

(Draft Minutes)
Birchanger Annual Parish Meeting
Held on Wednesday 24th March 2022
At 8pm in Birchanger Village Hall

Present:

Angie Driscoll, Chair (AD)
George Taylor (GT)
Sally Taylor (ST)
Linda Pocklington (LP)
John Revell (JR)
Peter Sampson (PS)
Geof Driscoll (GD)

Keith Williams (Parish Clerk)

1 resident of Birchanger

Ray Gooding (RG) (county councillor)
Melvin Caton (MC) (district councillor)

026. Chairman's Welcome

AD welcomed those attending to the annual parish meeting.

027. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 18th March 2020 were agreed as a true and accurate record of the meeting and were signed by the Chairman.

028. Chairman's Report

Good evening and thank you for coming this evening.

It's now just over two years since we last held an Annual Parish meeting, the last being just days before the first lockdown in March 2020.

During these last two years I've learnt again what a great village Birchanger is. During the various lockdowns many villagers have helped their friends and neighbours, whether it was just a phone call to say how are you, to offer to go shopping, or maybe pick up a prescription, so many have offered help. We were also fortunate to have had both the club and the pub offering takeaways and, during the first lockdown, the club had a shop selling essentials. Many of us who may not have otherwise done so have learnt how to hold Zoom meetings and what a boon they must've been to so many. I hope and pray that the worst of the pandemic is now behind us whilst we learn to live with the "new normal".

Although the Parish Council were not allowed to meet in person for many months we continued to meet virtually. So what has happened over the last 2 years?

I'm sure I've no need to remind anyone about the travellers who set up camp in July 2018. Eventually last October the Planning Inspectorate gave their decision on the travellers appeal against the UDC enforcement order. Disappointingly the travellers have been allowed to stay, but with conditions. I understand they have already applied to have one of these conditions removed regarding the submitting of a site plan, but this has been refused by UDC.

Again in 2018 Highways planned to remove the roundabout on the A120 at the top of Birchanger Lane and expected all vehicles leaving Birchanger to go around J8 to get to Dunmow Road and into Bishops Stortford. This plan was abandoned following protests led by Birchanger Parish Council and we were told that a separate lane would be created, controlled by traffic lights, to allow vehicles to directly access Dunmow Road. This plan was changed again but the first we all knew about it was when a letter was delivered at the end of December. The letter was very unclear as this separate lane had disappeared from the plan. However, it now seems that whilst there won't be a separate lane we will still be able to access Dunmow Road via a traffic light controlled crossing, without circumnavigating J8. Work has already started. Birchanger Lane was due to be closed for 90 days from the end of March. However, our County Councillor, Ray Gooding, and I met with the contractors on February 25 to discuss these works and it transpired that the lane will not now be closed until sometime in May. The purpose of the closure is to stop rat running through the village. We were also told that two lanes would be kept open on the A120 whilst work was taking place to enable traffic flow. We were also promised better communication from the contractors but so far I've had no communication from them.

In 2019 a traffic survey was carried out on the Lane and, whilst we'd didn't meet the criteria for a speed limit of 20 mph, it was, eventually, agreed that we could have what are commonly known as wig wags (flashing lights) installed on the lane before the hall, where many children enter and exit the school and opposite the club field, if we were prepared to pay £10,000. Given the number of speeding cars that travel along the lane and the danger they impose particularly around school drop off and pick up times, the Parish Council agreed and paid up last May. It has taken until February this year, in fact just 4 weeks ago, for these signs to be installed. Unfortunately, the one near the hall is in the wrong place. Obviously I've informed Highways of this and am waiting for it to be moved. I cannot emphasize enough how difficult it is to deal with Essex Highways. Their delay in responding, in fact communicating at all, whether it's regarding something like installing equipment or clearing a footpath is legendary! I understand that the new Chief Executive of Uttlesford District Council has had meetings with Essex Highways and we can only hope that this unacceptable situation will improve. I am also due to meet Cllr Lee Scott, who is ECC Cabinet member for Highways, in a couple of weeks to discuss the various issues we have.

