

DEDHAM PARISH COUNCIL: CHAIRMAN'S ANNUAL REPORT MAY 2021

Introduction

Along with everyone else, the Parish Council has needed to adopt and change the way we have worked over the past year. It also meant that the existing councillors have completed an additional year due to the cancellation of the 2020 elections.

Online meetings became the permitted way of holding our public meetings and our last face to face meeting was held in March 2020. Zoom became the new word on many peoples lips and our first public zoom was held in June. This was declared as the annual meeting of the Parish Council. Being the annual meeting there was an opportunity for the councillors to vote on the election of chair, Councillor Taylor was elected as the chair, following on from Councillor Beeton.

Amongst the changes that were brought in with zoom was that councillors were asked to pre-read meeting papers in order that we could concentrate on decisions rather than lengthy debate. To aid those members of the public asking to join the meeting, greater meeting documentation was made available to them. Once this bedded in the council meetings reduced in time, to about an hour. Public meetings are expected to return to face to face after the coming election.

Considerable time has been spent regarding the visitors to the river and it is a very long story regarding what can be done about this, you may have seen updates and articles on this topic during the year on our website home page. We understand the release that was needed for people that may have restricted access to gardens and outside space. Our problem was the management of the numbers and those few that decided not to respect the environment and expected others to clear up after them. On the positive side, Stratford St Mary parish Council have agreed to support further yellow lines on the B1029 and we understand that Suffolk has this programmed in for May.

Our financial position remains strong and we have developed a vision for improvements to the centre area of the village. The three elements are the Drift lighting, the Drift resurfacing maintenance and Royal Square refurbishment.

Lighting has always been an issue that divides residents into love it or hate it, however the safety concerns of residents has meant that it would be remiss of us not to tackle this thorny issue. We reported last year that we had passed a resolution to install Drift lighting, so this year has been about defining the right solution for us, that solution was agreed at the February parish meeting. Please rest assured that considerable work has gone into the solution in order to align with the Dedham Vale Society on dark skies, balanced against the safety of residents. We have 9 bollards that only focus light down to the Drift surface and only light up when a resident is walking the path, in the dark and with certain hours - they are not permanently on and do not affect wildlife - minimal lighting, maximum benefit.

The Drift is in need of resurfacing and we will also be carrying out work to improve the current issues with the pooling of water along its length. This phase will run from the sports pavilion to the Duchy Barn and is planned to coincide with the lighting installation.

That leaves us with Royal Square. We have previously, I think twice in the last nine years, tried to resurface this with gravel and it does not last. As part of the overall architects plans for the planned works we also asked for thoughts on Royal Square. We have initial drawings of a couple of options for its layout and finish, we have included the war memorial as part of the overall plan. Theses plans are available on our website but it is up to the next parish council to take this through to completion if they consider it appropriate.

Finally, our Parish Clerk, Emma Cansdale has just left us to pursue a new career and we would like to thank Emma for the work that she has put into supporting us in keeping the village moving forward over the past 9 years. We have appointed Emma's successor, Jayne Cole. We welcome Jayne, who is an experienced clerk and has been involved in many facets of local government. We are sure that Jayne will be a benefit to the village.

Business, Communications and Media Advisory Group: Chair: Cllr. Christine Frost

There have been no meetings of the BCM advisory group this year due to the Covid crisis, though we have kept in touch by email and telephone, including one to one discussions. There was one main aim this year and that was to give what limited support we could to the businesses as they came out of the first lockdown and as they prepare to come out of the second lockdown. We were unable to organise a Business Breakfast to meet and identify any major issues.

As we were discussing with other statutory bodies the impact of visitors to the area and the village, we wrote in June to ask if they could provide information on visitor numbers, peak times of the year for visitors and also to ask for comments on how the Covid situation had impacted on their business.

We had insufficient replies to be able to formulate a satisfactory response which was just as well as no one could have anticipated the flood of visitors to the river once lockdown was fully lifted later in the summer.

