

Minutes of the Annual Parish Meeting of BEECH held on Monday, 18th MARCH 2024

PRESENT: Councillor Graham Webb, Chairman
Councillor Kim Eakers
Councillor Alana Coombes
Councillor Tony Ransley
Councillor Ingrid McCormack
Councillor Ruth Duffin
Councillor Nikki Pickard

Hampshire County Councillor Mark Kemp-Gee
District Councillor Tony Costigan

Louisa Thomson, Clerk to the Council

OPEN MEETING -The Chairman welcomed everyone and declared the meeting open.

CONFIRMATION OF MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 20th March 2023, copies of which had previously been circulated, **were proposed as a true record by Councillor Ingrid McCormack, Seconded by Councillor Kim Eakers, agreed and signed by Chairman Graham Webb.**

CHAIRMAN'S ANNUAL REPORT

Beech Parish Council Annual Report 2023-24

As another financial year draws to a close on March 31, here is my annual report on the parish council's activities over the past year. There have been 12 parish council meetings since my last annual report on March 20 2023.

Councillors and elections

All of the seven parish council seats were up for election in May 2023. Five of the six sitting parish councillors (Cllrs Coombes, Eakers, McCormack, Ransley and myself) plus one new candidate (Nikki Pickard) were elected unopposed for a new four-year term. I was re-elected as chairman of the council. Shortly afterwards former parish councillor Ruth Duffin was co-opted onto the council, and so we now (once again) have our full complement of seven.

Planning applications in Beech

Since my last annual report the parish council has commented on 14 planning applications, broken down as follows:

- One outline application for the construction of six new houses on land behind 24 Wellhouse Road (still awaiting a decision from EHDC);
- One for the construction of a new infill house;
- Two for the demolition of an existing house and replacing it with a larger new house;
- Three for the construction of house extensions;
- Two for the construction of detached garages/barns;
- Two for work to trees covered by preservation orders; and
- Three for various miscellaneous outside facilities.

We also commented on an appeal to the Planning Inspectorate against EHDC's decision to take enforcement action where there had been a breach of planning regulations.

Planning policy

The parish council recently commented on EHDC's draft Local Plan 2021-2040, for which the consultation period ended on March 4. Our principal comments on the draft plan were threefold:

1. Objecting strongly to the proposed building of 90 houses on 'Land at Whitedown Lane', a site in Beech parish but adjoining Alton, wedged between Pertuis Avenue (aka Whitedown Lane) and Ackender Wood. At present, building on this site would not be permitted, as it falls in the gap between Alton and Beech that was independently endorsed and formalised in the Beech Neighbourhood Development Plan in 2020 (and subsequently accepted and approved by EHDC in 2021). The site is a highly visible part of the undeveloped rural gap between the settlements, and we cannot fathom how EHDC can justify trashing the currently established mapped gap.
2. Cautiously accepting the proposed building of 150 houses on 'Land at Brick Kiln Lane', a site in Alton on the north side of the junction between Pertuis Avenue and Basingstoke Road (i.e. below Hungry Copse). We are relatively relaxed about this development so long all or most of the housing is on the east of the site behind Will Hall Farm (alongside the recently-built Hop Fields Place estate), as previously suggested by the developer. We have, however, given notice that we will object strongly if unscreened housing is proposed on the hillside facing west across the valley towards Beech village.
3. Suggesting that EHDC is looking for brand new sites for too many houses (3,500 houses versus an identified need for 2,857, to be 'on the safe side'). In particular, we strongly object to the Beech-Alton gap being trashed just to provide 90 more houses to needlessly inflate an already over-large contingency figure.

Our comments in full are appended to the minutes of the parish council meeting on February 19 (see beechpc.com/council-minutes).

Pleasingly, the new draft Local Plan no longer proposes Chawton Park Farm as a housing site. You may recall that, at one stage, EHDC was proposing to build up to 1,200 houses just the other side of Bushy Leaze Wood. Our lobbying efforts seem to have achieved results.

The parish council also participated in workshops to develop the East Hampshire Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan – identifying potential longer distance cycling and walking routes in the district that might be developed. This work has now been taken over by Hampshire County Council (HCC) and we await news of any proposals

Roads and footpaths

Beech's **AutoSpeedWatch** speed camera system has had a very successful past year.

My colleague Councillor Tony Ransley and his team of volunteers have been consistently providing data on offending vehicles to Hampshire police, with the operating hours of the cameras now extended by battery power augmenting the solar panel units. Beech has been such a successful pilot of this technology that, in an initiative driven by our district councillor Tony Costigan, EHDC has provided similar camera systems to several more villages in the district. And parishes across Hampshire have been contacting our team for advice on setting up AutoSpeedWatch, no doubt prompted in part by Beech's appearance a couple of times on BBC South Today. Also, we have managed to insert AutoSpeedWatch into the Hampshire Community SpeedWatch Forum, by forming an association with the Bentworth CSW team.

