

Birchanger Annual Parish Meeting
Held on Wednesday 18th March, 2015
At 8pm in Birchanger Village Hall

Present:

Angie Driscoll, Chair (AD)
Elizabeth Godwin (EG)
Alex Stewart (AS)
Linda Pocklington (LP)
Sandy Dowle (SD)
Maria Davy (MD) (to arrive later)
Michelle May (MM)
Keith Williams (Parish Clerk)
23 members of the public
Ray Gooding (RG)

Apologies

Matt Zych, Ken Wheatley

1 Chairman's Welcome

AD welcomed residents to the annual parish meeting and introduced councillors to those present.

2 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 26th March, 2014 were agreed.

3 Chairman's Report

Firstly I would like to introduce our new Parish Clerk, Keith Williams, with whom I'm sure many of you will be familiar, who started with us in January this year.

Several years ago Birchanger was awarded Section 106 funds to be spent on our highways. In February, although almost a year later than promised, we had a village gate installed at the A120 end of the lane along with a new 30mph sign near the Duck End bend, the previous one having been knocked down when the grass verge was cut. We're also due to have dragons teeth painted on the road at this point but so far I have no date for this. We're still waiting for all the signs on the roundabout to be renewed or at least tidied up – one has been at risk of falling down for a very long time now. At the Stansted Road end there wasn't sufficient space for a village gates but a new sign on two posts was installed.

I have on many occasions asked about signage to deter HGV drivers from following their sat-navs through the village. However, I understand that there are no DFT approved signs for this and neither are we allowed to erect one of our own. However, our Highways Liaison Officer is proposing that the entrance to the Lane at the A120 end be made narrower to deter large vehicles. As yet this hasn't got as far as the design stage so, if approved, it will be some considerable time before any work is carried out. In the meantime we'll just have to put up with inappropriate vehicles driving through the village.

We've requested various other improvements including a footpath around Churton Bend. I understand this has been agreed but have no further information at the moment regarding the installation. Neither is there any update on our request for a 20mph speed limit.

We've asked for 3 new streetlights. The first to replace the one that we had to have removed on the right hand side as you come up from Stansted Road between Highview and the church which was severely damaged on several occasions when the hedge was cut and cost the council several hundred pounds to have repaired each time. That stretch of the lane is now dark so we would like a light on the other side. Secondly a light outside the church hall and, finally, still further along the lane on a bend where it is quite narrow, near number 284. We would also request an upgrade of electronic ballast in the existing lights and new style lamps. So far we've not had confirmation regarding this request.

Flooding and broken kerbstones are other issues that have been reported several times but sadly, apart from registering the problems, no action has been taken.

The Recreation Ground has had a facelift with new equipment, including a zip wire and basket swing being installed and we're hoping to add picnic benches and plant some silver birch trees in the near future.

The overflying of Birchanger by helicopters has been a constant source of complaint and so in November last year Andrew Harrison the MD of Stansted Airport, was invited to the council meeting to speak about this. He attended with his colleague, Duncan Smith, who is the Flight Analysis and Air Quality Manager at the airport. 17 members of the public attended the meeting and a lively discussion followed.

To summarise: It appears that Stansted Airport has limited jurisdiction over helicopter flights. Nevertheless, the airport wanted to address concerns about these flights as far as possible and efforts have been made to log complaints and respond to them efficiently. Helicopters are generally forbidden from flying over populated areas at a height below 1,000 feet but this minimum is reduced to 500 feet in controlled airspace near the airport which includes Birchanger. The majority of helicopter traffic in and out of Stansted was to/from the west and would need to over-fly or fly very close to Birchanger. Helicopter pilots have to follow Way Points, the last one being at Puckeridge. From there pilots are requested to follow the A120 so that they do not fly over Birchanger. If they do not follow this path there is no financial penalty or other sanction that can be imposed. We were shown a map outlining the path that pilots are requested to follow. As a result in the upsurge of complaints from Birchanger, discussions had taken place with the senior training pilot of the main operator at Stansted (Harrods Aviation) to try to persuade their pilots not to over-fly Birchanger. It is more difficult to control "non Stansted Airport" helicopters ie those neither coming from, nor going to, Stansted Airport. A request to include Birchanger village in a list of areas to be avoided, as is the case with Burton End, ie formalised in the Airport Regulations for Stansted, was acknowledged and will be investigated for feasibility. I have recently received a letter from Andrew Harrison which states "We acted on this request immediately following the meeting. Subsequently the Flight Analysis Manager submitted an AIP change back in November 2014 to incorporate Birchanger, Stansted Mountfitchet and Bishops Stortford into the guidance areas to be avoided where possible by over-flying helicopters". Brian Ross will be updating us later on other developments at the airport.

