

Beech Parish Council Annual Report 2021-22

As we come to the end of the parish council's financial year on March 31, here is my annual report on the council's activities over the past year.

Parish council meeting arrangements

The parish council resumed meeting in person at the village hall on May 24 2021, following the expiry earlier in May of Government emergency legislation permitting virtual council meetings during the Covid-19 pandemic. Up to February we were meeting in the main hall so as to allow plenty of social distancing, but from March we are meeting in the bar area now that Covid restrictions have been lifted (and the Bridge Club has reclaimed the main hall on Monday evenings).

For now, the council has decided that meetings will be held only in person, with no facility for people to participate using Zoom or equivalent (a 'hybrid meeting'). This is because of the technical difficulty (for a hybrid meeting) of making every person in the room, and every online attendee, able to both speak and hear every other participant.

We have brought forward council meetings by 30 minutes, to start at 7pm, with public question time at 6.45pm. Can I remind villagers that **parish council meetings are open to all members of the public to attend**. Some people seem not to be aware of this. There are opportunities for members of the public to speak on all agenda items, and to ask the council questions on any subject. We would like to see more of you attending!

Parish council by-election

The parish council held its first ever contested by-election on May 6 2021, and the two former co-opted councillors, Alana Coombes & Ingrid McCormack, plus Kim Eakers were elected to the three vacant seats.

With the necessary full set of elected councillors, at its following meeting the parish council voted to adopt the General Power of Competence. This expands the council's powers of action to allow it to perform, for example, the tasks necessary to carry out its new footways project.

Planning policy

Also on May 6 2021 the referendum on the **Beech Neighbourhood Plan** was held, having been delayed from 2020 by Government Covid-19 restrictions. The referendum result was 293 votes 'For' the Plan, and only 32 votes 'Against' – reflecting strong support in the parish for the Plan. East Hampshire District Council then adopted our Plan, so that it now forms part of EHDC's own Local Plan, and our Plan is now consulted when EHDC considers all planning applications in the parish. In November parish councillors gave EHDC planning officers a guided tour of Beech, so that they could get to know the village better.

EHDC continues to develop its own new Local Plan (covering the years up to 2038), with the next (and final) new draft Local Plan document now due to be published in November 2022. The parish council has liaised with EHDC on this subject regularly over the past year. In particular we have continued to oppose strongly the proposal to build up to 1200 new houses on **Chawton Park Farm**, just outside the parish on the other side of Bushy Leaze Wood. We played a significant role in persuading EHDC to remove from Chawton Park Farm the status of 'preferred large housing site', so that EHDC is still evaluating a wider range of large housing sites for possible inclusion in its new Local Plan.

Meanwhile parish councillors participated in an EHDC workshop on a housing site that will almost certainly appear in the new Local Plan – called '**Land at Brick Kiln Lane & Basingstoke Road**', within the Alton Town boundary (but adjoining Beech parish) in the fields below Hungry Copse, between Pertuis Avenue and Will Hall Farm. Our aim was to minimise the housing to be built on the part of the site that faces across the valley towards Beech, and we are cautiously confident that EHDC and the developers will comply with that aim.

For a second time we objected strongly to the proposed **Veolia waste incinerator** on the A31 at Froyle, which has now thankfully been rejected by Hampshire County Councillors (although the company may lodge an appeal).

Planning applications in Beech

Between March 2021 and February 2022 the parish council has considered 24 planning applications, broken down as follows:

- Two for the construction of new houses;
- Twelve for extensions, alterations or the conversion of outbuildings;
- Four for work to trees covered by preservation orders;
- Four relating to permitted development rights or the variation of planning conditions;
- One relating to agricultural construction; and
- One for a change of commercial use.

Roads and footpaths

In late 2021, and with the support of our county and district councillors, the parish council obtained permission to hold a trial of **AutoSpeedWatch speed cameras** on Medstead Road and Kings Hill. We consider the trial a success, and it demonstrated an ability to monitor average speeds of vehicles travelling through the village. We produced a report on the trial, which we reviewed with Hampshire's Deputy Police & Crime Commissioner at our January council meeting. Our next task is to work with Hampshire Constabulary, if they will let us, with a view to getting the equipment accepted as a valid basis for Community SpeedWatch speed enforcement (i.e. resulting in official police warning letters to offenders). Many thanks to my fellow councillor Tony Ransley for his unstinting work on this topic.

The parish council has written to Hampshire County Council supporting a campaign for **20mph speed limits** in residential areas, which could include parts of Beech. HCC is

embarking on a review of its policy on speed limits, and there could well be change to permit new 20mph zones.

The Road Safety Working Group continued with the **New Footways Project**, for new on-road footways in the village centre and on Kings Hill, and for new off-road footways at the edge of the woodlands on the south side of Medstead Road. In May 2021 the scheme concept passed an initial Hampshire Highways safety audit, with the exception of proposals for the top of Kings Hill (which are deferred for now). The council then put the scheme out to public consultation in the village, in September/October. 39% of Beech households responded to the consultation. The results showed strong support (over 85%) for the proposed new footways, with numerous constructive comments and helpful caveats also supplied.

Since December the Road Safety Working Group has been engaged with Hampshire Highways on developing the scheme design. We are establishing what, precisely, Hampshire Highways will permit to be constructed on their roads and land, and what they will be prepared to maintain. We are endeavouring to establish sufficient detail to allow us to confirm an application we have made to EHDC for Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funds to put towards constructing the first stages of the footways project.

The Road Safety Working Group has also completed a survey of Medstead Road and Kings Hill, and has been developing ideas for an off-road path at the top of Kings Hill, up to the Abbey. Many thanks to Charles Cockburn, Ian Gibson and Malcolm Ward-Close for their continued sterling efforts on the Working Group.

The **footpath down to the A339** has been given a major clean-up, and we plan to have a more frequent clearing of the vegetation alongside it. Dead hawthorn and diseased ash trees, between the path and the road, have recently been cleared by HCC.

Climate change

The Climate Change Working Group was formed in autumn 2021, and is developing a number of strands of work. The aim is to develop initiatives for Beech residents to play their part in meeting the Government's climate change targets in the period up to 2050. Many thanks to my fellow councillor Kim Eakers for his drive in setting up and leading this Working Group.

The first project has been a thermal imaging survey of Beech houses in February. Those residents who signed up (over 60) have had a survey to identify areas of excessive heat loss that are ripe for taking energy-saving action. There will be a workshop in the village hall on March 27 on the survey results, including presentations on available energy-saving and carbon-reduction measures and technologies.

Policing

I mentioned that the Deputy Police & Crime Commissioner was at our January meeting. In addition to discussing speeding with him, councillors and members of the public set out for him what our other priorities are for future policing improvements. Principally these were:

1. A named community policing officer for Beech, who should also be the link person for our Neighbourhood Watch; and
 2. Better police follow-up on crime incidents reported via the 111 phone system.
- We will see what transpires in the coming year!

Finance

The parish council decided to raise its Council Tax precept from £15,410 to £17,500 for financial year starting on April 1 2022, after freezing the precept last year. The increase is needed to cover the council's expected regular expenditure, taking into account increasing inflation over the past two years. Overall, the total council tax bills for residents of Beech are close to the average for comparable properties in East Hampshire.

In conclusion....

The parish council has been very busy over the past year, and I thank my fellow parish councillors and our clerk, Louisa Thomson, for increasingly working together as a good team. I also need to thank our county councillor, Mark Kemp-Gee, and our district councillor, Tony Costigan, for helping us greatly in our dealings with HCC and EHDC officers over the past year.