Discussions with the police, EHDC and HCC haven't yet led to a process being developed whereby offending vehicles can systematically be reported and then followed up with warning letters (or other sanctions). This is not something that Hampshire police central office currently feel able to deploy resources to support. However, Hampshire police are meeting with colleagues in Gloucestershire where the system is managed by the community police. Meanwhile Councillors Costigan and Ransley are pursuing other avenues for enforcement activities. Happily for us, with support from the district police, the local Alton-based community police team have all received speed gun training. They are now regularly deployed in Beech, particularly at times when the most frequent offenders pass through, with some considerable success.

The parish council is proud of the fact that its speed management system has reduced the number of speeding vehicles through the village by more than eighty percent. We are also pleased to be playing a leading role in promoting AutoSpeedWatch use in Hampshire and we look forward to developing the system further in the coming year.

I'll turn now to the parish council's **New Footways Project**. Last year I reported that we had secured funds from EHDC's Strategic Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) Fund, to be supplemented by money from the parish council's Neighbourhood Portion CIL funds, to put in place **on-road footways** in the village centre and on Kings Hill. Since then we have agreed with HCC that the scheme should be extended to run all the way through the village from 24 Medstead Road to 72 Kings Hill. The detailed design for this scheme, including all road markings and signage, has been agreed with HCC and has passed their safety audits. Progress has been slower than we would have liked, but HCC has advised that the scheme is due to be implemented this spring or summer.

Also last year I reported that the parish council was pursuing the construction of a **new off road footway** alongside the Forestry England land between the bridleway at 100 Medstead Road and the main entrance to Bushy Leaze Wood. We applied to EHDC for a grant from their Strategic CIL funds to pay for the majority of this work. Unfortunately our application was rejected. EHDC's view is that legislation dictates that neither Strategic CIL funds, nor our own Neighbourhood Portion CIL funds, are permitted to be spent on the design of infrastructure (or other pre-construction work). We have been unable to find other sources of funds to help pay for HCC's design and survey work, and so we have deferred any further work on off-road footways pending the introduction of an on-road footway along the stretch of road in question.

Recently HCC announced a new policy on creating new **20mph speed limits** in residential areas. Essentially, HCC will be open to proposals from town and village councils for 20mph zones where there is demonstrable public support (which we have in Beech), but priority will be given to areas where (among other things) there is a history of accidents resulting in serious injury or death (which Beech does not have). We intend to investigate, through the Community SpeeeWatch Forum, whether we can pilot a 20mph limit alongside our on-road footway and AutoSpeedWatch system.

We also supported an initiative by Medstead Parish Council to lobby HCC for a **7.5 tonne vehicle weight limit** (except for access) on the country roads around Medstead, including the roads through Beech. Sadly HCC has declined, citing the difficulty of police enforcement of the restrictions.

Finally, on footpaths, the parish council installed a **handrail up the steep bridleway** from Medstead Road to the Recreation Ground. Hopefully this has been assisting pedestrians in the recent very wet weather, when the bridleway gets slippery underfoot. Many thanks go to the volunteers who installed the handrail, mostly from Alton Ramblers, and to HCC Countryside Services Team, who supervised the work and gave a grant of £400, about half the cost.

Water supply

Over the years, individuals have occasionally complained to the parish council about excessive water pressure that causes frequent leaks in the home. And we all experience the regular water main leaks that shut Medstead Road for repairs. Last summer we were subjected to some more intense lobbying, and Nick Ward volunteered to lead a council working group to investigate the extent of the water pressure issue. A questionnaire was issued to all households before Christmas and, after analysis, it was confirmed that there is a systematic problem at the lower end of the village, closest to the pumping station at Wyards Farm, where static water pressures can reach up to 14 bar.

On 7 March parish council representatives met with South East Water staff, here in Beech, to discuss the issue. South East Water has confirmed that there is both a high water pressure problem in Beech and a low pressure problem in Medstead, that need to be addressed. They have in mind a solution that, broadly, will raise water pressure in Medstead and on Kings Hill, whilst lowering water pressure on Medstead Road and Wellhouse Road. But it probably won't happen until 2025 at the earliest. We will liaise with South East Water on how excessive pressure leak problems will be tackled in the interim period.

Climate action

Beech's Home Energy CO2 self-assessment study continued over the past year. Just 20 households reported their 2022 CO2 emissions assessments, a significant reduction from the 54 in 2021 (as many just reported that they had not made any further energy saving efforts in 2022). Those that did report for 2022 recorded an average 32% reduction in CO2. The exercise has recently been repeated for 2023, with 14 households responding, and a further small reduction in CO2 emissions per household.

