

MELDRETH PARISH COUNCIL

VILLAGE MEETING – MAY 2021

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

Council attendance and activities

We usually hold our Annual Village Meeting at this time of year but last year, in 2020, the Covid pandemic prevented a meeting from being held. So this report refers to a two year period since May 2019. The Council remains at full strength – we have nine councillors – and important contributions have I believe been delivered to our local community. There is a broad range of skills and backgrounds on our Council and I believe that this is the best formula for ensuring effective participation and governance in village life.

A lot of work goes on behind the scenes and this has been a busy two- year period for the Council. Overall Council attendance over this time has been well above 80 per cent, a similar level to previous years. I'd like to thank all my colleagues for their commitment and hard work on behalf of the community. I also need to thank volunteers who do not have Council seats but make essential contributions to village life and Council business through their various groups. Meldreth Futures, Meldreth Traffic, Speedwatch, Melwood, Rail Users, Footpaths and litter picking groups are clear examples but there are many others as well. Meldreth is a wonderful village and we are blessed with contributors to every aspect of living here. And I need to convey our thanks to our hard-working and committed County and District Councillors who play a major and much valued part in contributing both directly to our village community and in keeping us informed of what is going on at the County and District levels of local government, and how this might affect us at parish council level. So, my thanks to all concerned.

Covid pandemic

I would like to thank and to pay tribute to all of those who have helped our community during this most difficult time. Much valuable assistance – through support groups, food banks and the provision of repurposed technical equipment - has been given to local residents to help alleviate these problems. We all hope that we are now witnessing the beginning of the end of this crisis and it would be remiss of me not also to thank all our local residents for the parts they have played in helping to ensure that the virus did not get a hold of our own community.

Planning Issues

Two years ago I confirmed that our District Council had become able to demonstrate a five-year land supply. This status has been maintained and has continued to have the predicted consequence of dampening the flow of speculative developments. There has however been a steady flow of individual planning applications for property improvements and the Council's policy has been to support these whenever we can as we think it is important to ensure that

our housing stock is optimized and gives the community good value. As you will know, our role is not to approve or decline applications – this task belongs with the District Council, our local planning authority – but we are consulted for our opinion on all local planning applications and we do look at each of these very carefully and put our views and recommendations to the District Council. In addition to single applications there has been a small number of larger development proposals, for example, the possible redevelopment of the GoCold site next to the railway station. We recognize the need for the site to be brought back into productive use but we are concerned about the scale of the development and the issues of access onto nearby roads. There have been other developments in the High Street area, which, again, give us concern about the effects on local traffic and safety issues. As I have said, we always try to ensure a critical but constructive response to planning proposals whether or not initially we find favour with them.

There are, as you will know, several issues now on the planning agenda and these are a source of continuing concern to us. First, the emerging proposal by developers Thakeham to build 25,000 homes in our area is being carefully watched and we have council representatives on the group formed to protect the interests of Meldreth and other nearby communities who would be very adversely affected by the proposal if it proceeds in any significant way. The second issue arises from the recent “Call for Sites” in which a large number of sites have been put forward by landowners and others. We have given our initial response in respect of the 22 sites relating to Meldreth and are in readiness to contribute to the next stages of any discussions. It is fair to say that some of these proposals appear to us to be measured and sensible whereas others are not, in our opinion, in the interests of the local community. These issues have been reported in Meldreth Matters and we will ensure that the community is kept fully informed.

Village Projects

There have been no major infrastructure projects during the past two years but there are several unresolved issues, as previously reported. These include improving the footway over the railway bridge to Fieldgates. This might have been partly financed by contributions from the Marley Eternit scheme, had it gone ahead. Reconstructing this footway is not a task that should fall to a parish council – footways alongside roads are the responsibility of the County Highways department and we are not keen to shoulder the responsibilities of other local authorities if, unless and until it becomes absolutely necessary to do so. Besides which, improving the actual footway over the bridge would probably require major surgery to the bridge itself which lies well beyond our competence.

