



**THE CHAIRMAN'S ANNUAL REPORT
2015/16
as presented to the Annual Parish Meeting**

Annual Parish Meeting 2016

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

(for the 01/04/2015 to 31/03/2016 year)

Introduction.

It's that time again and no doubt this year's report won't seem much different from the previous twelve I have done, mainly 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.

We should have had an election in May 2015 but unfortunately only myself and Steve Rhenius stood for re-election together with Alan Cook and Peter Smart so the four of us were elected unopposed. I am pleased to say we have co-opted two new councillors since then so we are now six out of a full quota of seven. Dominic Simpson joined at our January meeting and Martin Gilbert in March. We may also have our final member waiting in the wings.

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, in spite of reduced numbers, and some of these I will outline in what follows.

Before I get to that it has recently been brought to my notice that Mr Julian Watson of Baythorne Park passed away in the last week or so. He didn't get much involved in Birdbrook matters but insisted on getting his copy of Birdbrook News. It would seem fitting that we take a short time to remember Julian and indeed any other parishioners who may have died in the last year.

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. Our main contract is usually done on a three year basis and the current year, 2016/17, is the last year of the current schedule so these works will be up for tender from 2017 onwards.
- **Play Areas-** Both areas (Birdbrook Village and at Baythorne End) are monitored on a regular basis and vermin checks made. We have had a new quotation for this pest control which is being considered presently. The agreement for emptying of litter bins on these areas and other bins in the Parish is still in force, but

again is due for reconsideration at the present time. The annual inspection, carried out by Fenland Liesure, 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. Hoye together with Cllr. Carter, neither no longer with us but I pass the Parish's thanks to them for their past hard work, 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.

I mentioned last year the problems of getting Grant Aid and a visit by Conservation Volunteers to give advice. It was suggested we keep the pond as a "conservation pond" rather than "ornamental" then we might attract more dragonflies, butterflies and the like. This we did and therefore the mini dredge was not done. We can all see the result, we are back to the green slime, only worse than ever. We are very grateful that Mr William Rooks gardeners kept the banks clear, even though it was suggested we don't do that either, which at least looked respectable. So it's back to plan A, and "do it all ourselves" again. We may therefore be asking for volunteers when we get a schedule in place.

- **Street Lighting-** our fund is till ongoing and the repair works continue. All the lights had new lamps at the annual maintenance time. As I prepare this report we seem to be one light missing and enquiries are being made. A suggestion has been made of alternative source of power for these lights which is yet another current project.
- **Highway Maintenance and other issues-** Obviously an ongoing issue but it would seem nobody reports potholes hence they don't get dealt with. I would stress however it is still imperative that you report all potholes or other road damage (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. As reaction times seem very slow just keep on reporting till something gets done. We have several areas marked orange at the moment which indicates they are due for repair, let's see how long it takes.

I don't want to go into detail here about the speed problems on A1017 and the petition presented to ECC Highways as it has been well reported in the Newsletter. However I will say we have had the response of "no action needed" as you will be aware. We are not letting this stand and are to get back to our County Councillor with a long but well thought out response shortly. It is mostly my fault for the delay but I have been looking round various areas and taking note and hoping to find other strengths in our argument.

Following problems with none gritted roads through Birdbrook Village in recent years at the beginning of 2014/15 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. We are still part of the Salt Scheme.

- **Passenger Transport-** as I write there are big changes happening here, operative from about mid-April. As I understand it the Friday 89B and the Tuesday Shoppers Buses will cease and be replaced by Demand Responsive Transport (DaRT 3 for us) which means you can call for a bus to suit you. Two hours' notice is needed but you can call between 0600 and 2000 Monday to Saturday but if only one person is travelling it could well be a taxi not a bus. However fares are fixed on a mileage basis and concessionary passes can be used, check when booking. Wheelchairs can be accommodated. You would not necessarily have to go to a bus stop to be picked up. I have requested copies of the leaflet issued by ECC Passenger Transport so these can be distributed to all households. However it seems they are a part of Highways so I am not expecting a

swift response! As I understand it school buses are not currently affected and in our case this includes the 118 service.

- **Other items-**the request for a replacement bus shelter at Baythorne End was accepted and a new shelter is in place but this remains our responsibility unlike the one on Moat Road. We eventually got the litter bin back which was removed with the old shelter! Guess what, two brand new shelters and even less buses to stop there!

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. There were more attempts on the Community House outbuildings last winter. 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 few years. 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 way 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 did not stand for re-election to Parish but was elected as District Councillor again 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-**at this time last year you will have gathered from my report that the Parish Council, particularly myself, were not too happy with the way the Network 5 group was going. The new councillors decided to leave for a while until they were more in tune as it were. Now, at the instigation of Birdbrook, a new group with Helions Bumpstead, Steeple Bumpstead and Sturmer is being discussed. All these councils are in the same ward as Birdbrook so more appropriate. A preliminary meeting was held in April, strictly outside the report bracket, and it seems all attending were in favour. They have to report back to their relevant councils and if all agree a proper inaugural meeting will take place in September.
- **Key Community Issues-** we are still working on the two telephone boxes and hope these will be sorted in due course I will not go into full details here as part of updated Parish Plan to be distributed shortly. I will say however many thanks to Cllr Alan Cook who has cleaned up and repainted the Birdbrook Box in the original colours including gold crowns! The area around the pump was cleared and this is now also part of the Parish Plan.