There was also a workshop in March 2023 at which residents were able to consult green energy experts. Many thanks to Councillor Kim Eakers for managing this initiative, which has certainly helped to educate and inform those residents who are receptive to climate change and energy saving issues, and to prompt some to take action.

Finance

The parish council decided to raise its Council Tax precept from £18,000 to £18,900 for the financial year starting on April 1 2024, a 5% increase to cover inflation-related increases to the council's regular expenditure. In addition to our regular expenditure we have spent around £8,800 of EHDC S106 funds (that were available to Beech) on transport-related matters such as batteries for the AutoSpeedWatch cameras and the radar Speed Indicator Device (SID), and on HCC's study on new roadside footpaths. At the end of this financial year on March 31 the parish council will have reserves of about £48,000, including around £23,500 of Neighbourhood Portion CIL funds, which will in due course must be spent on transport or social infrastructure in the parish. At least now we are earning a reasonable rate of interest on those reserves.

Acknowledgements

Thanks once again to all the people who have contributed positively to Beech parish council matters:

- Our district councillor, Tony Costigan, who is very responsive to, and supportive of, Beech's interests in faraway Petersfield;
- Our county councillor, Mark Kemp-Gee, who is equally responsive and supportive in equally faraway Winchester – but who has a larger bureaucratic organisation to contend with;

- Our invaluable volunteers on the Road Safety Working Group, the Climate Action Working Group, the AutoSpeedWatch team and now the Water Supply Working Group;
- Our volunteer internal auditor, Nigel Sillick;
- Our parish clerk, Louisa Thomson, who keeps us all in order; and finally
- My fellow parish councillors, all of whom decided to stick around at the last election, which I guess is a positive endorsement of the way the council is operating.

And a final special thank you to the late Ian Gibson, who sadly passed away in 2023. Ian was a very active parish councillor for many years, but even after stepping down he played a big role in putting together Beech's Neighbourhood Plan, and in driving forward our Road Safety Working Group. That's in addition to being one of the Village Hall trustees for many years, and generally getting involved in all village initiatives, always positively, knowledgeably and hands-on. He is much missed by all who knew him.

QUESTIONS ON REPORT – There were no questions.

Councillor Alana Coombes proposed a vote of thanks to Chairman Graham Webb.

REPORT FROM HAMPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCILLOR MARK KEMP-GEE

Thank you for the invitation to attend the Annual Parish Meeting.

- The Chairman's report is a testament to the achievements in the last year.
- Executive Member of Hampshire County Council Highways has had a one-to-one meeting with Councillor Ransley to see what has been achieved.
- Sorry the on-road footway is taking so long but hopefully will be completed in the spring.
- The County Council Council Tax has increased by 5% which is the maximum increase without a referendum. Two fifths is allocated to adult social care however the spend on this is much more, £600 million. Adult social care needs reform, reform of the finance package. Hampshire County Council are having to fund savings of £120 million from 2025 onwards, there is currently a consultation running. Increasingly more councils are going bust. Higher Council Tax is needed, more that 5% increase.
- 20MPH initiative – there isn't much support from the police to implement this. It would be funded by Parish Councils.
- Hampshire County Council have increased the budget by £15 million this year and for the next two years for Highways patching roads, this isn't a long term solution, more money needs to be invested.
- East Hampshire District Council have responded well to the Hampshire County Council consultation.
- Not in favour of the 1,200 new homes development at Neatham Down, there must be a better way to spread housing around the area.

REPORT FROM EAST HAMPSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCILLOR TONY COSTIGAN

- Brant Storage planning application – communicating with Planning Enforcement and will update the Parish Council.
- Thanks to the Parish Council for their efforts and great to see a full Council which is not the case everywhere.
- East Hampshire District Council Planning has undergone a complete overhaul, which is not excuse for being 'closed for business'. Send any outstanding planning applications and he will chase them.
- The new office move from Penns Place is happening, there are many items of office equipment which can be donated. Some screens have already been donated to the Alton Food Bank as people feel embarrassed and area also seeking advice not just food.
- AutoSpeedWatch – enquiries have been received from all parts of the country.
18 sets of cameras have been booked, some have been installed.
Hopefully the information from the cameras can be used to issue letters and hopefully fines of up to £1,000 for the worse offenders.
The cameras can be used to track cars across the district not just for speeding but for MOT, Road Tax and Insurance as well.
The scheme is being watched keenly.
Thank you to Councillor Ransley for his constant help.

THERE WERE NO MATTERS TO BE REFERRED TO PARISH COUNCIL MEETINGS

CLOSE OF MEETING -There being no further questions from the Public, the Chairman thanked everyone for their attendance and formally closed the meeting at 7.55pm.

Signed:.....
Kim Eakers
Chairman Beech Parish Council
Date: 17th March 2025