We had reminded them that the Dedham Parish Council website could post opening information which would be useful to both residents and visitors to the area. By July, we had posted a fairly comprehensive list of opening dates and times for the main central businesses and organisations, thanks to the work of our webmaster John Goldsbrough. Openings in July were limited to some extent by the difficulty in purchasing the necessary screening and sanitisation equipment. Also, those with outdoor space were able to limit to a small degree the damage to normal business. Some pubs and restaurants continued to offer takeaway services. Other businesses continued to offer online services.

One café was unable to open due to the small size of their premises. They applied to CBC for a parking licence to trade in the High St, which the DPC supported in line with previous practice of supporting High St businesses which were unable to trade in their premises for reasons beyond their control. This led to a policy document on DPC street trading being approved.

When the second lockdown was announced the Chair of BCM advisory group wrote to the businesses to thank them for their hard work in continuing to serve the community during the very difficult summer.

We are now approaching the lifting of lockdown restrictions for a second time and although their buildings and out door space may be Covid ready this time round. The businesses will only just be coming to terms with the support offered in the Spring Budget 2021. It will be important to share any information to assist them and again to report on the DPC website any opening information that the businesses supply.

Webmaster: John Goldsbrough

In 2019, it was announced that the essexinfo platform for websites provided by Essex County Council was going to cease operating from the end of March 2020. After looking at the options it was decided the platform supplied by OneSuffolk, called essexonline.net would be a suitable option for the Parish Council website, dedhamparishcouncil.co.uk.

At the end of 2019, the new website was created from scratch as there was no facility for transferring code from the essexinfo platform. The new site was run in parallel during January

2020 and then went live from the 1st of February 2020. In March as the country went into lockdown as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the website then provided a source of information to residents detailing closures and changes to services. OneSuffolk don't provide statistics with their offering however it was possible to use Google Analytics to obtain website traffic statistics.

1. Audience overview for the period 01/01/2020 to 31/12/2020
Data table

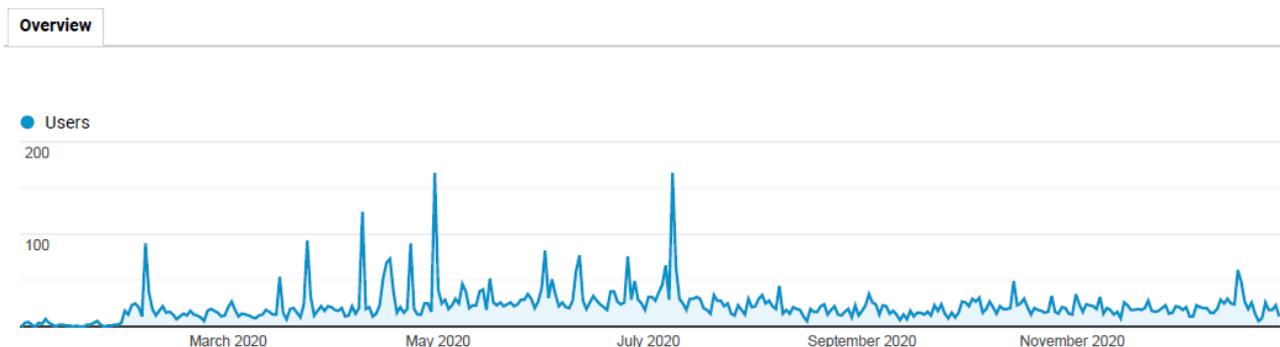
Month	Users
January	43
February	408
March	442
April	765
May	659
June	774
July	735
August	440
September	371
October	549
November	445
December	535
Total (Excluding January)	6,123
Monthly Average	556.6

The data shows that the months with the most traffic were April, May, June and July 2020, the months of the first lockdown with an average monthly figure of 556. The data for January is excluded as that was a parallel running month. If we look at the daily figure then there are pronounced spikes in the data which can be correlated to posts on the Dedham Vale Voice facebook page referring to items on the parish Council website.

Graphical Representation of monthly data.



Graphical representation of the daily data.