Neighbourhood Watch-this keeps dropping off my radar but it is not forgotten. We know from the organising group that this is not strictly a parish council responsibility but should be organised by residents. However we have agreed to organise a public meeting so everything needed can be discussed and again this is in the Plan.

Superfast Broadband-I am not going into details here as this has been well covered in Birdbrook News. It would seem anyone along the A1017 may have access but only one house on Moat Road in the village has been connected as this comes from box 5 in Ridgewell and the rest of us from box 4 near bus shelter Moat Road which may be updated by 2017. We continue to express our disgust to Essex Superfast.

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 Cllr. Smart 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- my thanks to Cllr. Smart who together with myself updated the current Plan which has been agreed by the Council and will be distributed shortly.

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. This has now expired due to us not being a "fully elected" council. "News" has just published its 75th issue for May and if you visit 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. As you will know from "News" Carrie and Chris have left the Parish but have currently agreed to continue helping us for which we (and me particularly) are very grateful.
- **Notice Boards**-these boards are still being well used. Currently looking as if the 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. This doesn't seem to be helping us much at the moment especially financially.

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 if possible but keep any increase to a minimum, 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. They were allowed to add an extra 2% for care services this year on top of anything else. Both Essex and Braintree set all this out in the Council Tax Demand papers. 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! Some of our budgeted figures for 2015/16 year were exceeded but some were not reached so overall we were fine. In this respect therefore we were fine so your Council decided to go for the same precept figure for 2016/17. This would have been no change but with the Localism Grants reducing again as expected to stand still a small increase was explained in February Birdbrook News. However with the way these rates are calculated it seems we must have a slight increase in the number of Band D dwellings paying full tax so the amount requested as you will have seen from your demand is a slight reduction.

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 Steve Rhenius, has lots of experience from elsewhere to share and so to him and all the other new 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. I must also thank all of the previous councillors who didn't stand again but did sterling work in the past and we are still building on this. As you are well aware these are Anne Beetson, Robert Bolton, Derek Hoye, Leigh Carter and of course Hazel Hodge whose death I sadly had to report at this time last year.

As I have intimated earlier we have several things ongoing. These will be dealt with by the new council now a year old and nearly complete. As with all previous councils we will continue to strive and do our best for the Parish but no doubt you will let us have your views in the usual way, but not please when I am having a quiet pint in the pub!

Councillor Thomas Richard Walker
Chair Birdbrook Parish Council 2015/2016.
10th May 2016

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Birdbrook Parish Council: Income and Expenditure Account 2015-16

		Expenditure £	Income £
Street Lights	Routine maintenance	426.00	
	Electricity	462.62	
	Repairs	58.00	
	Other	-	
	Sub-total	946.62	0.00
Open Spaces	Playing field bin emptying	824.00	
	Playing field pest control	672.00	
	Playing field litter pick	792.00	
	Grass Cutting	2,533.04	
	Play equipment-new		
	Play equipment-repairs	326.20	
	Other	221.40	0.00
Sub-total	5,368.64	0.00	
Admin	Insurance	1,173.69	
	Subs & bank charges/interest	168.09	1.81
	Audit fees	150.00	
	Clerk's expenses	43.53	
	Clerk's salary	2,700.00	
	Training	15.00	
	Election costs	59.00	
	Postage & Stationery	18.10	
	Website	29.88	
	Refurbishment of BT box	685.00	
	Chairman's expenses/allowance	100.00	
	Donations/other	1.00	
	Hire of hall	140.00	
Sub-total	5,283.29	1.81	
Other	Birdbrook News	249.08	150.00
	Precept & Localism		13,151.00
	Refurb of pump	200.00	
	Transparency code (new laptop)	597.50	671.94
	Grants	1,050.00	0.00
	Section 137	40.00	
	Other	1,599.12	1,599.12
	VAT	737.61	957.26
Sub-total	4,473.31	16,529.32	
Agency Arrangements	Verge Cutting	1,700.00	1,926.58
	Street Cleansing (see above)	-	732.42
	Sub-total	1,700.00	2,659.00
Total Expenditure		17,771.86	
Total Income			19,190.13
Bank Reconciliation @ 31st March 2016			
Bank Balances			
	Current Account	13,257.52	
	Business Reserve Account	3,570.16	
	Total		16,827.68
Less uncleared cheques	Cheque no 1155	42.60	
	No 1336	69.60	
	No 1338	42.60	
	No 1339	68.40	
	No 1340	100.00	
	No 1341	717.00	
	No 1342	141.00	
	Sub-total	1,181.20	
Balance at end of year			15,646.48
Summary of Accounts 2015-16			
	Balance at beginning of year		15,409.41
	Total receipts		19,190.13
	Total payments		17,771.86
	Balance at end of year		16,827.68