

Annual Report from the Parish Council

The year has been particularly significant for the Parish Council in that it has seen the completion of two major projects that have both occupied a considerable amount of time and energy. The first of these was the upgrading of **The Play Area**. Parishioners have been wanting this facility to be improved and its scope for play widened for many years, but before this could be achieved the Parish Council had to take over responsibility for the area and to negotiate a new lease with the Old Town Trust which owns the land. This done, and much more, a contract with Premier Play Solutions was signed in July 2022, and construction took place in October. The transformation has been enormous and an official opening ceremony took place on April 22nd attended by almost a hundred people ranging from babes-in-arms to those of more advancing years. This may partly have been influenced by the supply of free ice-cream, but it also shows how important a facility like this is, not just for children, but also for parents and grand-parents. A few weeks earlier we had held a work party to do various jobs and get the area ready for the opening; this sort of thing is very important and covers jobs which are not part of the normal maintenance contract. We hope to have similar events at regular intervals in the future and any help from residents will be much appreciated.

The second milestone concerns the (almost) completion of our **Neighbourhood Plan**. Work on the Plan started over five years ago and will culminate in the adoption of the “Walsham le Willows Neighbourhood Plan 2023 – 2037” and the accompanying “Design Guidance and Codes” - two extremely important documents which will have an enormous impact on what happens to the village over the next fifteen years. The project has involved many people starting with those who attended the first drop-in event at The Priory Room in June 2018; over 140 households then helped by completing the Household Survey in November 2021, and more than 50 people completed quite detailed and usually very informative responses to the Draft Neighbourhood Plan in the autumn of 2022. Special thanks must go to the very resilient members of the NP steering group who have spent many hours at Zoom and face to face meetings, between writing and collecting materials for the Plan, and distributing materials to keep parishioners informed. We also need to thank the consultants brought in by the Parish Council to assist with the project: Holly Turner from AECOM who did a impressive job in creating a Design Code which genuinely reflects the character of the village and embodies people's views as to the type of development which we feel is appropriate and acceptable; and also Rachel Leggett, Andrea Long and Emma Harrison who did much of the work on the Plan itself. Without their knowledge, experience and motivation it is unlikely that the Plan would have been completed.

Much of our day-to-day work as a Parish Council is aimed at **maintaining and enhancing amenities** within the village. During the past year we have:

- used £7,500 of CIL money to help with the redecoration and refurbishment of The Priory Room,
- used CIL money to purchase a solar panel for the Speed Indicator Device on Summer Road near the Sports Club,
- hired machinery to help clearing leaves and litter from the pavements in the autumn,
- made a grant of £8,000 of CIL money to the Sports Club to act as a “pump primer” in

- their fund raising for new gym facilities,
- supported the planting of new shrub roses in the churchyard,
- awarded a grant of £6,000 to Little Willows pre-school to help with the much needed refurbishment and redecoration of the unit, and
- instigated an arrangement for contractors to clear the banks and bed of the stream in the autumn where it runs parallel to Swan Path. This was done for the first time in 2022 and will be repeated in 2023. In general people have been very positive about the way in which this has improved the appearance of the village and yet has maintained an area suitable for wildlife.

During the course of a year we also deal with quite a number of **Planning Applications**. Most are not contentious, but others such as the ones relating to Church Farm Barns, Holmwood and the Four Ashes Grain Store do cause concern for some residents. When this happens the Public Open Forum part of the agenda in a Council meeting provides an opportunity for opinions to be voiced and hopefully we can then assemble a response which can be put forward on behalf of the parish; however, the decision still remains with the planners at MSDC. By far our biggest planning concern at the moment is with the applications for the enormous Shepherds Grove site at the top of Summer Road. If Co-part were to get permission for their huge depot handling second-hand and accident damaged cars there could be big impact on the village in terms of lorries travelling through Walsham and in the amount of congestion on the A143. This has been exacerbated by a second application to build warehouses employing up to 2,600 staff on neighbouring land. We are doing everything we can to monitor these applications, which are to the planners in West Suffolk not MSDC, and for the Co-part application we appointed a consultant to put together the most effective objection that we could. It is very important for as many people as possible to make themselves aware of this developing situation and to respond as forcefully as they can.

Finally I would like to thank my fellow councillors: Paul Arbon, Ian Bartholomew, Nick Mecrow, Trevor Roberts and Janette Winch. Without their tolerance, good humour and hard work none of the tasks mentioned above would have been completed. In addition I would like to mention Brian Kinnair who has served on the Council for much of the time he lived in Walsham and was the lead figure in all the work involved with the Play Area project - he has now moved even deeper into rural Suffolk. Also our sincere thanks to Kevin Boardley, The Parish Clerk; his is a very difficult and demanding job, and in coping with the administrative loads from both the Play Area project and the Neighbourhood Plan he has been central to their fulfilment.

Richard Belson
Chair of Walsham Parish Council