2. Pageviews - Overview 01/01/2020 to 31/12/2020

Top 10 page views.

Page	Pageviews
Homepage /	5,034
/dedham/walks/	1,316
/parish-council/council-minutes/	721
/parish-council/	658
/dedham/walks/footpath-map/	650
/news/view/25	632
/parish-council/parish-councillors/	598
/parish-council/planning/	501
/dedham/parish-magazine/	436
/contact-us/	371

In addition to the Parish Council pages, the pages relating to Dedham Walks have proved popular, probably reflecting the fact that during the lockdown many more people were using walks around the village. The Parish Clerk contact form was used more than 50 times during the year. A similar level of activity has been maintained in the first two months of 2021.

Sports and Recreation Group 2020/2021 Chair Cllr Baker

DPC continues to work productively with Dedham Sports Club.

Covid-19 has meant that the Club building has been closed for much of 2020/21 which has had an impact on its financial viability due to loss of income. Plans have been agreed to re-configure and update the kitchen area so that the club can offer Covid-secure and modern facilities for hirers to boost finances. This work will be completed shortly.

Improvements to the football pitch playing surface have also been undertaken. The children's play area was closed for part of the year in line with government restrictions. A replacement piece of equipment for the play area has been approved and is expected to be installed shortly. The 'Simon Says' feature has not been working successfully for some time and will be removed.

The Playing Field and Duchy Field have been much in demand when weather and Covid restrictions permit for residents and visitors to exercise and meet.

Parish Magazine

Dedham Parish Council has a number of ways of keeping in touch with residents, including our website and parish noticeboards. We write a regular monthly column for the (Church) Parish Magazine where we cover items of interest as well as keeping residents up to date with the ongoing work of the Parish Council.

Environmental Group: Chair: Cllr. Ann Follows

As chair of the ESG. it has been a very trying year and frustrating due to Covid , so I cant say that we have achieved a lot.

We have on the positive side still looked at the problems down by the river that Kevin has taken the lead .

1) We have kept a dialogue ongoing and it was agreed that yellow lines should be installed on the B 1029 but as yet they have not been installed.

Also the litter bins that we paid for on the Suffolk side to be removed to encourage visitors to take their rubbish home with some success.

2) A new Contract was signed up for the cutting of the Footpaths under a P3 agreement with ECC and we have the same contractor of last year and should do 3 cuts weather permitting.

3) We still have the Neighbourhood watch and have reports sent to all our members via Colchester NHW as we don't have a co-ordinator at this time.

4) Highways issues are still ongoing but we have highlighted a number of issues on traffic in the Long Rd. East /West Ardleigh Rd . and B1029 which will be ongoing.

5) We have a problem with inconsiderate parking at Lamb Corner and have put up signs to stop the parking which will be monitored , but at this time these have been removed by persons unknown!.

On the parking the arrangement of the Sunday parking in the centre of the village was changed to only 2 hour parking and no return for 2hrs in line to the rest of the village.

6) Black Brook was cleaned by the Environmental authority under their yearly programme of work.

7) We heard that we have got a special part time constable in training so hope we will hear more at a later date.

Health and Well Being: Cllr. Jane Meakin

The Tea and Tablets sessions which were becoming a popular get-together were sadly brought to an end by the COVID-19

Pandemic. Unfortunately it is not possible at this time to say if the sessions will continue in the future but details will be passed on the the new council.

I attended a meeting of the PPG (Patients Participation Group) at the Ardleigh Surgery before the first lockdown but again, due to the pandemic, there have been no recent meetings.

I also attended Zoom meetings, on behalf of DPC, with the Reverend Antony Wilson, and the Chairman and Clerk of Ardleigh Parish Council to discuss issues arising from the Dedham and Ardleigh COVID-19 Helpline.

Finance Advisory Group: Chair: Cllr. Dr. Jeffrey Herbert

Our Parish Council finances continue in good order.

We expect our cash balance by the year end to have further increased to approximately £255,000.

We have no borrowings, our cash balances are held in the UK by Barclays Bank.

