



**THE CHAIRMAN'S ANNUAL REPORT  
2014/15**



# **Annual Parish Meeting 2015**

## **CHAIRMAN'S REPORT**

*(for the 01/04/2014 to 31/03/2015 year)*

### **Introduction.**

It's that time again and no doubt this year's report will seem much like the previous eleven I have done because a small Parish Council's work does not change much from one year to the next unless something major takes place. I will not repeat all the history of how and why Parish Councils came into being and as with other sections will try to be brief but to the point. I will however repeat that the Council is made up of seven elected Councillors with the assistance and advice of a Parish Clerk and Responsible Finance Officer usually, as in our case, one and the same person.

This particular group of Councillors has been together now since the election in May 2011 and have been working hard together to keep the parish going. We have just completed the last lap of our four year stint with an election for new councillors due on 7<sup>th</sup> May.

As explained in the past, in area, Birdbrook Parish Council is quite large as it incorporates Birdbrook Village, Baythorne End, New England, Finkle Green and other outlying farms and properties. However as the number of residences is only 160 and the last electoral roll had 185 eligible voters in Birdbrook and 107 in Baythorne End, total 292, we have a limited area on which to draw the needed funding hence we show well up the league table for parish levied amounts, usually second or third. However without these funds we could not achieve what we do and that is sometimes considered not enough from some of the comments I get.

We have achieved several things in the past year and some of these I will outline in what follows.

### **Environment.**

- **Grounds Maintenance-** we have continued with the grass cutting of all areas for which the Parish Council has a responsibility, (except for what we have come to know as The Green, which the Rook family mainly look after, and for which we are very grateful) and also arrange grass cutting for the rest of the Parish, which is Essex County Council Highways responsibility under contract to ECC. On the County side they tell us how many cuts they are prepared to pay for in a year, usually one or two, and how much they will pay us. We then have to work inside these parameters and not make a loss. On the Parish areas we authorise eight cuts per season with allowance for twelve maximum before the contractor has to refer back to us. It is therefore mainly a weather problem if things don't go right.
- **Play Areas-** Both areas (Birdbrook Village and at Baythorne End) are monitored on a regular basis and vermin checks made. The agreement for emptying of litter bins on these areas and other bins in the Parish is still in force. The annual inspection pointed out some items on both areas which needed attention and these have been completed. The equipment itself is mostly not that old, considerable amounts having been spent on new equipment in the late 90's and around 2004/5. We were lucky to have obtained grants towards the latter, the previous work being funded by money raised by a group of parishioners, and the total amount spent was around £30,000 in total. In the latest changes there was new equipment on both sites and some moved from Birdbrook to Baythorne End.
- **Graffiti Removal-** nothing needed cleaning away in the last year.
- **Birdbrook Pond Area-** Cllr. Hoyer together with Cllr. Carter have normally looked after the pond but over the last twelve months not a lot has been done compared with recent years, for various reasons. Because of perceived problems over legal ownership of the pond and its surroundings we cannot get grant aid

to help with what will be a big expense as we have been told a full dredge is needed and relevant works could cost as much as £13/15000 A few weeks ago all problems re the pond area ownership seem to be sorted thanks to William Rook, and from now on things will be easier. We have also had Conservation Volunteers look at the pond and they feel they can do the work later in the year and that grants would be available if we had more planting to attract wildlife and had the pond as a conservation/environmental pond rather than trying to make it ornamental. However around Easter time Mr Rook had his gardeners do a lot of work pulling out branches and generally tidying up and the area looks great again. We are very grateful for this help. If the volunteers now do their “mini Dredge” in late summer things should be fine for a while now.

- **Street Lighting-** our fund is till ongoing and the repair works continue. All the lights had new lamps at the annual maintenance time.
- **Highway Maintenance and other issues-** Obviously an ongoing issue but it would seem nobody reports potholes hence they don't get dealt with. I checked last week about the huge hole in The Street near The Green and this has never been reported it would seem. I am now waiting for Highways to get back to me to talk about this and any other holes I can find. I would stress however it is still imperative that you report all potholes (contact details in Birdbrook News) even if you think someone else may have done it. The more reports they receive the better and as we know it gets a better response from individuals than if the parish council does it. I am told they react better to several calls rather than just one person.

Just before the end of this administrative year I read in Haverhill Echo about a petition for lower speed limits on the A1017 around the Station Road area and B1054. This goes back some year when the council was working with a previous resident. As a result of this petition I have met with Warren Brace and discussed all we had done before. It seems the new council will need to put all his information and our previous together and update it so we can work together again and see what we can achieve to make these two roads safer.

Following problems with none gritted roads through Birdbrook Village in recent years at the beginning of last winter the Council purchased a manual salt spreader for emergencies as it were but it was not needed. It is however there for when it may be.