The council have been investigating the installation of dog bins at several points around the village. However, before this can go ahead we obviously need the permission of the various landowners and so far we are still waiting to hear from several of them.

The Parish Council, as is the will of the electorate, always defends the green belt and, as such, when an application was made last year to build a house on green belt land the council and several local residents objected. The application was refused. However, the applicant then appealed against this decision and we, and others, again objected. In January we were extremely relieved to be informed that the appeal had also been refused.

You will all be aware that Elizabeth Godwin, our District Councillor will not be standing for election again in May. Elizabeth has been Birchanger's champion at UDC for 15 years and whoever replaces her will have a tough act to follow. I know you would all like to join me in thanking her for her unstinting work on our behalf.

Finally I would like to thank all the Councillors for all the time they devote on your behalf to keeping Birchanger the great place to live in that it is.

4 Police Update

AS advised that no police officer had been allocated to address the meeting. He had contacted the police several times in an effort to obtain statistics relating to crime in the village but with no success. He advised that the parish clerk had written to the local Police Commander in an effort to obtain the required information but with no response to date. He had identified a website which he hoped would provide some information but unfortunately this was not satisfactory. AS did report that there had been a few (possibly four) break-ins during the preceding year and that crime in the village was generally low.

5 Essex County Council Update

RG had met with the cabinet member responsible for Highways regarding the road repairs to Forest Hall Road and he was assured that instructions would be given for work to proceed. There had been great pressure on the budget which had been reduced by £47 million compared to last year. In 2005 the total budget for Essex was £2.3 billion. By 2015 this had reduced to £1.78 billion. There had been some reductions in services but most services had been maintained by employing greater efficiency.

The financial limit beyond which assessed individuals would have to pay for Health and Social Care has been increased from £27,500 to £118,000. The maximum total payment now is £72,500, which sounds a substantial amount of money, but as the average stay in care is 2 years and 3 months this would not go far.

There had been significant improvements for children in care. Currently there are 1011 in care which compares to a figure of 1650 previously. In education Key Stage 1 and 2 and above performance was above average. In the 17-22 age group only 4.4% are not in education or training.

Essex County Council was also looking into the implications of devolution which it is felt would help the Essex economy.

Finally, the County is trying to persuade the relevant authority to pass on to the county the air traffic charges from Stansted Airport.

AD thanked Ray for his contribution which was always very informative.

6 Airport Update

Brian Ross began by reminding the audience that 5 years ago Stansted Airport was the first in the queue to have the first new full length runway to be built in the UK since WW2, which would make Stansted bigger than Heathrow. The planning application had been submitted, the Inspectors appointed and a date had been set for the start of the Public Inquiry. The Conservatives and the Lib Dems both opposed a second Stansted runway and promised to cancel it. After the election they kept their promise with the result that BAA abandoned its plans for a second runway at Stansted, and wrote off £180 million in abortive expenditure. However, the Coalition Government eventually decided to re-consider the question of additional airport capacity for the South East and, in 2012, they set up an independent 'Airports Commission' to come up with the answers. The Commission is due to deliver its final report shortly after the forthcoming election and it will then be for the new Government to make the final decisions. What we do know, however, is that Stansted is not on the Commission's shortlist. Heathrow and Gatwick are the considered options.