We have made no financial investments.

Our level of financial security will enable the projects that our residents and businesses have requested to proceed.

Any cash expenditure requires formal approval at Parish Council meetings and all cheques require counter signatories.

The financial budget we have set for the coming year requested a precept of £41,225 and this resulted in a zero increase in Parish Council tax (equivalent band D properties).

Other than the Parish precept our primary source of income remains car park revenue.

During this last year our income will be approximately £38,000. As you can imagine the impact of Covid on visitor numbers to Dedham has been difficult to forecast and I imagine we will see similar issues for at least the first half of the coming financial year. We have a good working relationship with the North Essex Parking Partnership (NEPP). Quarterly review meetings are held with the Parish Council parking group.

Our primary expenditure continues to be a series of costs related to the “presentation” of our village. We are all very proud of our village and strive to maintain the condition of our footpaths, hedges and walkways. A litter free village is becoming more of an issue with the growing number of visitors especially around the river.

The impact of Covid on central and local government finances will have an impact upon Parish Councils such as our own. Whatever the new normal turns out to be, we must remain alert to any pressure to reduce services to our residents and businesses.

Planning Advisory Group: Chair: Cllr. Jonathan Smith

In the year ending 31st March 2021 the Parish Council responded to 64 planning applications, which was 10 more than the previous year and at a similar level to two years ago.

These included various elements of planning condition approval relating primarily to existing home extensions and new developments , as well tree work applications in the conservation area.

The majority of the applications were for home extensions to create a larger open plan living area with the kitchen becoming the main social area of the home , as well as providing extra bedrooms and bathrooms above an enlarged ground floor.

The conversion of existing outbuildings into habitable annexes for sole use of the main residence has also been popular.

Due to restrictions imposed by the pandemic the Planning Advisory Group have not been able to hold the normal quarterly meetings with planning officers at CBC as such but have maintained contact and taken advice as necessary.

We seek to maintain a relationship with the planning officers who provide us with help and expertise; however, this does not compromise our responsibility to present independent representation on behalf of residents of Dedham.

Our overriding objective has been to protect the special character of Dedham and the AONB and to represent the views of residents, particularly where Applications generate opposition due to the potential impact on neighbours and the wider community and landscape.

Strategic Development Advisory Group: Chair: Cllr. Kevin Taylor

This year has not been one of big new strategy, just one of keeping Dedham well and operational through this interim difficult period. Covid did bring about the need to develop two new policies.

Firstly we now have a policy on remote meeting protocol.

Secondly, we were in discussion with CBC regarding street trading expectations as we progressed through the pandemic. There was a view that there would be a rise in trading from mobile vans and the licence procedure for this is managed through and is the responsibility CBC. That said CBC was keen to engage with us over this process, we have developed a Street Trading Policy to help ourselves and CBC to judge applications against. These can be seen under the Policy Documents page on our website.

The decision to close the Parish Office has been taken. The plan is for our records to be passed to the Essex Records Office to be digitised for safe keeping. Our thoughts on our clerks visibility and contact is that we would regularly sit in at the Duchy Barn coffee mornings for residents to “drop in”. That of course is dependant on our continued Covid recovery.

Miscellaneous

Relationship with Ward Councillors

Both Nigel Chapman and Anne Brown have actively supported us throughout the year. Their help regarding the river visitors and cooperation from their opposite numbers within Suffolk has made a difficult task easier.

There is no question that we are suffering from increased traffic and speeding, both these require cooperation at the senior levels within ECC. Anne has been leading on this engagement and has brought Tendring into the debate. Progress in the highways world is led budget and planning cycles. Awareness of problems is now high and we look forward to more speed and volume checks. Solutions however will need pursuing on the basis of evidence during the next phase.

Finally I would like to sincerely thank my fellow councillors for the work and help that they have given to our village, residents and myself over the past years. Not to be forgotten is our webmaster, John Goldsbrough, a crucial link to keeping in touch with all.

Kevin Taylor
DPC Chairman