- **Passenger Transport-** no surprise there is nothing to report here again but we do keep abreast of any changes and hope someday one might affect us favourably.
- **Other items-** in this section last year I reported how we were on the list for a new bus shelter to be provided by Essex Highways to replace our demolished one. This did appear in the early summer and hopefully is doing its job. The shelter at Baythorne End is again one constructed by parish council and has had a good few repairs, thanks in recent years to Cllr. Hoye. As a matter of foresight the parish council has asked if this can go on the list for a Highways replacement before it gets urgent. It may be a long wait but better safe than sorry. The Moat Road shelter therefore is now an Essex Highways responsibility so moves out of our expense problem.

### **Supporting the Community.**

- **Crime and Disorder-** not something we suffer a lot of but we have had in recent times oil thefts and thefts from sheds as have a good few surrounding parishes. As far as I am aware the Village Agent, probably called something else now, is still available, details in Birdbrook News. We try and keep you up to date with crime and its problems through Birdbrook News, for example our wide coverage on scams in the last year or so. It is worth remembering Essex was one of, if not the worst, areas affected by these events and I understand in that area Steeple Bumpstead and Saffron Walden were high on the list for numbers of people affected. Unless of course it's an emergency 999 problem the quickest and easiest to contact the police is via the 101 non-emergency number. It does work, I have used it.

- **Meetings-** we held all our meetings last year as scheduled and all Councillors have a very good attendance record but more parishioners would be welcome.
- **Outside Bodies-** we continue to work with Braintree District (BDC) and Essex County Council (ECC) and are still members of the Braintree Association of Local Councils (BALC) and Essex Association of Local Councils (EALC) and indeed the National Association of Local Councils (NALC). We are still members of The Rural Community Councils of Essex (RCCE) and we did use them for help with establishing The Parish Plan.

Councillors, and in particular the Clerk, have continued attending many meetings particularly in Braintree, although attending Passenger Transport Representative meetings has been put on hold currently. Councillor Bolton is of course a District Councillor as well (until the 7<sup>th</sup> May as District Councillors also up for re-election) so is a good contact. We still get lots of consultation documents from national government, local government, NHS Trusts and various other bodies. We reply to all whether we are greatly affected or not so that we are ahead of the game as it were.

- **Working in Partnership with others-** I mentioned in 2011 that we were establishing a somewhat indirect connection with Stambourne Parish Council as our Clerk is also theirs, and that Cluster Groups of local parishes had been abandoned as support from Braintree District Council ceased in early 2012. This changed during 2012 in that although no new scheme has yet been agreed out of BDC, at the instigation really of Toppesfield, a Community Issues meeting Group was set up. This comprises Toppesfield, Stambourne and Ridgewell as well as Birdbrook and since then Great Yeldham have joined us. Things are changing in this respect and relating to district matters we are now in a different ward to the other parishes so look out for what might happen during the next few months.
- **Key Community Issues-** we are still working on the two telephone boxes and hope these will be sorted in the next few months. Looking at these which are to be retained as “monuments” if you like my attention was drawn to the Parish Pump which had become almost invisible. Thanks again to William Rook he has had fenced off part of his private property around the pump but access is provided by a gate for maintenance and to view the pump. Whilst the conservation volunteers were talking to us about the pond, known as the Waver by the way, we looked at the pump area and they agreed to clear it and this was done the Sunday after Easter. A few final touches are now needed to finish this area. Two other items have crept into this category following the Parish Plan.

**Neighbourhood Watch-** this keeps dropping off my radar but it is not forgotten. I am told by the organising group that this is not strictly a parish council responsibility but should be organised by residents. However I have agreed to organise a public meeting so everything needed can be discussed.

**Superfast Broadband-** very briefly the goal posts seem to keep changing here. At first it seemed we were in the Essex plan and looked to be connected early 2016. It now seems this may not be the case and we may only be in line for a guaranteed minimum speed of 2mbps which seems odd as my contract with BT says they will provide me with 1.75 to 3mbps! We are looking at different options here in view of what surrounding parishes have done. However it seems that recently we have been made aware that only 10% of the parish has actually registered an interest in superfast broadband so this will need to be changed before any hope of a cost effective scheme can be agreed.

- **Emergency Planning-** our emergency plan is part of the overall Braintree District Plan and as such is kept as up to date as possible.

