillors and to our clerk, Louisa Thomson, for coping well with the difficult circumstances we have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I would also like to thank our county councillor, Mark Kemp-Gee, and our district councillor, Tony Costigan, for their wise advice and valuable support over the past year.

***Graham Webb***

*Chairman, Beech Parish Council*