We remain concerned about traffic in the village and the risks that it presents to residents going about their daily business. Speeding, volumes and junctions are the main issues. We do have a committed and active Traffic Group as well as a Speedwatch volunteer group and within the last two years we have installed movable speed indicators both to deter violations but also to give us more reliable data about what is going on. It is clear that limited resources at Highways department level continue to have a material bearing on what can be achieved in this area. Potholes, footway defects, drain clearances and road flooding remain major nuisances but I can assure you that our Councillors responsible for those issues are doing all that they reasonably can to ensure that

pressure for progress is maintained on Highways and other authorities. A proposal we recently submitted to introduce traffic calming in Whitecroft Road was, unfortunately, declined as a Local Highways Initiative (along with a majority of proposals submitted by other local councils) but I can assure you that we will not be daunted by this and will continue to use our best efforts to improve these conditions.

Our Recreation ground continues to provide a valuable resource for families of all ages and of course for sports. We have a small group of Councillors responsible for this facility and to ensure that our equipment remains safe and in good order; they also investigate and recommend new facilities there and are in the current process of organising additional equipment both for children and older age groups.

Financial Report

In the papers you have our Clerk's report on the village finances. We may seem to have very generous reserves but our budget each year has been constructed to run down this surplus and we were able, for several years, not to impose an increase in our parish council tax, which is known as the precept. Last year we did introduce a small increase in the precept, as part of a longer-term plan to ensure a smooth transition between surplus reserves and a run down in those reserves, as our annual budget exceeds our generation of funds through the precept. This will require careful planning and we have revived a Council Finance Group, manned by a small group of parish councillors, to keep the Council's funding and financial strategy under continuing review in the future. No increase was made in our latest precept and you will see from your Council Tax bills that the Meldreth figure was the only ingredient to show a reduction compared with County, District, Police and Fire charges.

Mettle Hill

The Council continues to believe that the Mettle Hill site should be held for future opportunity use and safeguarded in the meantime. Mettle Hill remains a most important and potentially longer-term investment for the Council and you are of course entitled to continue to take an interest in its future. There has been little change in the underlying considerations so I hope you will forgive me for revisiting comments made in the past but which remain, in my view, very relevant to the present position.

Let me start by reminding ourselves about the underlying question of Council reserves. There are financial and audit rules that govern permitted levels of Council reserves. In the same way as charities can be challenged on having money they have not spent or have no agreed plans to spend, we are limited as to what can be legitimately held in our reserves unless we can justify that level by reference to actual decisions we have taken about using the money on defined projects. This protocol has a very obvious impact on the timing of any scheme to bring Mettle Hill into use and to thereby generate large surpluses. We have no suitable project or projects in mind at the moment and this has been one factor determining our strategy for the Mettle Hill site.

I need also to remind us about the difficult choices affecting the higher level authorities – District and County. Those authorities continue to have to make major political choices in their spending plans and I have no doubt that increasingly they would like to see parishes absorbing more of the financial burdens. Our strategy is quite a simple one – we will do what is necessary if and when it becomes necessary but it is not our strategy to sit on large piles of money, for which we as a local council have no immediate use, and perhaps unintentionally invite other authorities to relieve us of those surpluses. Nor rather obviously do we want to encourage any acceleration in any such process.

This – and importantly the issue of not being able to hold large unallocated reserves – has encouraged us to adopt a strategy, for the time being, of holding the Mettle Hill asset for future use. We believe that the Mettle Hill site will continue to at least maintain its utility and value in the longer-term if need be and that other, and perhaps better, choices may become available. So we intend to retain Mettle Hill for future development but will keep it under active review as part of the Council's funding and financial strategy. And we should not of course forget that our primary purpose in buying the site was to prevent a reversion to its former use as a gypsy/traveller site and that objective has been achieved.

The Council has a major financial investment in this site and this will need to be taken into account when any consideration is given to its future use.

Carbon issues

Since I last reported to the Village Meeting two years ago there has been growth in promoting carbon reduction schemes, something we should all individually support as part of global initiatives. The Council has set up a small group to consider issues in this regard, recognising that the Council has a local role to promote and undertake programmes for the direct benefit of the local community. So we would, for example, support tree planting if it can be shown that the community would directly benefit from the results of this - that is to say that the overriding objective is that residents should be able to see and enjoy the trees. We believe that this local community aspect should be the primary driver of any local schemes noting, as a secondary issue, that such will also hopefully contribute, albeit immeasurably, to the global picture but that this should be the order of priority in determining the Council's approach.

Conclusion

This concludes my report as Parish Council Chairman. It is a privilege to serve in this capacity and, once again, I thank all my colleagues and others for their confidence and for their support in our work.

Richard Goddin
Chairman
Meldreth Parish Council