- **Remembrance Sunday-** as in recent years the Parish Council was involved in that Councillor Hoye laid a wreath on our behalf during the service at St. Augustine's

### **Planning.**

- **Applications-** many were considered in the last year as usual and our aim has been to comment on every one and try to ensure our decisions are in the best interests of the Parish both as a planning matter and with a view to the environment. It must be stressed however that we do not have the final say over any planning matters and our position in this process is merely that of someone being consulted. There are moves of course to allow more works being done without the need for Planning Permission but other permissions such as building regulations and the like may still be required. We also have to bear in mind that Birdbrook Village is a dedicated conservation area, the only full village of its kind in Braintree District we think, which has a very big impact on any planning application. The District Plan is currently under review and we have commented on two consultations and are currently awaiting publication of the final document before it is accepted and published. The current plan is for no further development in Birdbrook due to lack of infrastructure to support extra population and currently no change is expected to this.
- **Parish Plan-** at this time last year I was pleased to announce that we had completed a plan and it was distributed at the same time as this report last year. There did not seem a lot to do really and updates are given in Birdbrook News and Parish Council Minutes on the website. Any items needing comment are dealt with separately in this report. The Plan was constructed for 2013/2015.

### **Contact.**

- **Birdbrook News and Parish Council Website.-**these are our main contact points with you apart from meetings of course. They were also compulsory elements of the maintenance of Quality Status and hopefully they carry all that is needed to enable everyone to see what goes on. Quality Status has been superseded and we have been given a place on the new scheme until January 2016 and we await to see what hoops we need to jump through should we wish to go further. I understand we will be contacted about October 2015 about this. "News" is about to publish its 70th issue for May and if you visit [www.birdbrook.org.uk](http://www.birdbrook.org.uk) you will see that this is also kept up to date. All the technical work here is beyond me and I would like to thank Carrie and Chris Webb for keeping me sorted and making sure all is hunky dorey and done as near as we can make it at the right time.
- **Notice Boards-**these boards are still being well used. Currently looking as if they need some t.l.c. and this a project "on the go" at present.

### **Internal Organisation.**

- **Policies and Procedures-**all Councillors have signed yet another new version of the Code of Conduct as required, the same in fact as signed by all MPs. Councillors are asked at the start of every meeting to declare any interest they may have on any agenda item.
- **Staffing-** as already pointed out apart from Councillors we have a Parish Clerk and Responsible Finance Officer, in our case this is Debbie Hilliard who has been with us a while now and we are all used to each other and work well together. Debbie keeps in touch with all that rapidly changes in council life, for good or bad
- **Preparedness for Local Government Changes-** never a meeting goes by without some reference to a Government White Paper or Consultation about proposed changes to local government from County Councils downwards. With the help of our Parish Clerk we keep a watching brief on the progress of all these events so we will be prepared for whatever should the need arise. The most important thing here at present being everything associated with so-called Localism Bill and all its connotations.

## Finance

- Clearly there is a cost involved in running a Parish Council and providing the services we do. We do more than some councils but I am sure parishioners would have it this way rather than pass it all to Braintree or indeed Essex. We know what we need locally. They wouldn't take anything on at present anyway what with The Localism Bill and the like. There is also a requirement as to how much we should hold in reserve funds (about one and a half times our precept) and I can say that since I took over as Chair we were not up to that level and have still not achieved it as we need to spend to keep on top of things. However as you will see from the figures we are getting nearer all the time. The main reasons for this reserve is all to do with collection of the funds. As you know these are collected for us by Braintree District Council and paid to us in two instalments over the year even before they have been collected really. Therefore should there be problems with collection, or indeed if BDC got into financial difficulties and couldn't pay us then we are told we need enough in reserve to keep us going at our level of spending for at least one year. Your Parish Councillors are convinced that their careful scrutiny of expenditure ensures that local taxpayers get good value for money.
- **Precept-** our spending plans usually increase because of inflation and whatever else we need to spend to make the Parish a better place. This year, again, all Councils and Authorities above Parish level are being asked by the government to freeze the Council Tax, and if they needed an increase above whatever level the government set for their layer then they would have to hold a referendum to see if their council tax payers accepted this. The question of a percentage cap for Parish Councils seems to have abated for the present which is good news because a percentage cap would be very bad for us as we have small figures relatively. Holding a referendum is very expensive so could warrant an increase on its own! We were not happy with what Braintree D C did for this financial year which directly affected our precept requirements. This was explained in the February 2014 issue of Birdbrook News and in full in my last year's report so I do not need to go into all this again. In the February 2015 issue of News the budget requirement for 2015 was explained. Briefly I would say our fears were justified in that the Localism Grant was indeed added to the previous Support Grant and is now known collectively as the Localism Fund. The total was therefore reduced by 15.4%. Translated this means our grant of £1,859.00 for 2014/15 is reduced to £1,573.00 i.e. £286 reduction. We decided not to increase our level of expenditure even though some items looked as if they might go over budget so we were standing still, but as our income reduces by £286 we needed to increase the Parish Tax by 3.6% as you will have seen from your demand to compensate. This just highlights what I keep saying about a large parish area with not many people. The percentage looks high but pound notes, sorry coins it's my age showing it's not a great deal. For example to take Band D as the average, the extra cost is £2.73 for the year. And I stress again this is purely to offset loss of income in grants, not to enable us to increase spending!