I'm sure that you are also aware that Stansted Airport unfortunately won the judicial review and are now able to increase passenger numbers. Brian Ross will be updating us on Stansted Airport Watch later in this meeting.

Uttlesford District Council are preparing a new Local Plan. As part of this some months ago there was a call for sites. 319 sites around Uttlesford were put forward, mostly in the south of the district, and, in fact, if the sites around Birchanger were accepted the village would be completely surrounded by new housing. Fortunately we are surrounded by green belt and have been assured that there are no exceptional circumstances, which would need to be proved to build on the green belt, so the threat has so far been removed. However, the planning group within the Parish Council spent many hours drawing up reasons why these sites are not suitable so I must thank those who helped me, Cllr Sally Taylor and Elizabeth Godwin.

Another planning issue has been the barn along the sand track. Firstly, the owner wanted to convert it into 2 houses under permitted development rules. The information given in the application was inaccurate but UDC agreed the development could go ahead. This decision this was subsequently quashed by the high court. However, another application has now been made to use the barn for industrial purposes, again giving inaccurate information. A decision has not yet been made but on this, as with the previous application, the Parish Council, Harrison's residents association and many other have strongly objected.

Each year we ask those at the annual parish meeting to vote on these last two issues, Stansted expansion and protecting the green belt, and we will be doing this again at the end of this meeting.

We have all now received this years council tax bill and inevitably it has risen again. The Parish Council precept is collected with the council tax. The Parish Council budget for the year 2022/23 was £22,597. However, as we have sufficient funds, and for the third successive year, we were able to cut our precept. On this occasion to £15,000, a cut of about a third.

Many celebrations over the last two years, both big and small, have had to be cancelled but I'm very pleased that so far the Queen's Platinum Jubilee celebration will be going ahead in June. As part of this the Parish Council have been asked to light a beacon on Thursday, June 2 and, once again, the club are allowing this event to take place in their grounds. The Parish Council is working with the club and there will be 4 days of events to which everyone is welcome.

Thank you for listening, but before I end I must thank our Clerk and Councillors for all the time they freely give and for the support I receive from them all.

029. Essex County Council Update from County Councillor Ray Gooding

- Essex has set a 4 ½% increase in council tax.
- £834m is collected annually, of which £670m is allocated for adult social care. This supports 17000 people. Of the 17000 people, 43% have learning difficulties.
- In addition there are children's services. Children over 16 in foster homes can choose to leave their foster home. ECC then has to find them suitable accommodation.
- Domestic violence incidents have escalated over the past twelve months. 30% of the victims are men. 5% of the perpetrators are children committing violence on parents.
- For the A120 roundabout, the first time this was cancelled as it was over budget and ECC decided not to proceed. The latest operation is within budget and is therefore proceeding.

030. Airport Update by Brian Ross

- In March 2020 UDC had just refused MAG's request for expansion of Stansted Airport. MAG appealed but left this appeal to the last moment leaving little time for UDC and SSE (SAW) to prepare their responses.
- UDC planning officers decided not to pursue all their original bases for opposition. In the event the appeal application was approved.
- MAG had stated that there would be little impact on traffic. They later admitted that they had underestimated the impact by 40%.
- It will likely take some considerable time for passenger numbers to return to pre-covid levels. Significant growth to 43m is not likely to happen any time soon.
- MAG want to remove the current limit on night flights.
- Cargo flight numbers have remained steady. Many of the flights are at night and utilise older, noisier aircraft.
- MAG has applied for funding from the UK government. A major shareholder in MAG is a company registered in the Cayman Islands.

031. 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 unanimously.

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 unanimously.

032. Closure of Meeting

There being no further matters to discuss the meeting was declared closed at 20.32.