There is a view that even with a new runway there will be a need, perhaps in 2040, for a further runway and Stansted may well figure in those plans. There are some powerful voices who see Stansted as the solution, including London Mayor Boris Johnson and the chief executive of Manchester Airport Group (MAG) Charlie Cornish, who are the current owners of Stansted Airport. MAG do still wish to expand the airport. We must therefore remain on our guard. It is also worth bearing in mind that even without a second runway, Stansted has the scope to double in size from the 20 million passengers it handled last year. The airport has been growing very rapidly in recent months, showing around 25% year-on-year growth in passenger numbers. Even so, it is still handling fewer passengers and flights today than it did at its peak, 8 years ago. Almost all the recent growth has come from Ryanair, which now accounts for approximately 82% of all Stansted passengers.

Finally Brian commented on the locally contentious issue of helicopters and said that it was obviously good that, following pressure from the Parish Council, Birchanger was now specified in the Stansted Airport Regulations as a settlement which helicopters should avoid overflying. However, this was not legally enforceable and we would still get rogue helicopters, but it would hopefully reduce the scale of the problem.

A questioner from the floor asked Brian if there was any truth in the suggestion that Ryanair wished to start trans-Atlantic flights. He said that this was certainly being considered but felt that as the required aircraft are likely to be Boeing 787 Dreamliners, for which there is a 5 year waiting period, this probably would not happen soon.

Another questioner from the floor asked if MAG would be selling the many houses that they owned in the airport area. Brian thought this was possible but that if so it would be a slow process as MAG would not want to sell too quickly because of the effect this would have on house prices.

This concluded Brian's presentation which received thanks from AD and a warm round of applause.

7 Resolutions

1) This meeting rejects any expansion to Stansted Airport and proposals in any form relating to a second runway.

The resolution above was passed with 31 votes for and 1 vote against.

2) This meeting rejects any further coalescence with neighbouring towns and villages and will endeavour to protect the remaining Green Belt surrounding the village.

The resolution above was passed with 31 votes for and 1 vote against

8 Any Other Business

Questions from the floor:

1. The patch of grassed area opposite 211 and 213 Birchanger Lane was in very poor condition and the local residents would like to improve the area. Has the Parish Council any objections to their carrying out such improvements?

AD said the Council would look in to this but permission would be required from Highways. EG pointed out that a rare weed had been identified many years ago as growing in this patch which had previously prevented any clearing of the area. RG offered to look into this for the council.

2. Was it possible to have a sign near no 213 Birchanger Lane to show drivers the actual route of the Lane as some drivers think the lane passes outside this house?

AD will look into this and request signage. There was a suggestion from the floor that the 2 black and white posts, which had fallen into decay, should be reinstated which may help to direct drivers.

3. What is happening about the installation of dog bins in the village?

AD referred to the part of her Chairman's Report which dealt partly with this issue but reiterated that the Parish Council is still pursuing the matter. MD, who had arrived from a meeting with the Birchanger Wood Trust earlier in the evening, said that the Trust would not allow dog bins in any part of the Wood. It is hoped that by next year's meeting there would be some more positive news.

4. Can we have a litterpick?

This would be discussed at the next Parish Council meeting.

5. There was concern about the large area of standing water which accumulates on the blind bend between the bus stop and the 'phone box whenever there has been a substantial period of rain. AD said that this had been reported several times already would be reported again.

6. Can something be done about the overflowing drain near Bradley Common and the flood area between Duck End and the A120?

AD said that these had also been reported previously and we would do so again.

7. There had recently been 3 accidents on the bend near Bradley Common. Could some additional signage be installed?

AD said she would contact Highways and request this be investigated.

8. Will the village be getting a 20 mph limit?

AD said although this had been requested there were no current plans.

9. Will the village be getting temporary VAS to slow down traffic?

Again there were no current plans. Previously the signs which had been provided were vandalised very soon after their installation.

9 Closure of Meeting

The meeting was closed at 9.12 pm.