

Annual Parish Meeting: 9 April 2024 - Report of the Chair of the Parish Council

It is five years since there was an Annual Parish Meeting. Some of that lapse was due to COVID-19 but, more recently, the lack of a meeting can be attributed to the actions and personalities in the previous Parish Council. Thankfully, we as a village have moved beyond those days.

In May 2023 there was a new Council elected. None of the councillors on the Council in the two years up to May 2023 was re-elected. There were nine vacancies and nine people elected from Tostock village with our good friend Vanessa Malcom topping the poll.

We had been left with quite a challenge - the audit on the accounts prompted many questions and led to many hours and days of checking payments, giving explanations (as best as we could), writing up spreadsheets to show the variances and finally getting a verdict from the auditors. This has been reported on the Tostock website.

We had had a clerk to record the meetings and write up the minutes. He gave advice when asked but was no more than a Minutes Secretary. After a false start we were able to persuade Doug Reed to take us on. Tostock had been considered 'toxic' but with a newly elected Council, all determined to do their best for Tostock, it was a much better prospect.

There was much to do and the Councillors elected me to be their Chair and Vanessa their Vice-Chair. Vanessa lost her battle with cancer in January this year. It was a great privilege to work with her and we, as well as many other organisations and individuals, miss her very much.

Of the councillors elected in May, six had been councillors at some time in the past, and three were new to being a parish councillor. A write-up for each councillor was included in the June/July 2023 edition of the Chronicle - available on the village website. We now have a vacancy and hope to co-opt a new councillor at the next meeting of the Parish Council on May 14.

As a Council we have considered several planning applications, including holding a meeting to take into account the views of the villagers for a single application that was proving contentious. We have taken into account the comments made to us and, after consideration, have sent our comments to Mid Suffolk Planning Services. We try to avoid 'no comment' as we like to be more positive - so our submissions are objection (with reasons), no objection or support - at least making it plain, we hope, that we have actually read the applications!

The Budget Working Group was established to look at the budget for the year 2024/25. The comments and decisions are included in the report, also available on the website. We had been left with a significant deficit and difficulty in bringing the budget under control. Another Working Party was set up from the Budget Working Party recommendations - to look at the Chronicle and to try to reduce the cost to the Parish Council, and therefore Tostock residents, without charging for it. It may take some time to get this cost down and advertising revenue up, but the Working Party is determined to succeed. Our thanks go to the editor, Kim Mars, and to Sharon Burman, who has been keeping the advertisement side of things under control. Tom Whitman has joined the

team, which includes Adrian Malcom, so we are hopeful of a slimmed down Chronicle but with all essential news and views covered.

Every meeting seems to have speeding and highways issues on the agenda - and many local people have expressed their views. Speeding through Tostock has been an issue for as long as I can remember - but it has come to the fore in recent times with the inconsiderate behaviour of many of the drivers who are using Tostock as a rat-run to avoid the roadworks on the A14. Hopefully, that will come to an end in a few months and we can return to normal. As a Parish Council we have pledged to use some of the CIL money from recent developments to fund additional Speed Indicator Devices (SIDs). One local resident has volunteered to set up a Speedwatch group and if anyone is interested in joining, please contact the Clerk. The significant increase in traffic volume has also had a detrimental effect on our local roads and we work with the local contacts from Suffolk Highways. Even though they are under significant pressure from all directions they do try to get our repairs done.

Our Parish Council meetings began with about 20 members of the public in attendance and these numbers have roughly halved but we still get many more than many of our neighbouring villages. I would like to thank all my fellow councillors for their attendance and participation in the meetings and our Parish Clerk for his perseverance and good counsel. We have a really good attendance rate at meetings.

Our challenges have been many and varied but I am glad to say that we approach them with good intentions, good humour and a determination to do what is best for Tostock. Our Annual Parish Council Meeting is on May 14 and, as always, all are welcome.