**It must also be remembered that the local taxpayers have to meet ALL of the Parish Council's PRECEPT, but District and County Council's expenditures are funded to some extent by the Government.**

## Conclusion.

Finally, I would like to say what a privilege it has been to serve as Chair to Birdbrook Parish Council for yet another year. I have enjoyed most of what is involved but there is the odd downside at times. None of this would have been possible without all the hard work, advice and dedication of our Parish Clerk, Debbie Hilliard. I pass on mine and all the other Councillors thanks for the excellent work she does. My Vice Chair, Councillor Robert Bolton, has lots of experience to share and so to him and all the other Councillors; I extend my grateful thanks for this last year. I think we should remember that being a Parish Councillor is a voluntary and unpaid job (in spite of the fact you have to be elected) and it is not intended that work needed should be carried out personally. However we have been fortunate to have people who are prepared to get involved and so keep some of the costs down. I also extend my thanks to the wider community for their views, expressed in many different ways. I would also thank all the people who attend our meetings with reports or send a report in for consideration, which is now mainly County Councillor David Finch.

I cannot close this report without mention of Cllr Hazel Hodge. She has been attending over the last two or three years in spite of serious illness and unfortunately passed away on Maundy Thursday. Her funeral was in Birdbrook Church last Monday (27<sup>th</sup> April) with a full church and an enlightening celebration of her life. Hazel joined the Council in 1999 just a few months before I did in 2000. She therefore served for fifteen years or so and was a good councillor, emptying many a litter bin and cleaning up the village playing field over the years. Agreed she could be a bit infuriating at times but she had all the local knowledge and history which helped many times with dealing with some problems. This sort of input will be greatly missed.

As I have intimated earlier we have several things ongoing. These will be dealt with by new councillors but I can say now that you will not be required to vote for Parish Councillors next week, just Parliamentary and District, as you may have seen from the notice boards. The reason? Well only four people were nominated for seven places so these four have been advised they are elected unopposed. Four does give a quorum for business to continue but the first business looks like deciding what happens next. I am told we are not on our own and if you look at BDC website you can see some parishes with no nominees and a good few with only one or two. If there is a general lack of interest overall in parish councils this could well play into the hands of those who see them as not really being required. Let's hope not?

Councillor Thomas Richard Walker  
Chair Birdbrook Parish Council 2014/2015.  
29<sup>th</sup> April 2015



## Birdbrook Parish Council: Income and Expenditure Account 2014-15

		Expenditure £	Income £
<b>Street Lights</b>	Routine maintenance	355.00	
	Electricity	416.56	
	Repairs	739.50	
	Other	-	
	<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>1,511.06</b>	<b>0.00</b>
<b>Open Spaces</b>	Playing field bin emptying	528.00	
	Playing field pest control	460.00	
	Playing field litter pick	660.00	
	Grass Cutting	3,060.20	
	Play equipment-new		
	Play equipment-repairs	425.00	
	Other	100.00	0.00
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>5,233.20</b>	<b>0.00</b>	
<b>Admin</b>	Insurance	1,173.70	
	Subs & bank charges/interest	148.29	1.80
	Audit fees	150.00	
	Clerk's expenses	44.02	
	Clerk's salary	2,610.40	
	Training	134.00	
	Election costs	-	
	Postage & Stationery	29.41	
	Computer repair/maintenance	-	
	Transfer of funds	-	
	Chairman's expenses/allowance	139.50	
	Donations/other	1.00	
	Hire of hall	120.00	
	<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>4,550.32</b>	<b>1.80</b>
<b>Other</b>	Birdbrook News	226.65	396.00
	Precept & Localism		12,665.00
	Parish Plan	-	
	Grants	350.00	0.00
	Section 137	40.00	
	Other	317.34	
	VAT	370.99	0.00
	<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>1,304.98</b>	<b>13,061.00</b>
<b>Agency Arrangements</b>	Verge Cutting	1,650.00	1,924.88
	Street Cleansing (see above)	-	732.42
	<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>1,650.00</b>	<b>2,657.30</b>
<b>Total Expenditure</b>		<b>14,249.56</b>	
<b>Total Income</b>			<b>15,720.10</b>
<b>Bank Reconciliation @ 31st March 2015</b>			
<b>Bank Balances</b>	Current Account	11,841.06	
	Business Reserve Account	3,568.35	
	<b>Total</b>		<b>15,409.41</b>
<b>Less uncleared cheques</b>	-		
<b>Sub-total</b>			
<b>Balance at end of year</b>			<b>15,409.41</b>
<b>Summary of Accounts 2014-15</b>			
	Balance at beginning of year		13,938.87
	Total receipts		15,720.10
	Total payments		14,249.56
	Balance at end of year		15,409.41

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