



Saxmundham Town Council

Chairman's Annual Report May 2021

This report would normally cover just one year in the life of Saxmundham Town Council, from April 2020 to April 2021. But since last year we were locked down due to the COVID pandemic and no Annual Town Meeting was possible, this report summarises our activities over the two year period since the Town Council elections were held in May 2019.

CHALLENGES AND ACTIVITIES

RESPONDING TO COVID

In March 2020, and prior to the first lockdown, it was clear that we needed to be ready for whatever the coming pandemic would confront our community with. We therefore agreed to provide up to £10,000 in 2020/21 to support the work of the newly formed charity, IP17 Good Neighbour Scheme, in particular to engage its co-ordinator. Councillor Diana Eastman agreed to be our main link, and became a trustee of IP17GNS, whose committee she now chairs. This provides a strong level of cooperation between the council and the charity; the Town Council also provides office space for the charity at present. We wish to record our thanks to the many volunteers who have given time, expertise and commitment in order to serve our community, especially the more vulnerable members. And a big thank you to our Vice Chair Diana Eastman who has dedicated so much of her time and support to ensure that the Good Neighbour Scheme works well.

PLANNING FOR THE TOWN'S FUTURE



Making our point at the start of the Local Plan public inquiry

LOCAL PLAN

The District Council's Local Plan for the Suffolk Coastal area identifies Saxmundham as one of its growth hubs, and allocates land to the south of the town for a new 800 dwelling 'Garden Neighbourhood'. The Town Council argued in particular that – while the town needs to

continue to grow – the scale was excessive, and that the land to the east of the railway (The Layers) should be kept as open space and not built upon.

In summer 2019, the Town Council was represented at the public examination of the draft Local Plan; the examiner agreed with our case in respect of preserving The Layers, but accepted the size of the overall development. The Local Plan was finally adopted by East Suffolk Council in September 2020. The policy for Saxmundham includes a requirement that the local community be engaged in the defining of a masterplan for the new Neighbourhood.

In December 2020, the would-be developer, Pigeon Investment Management, conducted a consultation exercise to which the Town Council responded. We criticized the fact that Pigeon's proposals did not correspond to the new Local Plan policy, and failed to connect the new Neighbourhood in any effective way to the Town. We are in dialogue with East Suffolk planners over issues relating to the Garden Neighbourhood, in order to try and get the best outcome for the town, and await the next stage of consultation.

NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN



Team of volunteers off to deliver the household survey questionnaires

In parallel, we have been working towards drawing up the Saxmundham Neighbourhood Plan (NP). By law, an NP must not contradict the policies of the Local Plan, but

may add local planning policies. Our NP Steering Group comprises councillors and community volunteers.

In summer 2019, we conducted a household survey of residents, hand delivered to over 2,000 homes by volunteers. We received back over 500 completed forms, giving the views of almost 1,000 residents. We published the results in 2020. In general, the results supported our position on the Garden Neighbourhood and on The Layers. Residents also underlined the need for more and better community facilities and infrastructure as the town grows.

We have since January 2020 had access to technical support for our NP work through the engagement of engineering and planning consultants, AECOM, who have provided very useful advice in relation to design issues for the Garden Neighbourhood, and for the Town Centre. We have also now engaged consultants to assist the Steering Group with drafting the Plan itself. Almost all this support is provided via government funding to NP work, not via the Town Council's budget. The aim is to have a first draft available for public consultation by late summer, and finalise it in 2022.

TOWN CENTRE AND THE LOCAL ECONOMY

Our 2019 household survey of residents gave wide support for measures to make the town centre look and work better. Many want more space and priority for pedestrians, e.g. through wider pavements, as well as a more attractive environment, and control over illegal parking etc. The Town Council and Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group are looking at the options.

We have since 2019 worked closely with East Suffolk Council's officers with a view to promoting the longer-term viability of the local economy, and improving the town centre environment to encourage visitors and customers. We are setting up a Business Network, and providing a business directory within our new website, offering a free promotional slot to local businesses. With part-funding from East Suffolk, we are also implementing a project for better signage and signposting at key points in the town. We have also recently agreed a town centre and business support action plan with East Suffolk's economic development team. We hope to receive some grant support to help implement the plan's proposals.

The weekly market is presently very small, with COVID adding to the longer term problems. We have waived all market fees for stall-holders for the time being, and are looking at ways of attracting new types of stall and e.g. using the Market Hall again as an additional area.

ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE EMERGENCY

In October 2019, the Council gave its backing to Cllr Hiley's motion to join other councils in declaring a 'climate emergency', and pledging to work with other organisations "to help achieve East Suffolk District Council's ambition to

become carbon neutral by 2030 and to maintain Suffolk's claim to be the 'Greenest County', and to develop, carry out and support a programme of action here in Saxmundham for a better environment." We are currently seeking to recruit a part-time Environmental Co-ordinator to help take this forward.

SIZEWELL C

We have followed closely the proposals of EDF for the construction of Sizewell C. While not taking a position on nuclear energy as such, the Council has expressed serious concerns at the possible impacts of the development on Saxmundham, and on the wider area environment. One issue for the town is the proposal for night-time freight trains to pass through our residential areas. We are also seeking to ensure that if Sizewell C proceeds, our town will gain some economic benefits.

SAXMUNDHAM STATION

After the big fire of February 2018 until recently, Saxmundham station was in a shameful condition. In summer 2019, we invited representatives of Greater Anglia to a public meeting with councillors and the community, with almost 100 residents in attendance, to explain what was planned. We thank the GA representatives for coming – it was not an easy meeting! The Town Council unsuccessfully opposed the planning application for a single storey replacement of the old two-storey one, since we felt the replacement was not adequate, and no community facilities were provided. The design was later improved, and we are sure that once current works are completed, the station will prove a far more attractive 'landing point' for visitors to our town and area. We have also sought to help with the forecourt landscape design. We funded professional support and plants for the forecourt landscape design; councillors helped the Station Adopters plant the native species trees and drought-resistant perennial plants to this design. Our own building and car park area opposite have also been upgraded including trees.

EVENTS AND ENTERTAINMENT



The Town Council made a financial grant to the Sax Music Festival for 2019, and was intending to do so in 2020, but due to the pandemic, the festival did not proceed. We also helped to organize the Christmas 2019 event in the High Street and Market Hall, along with other partners. Despite poor weather, it attracted a good participation. For Christmas 2020, we supported the community activities of IP17 Good Neighbour Scheme. We hope to

have an event in December 2021... For both years, the Town Council has funded the Christmas Light display (and trees) in the town centre.

MARKET HALL



The Market Hall was the venue in 2019 for a series of musical events under the aegis of 'Sax Jazz', which were mostly well supported with enthusiastic audiences. Our thanks in particular to Rosie Hoare for her energy and skill

in organizing the programme. In addition, we supported a Tea Dance aimed at older citizens, which pupils from the SET secondary school kindly helped with. Alas, the pandemic meant that we had to postpone events planned for 2020.

In 2020/21, the Hall, which the Council holds on charitable trust for the community, has had an internal 'make over' with the interior being redecorated, the floor polished, new curtains and lighting. Thanks to a grant from East Suffolk District Council, the hall has also been fitted with a new projector and facilities for hosting virtual events. We next plan to improve the kitchen and its facilities, which sorely require modernisation and repair. We also aim to renew the High Street frontage, to bring it closer in look to its original impressive façade, and to modernise the toilet blocks. This will certainly require external grant support.

As soon as Covid-19 rules allow the hall will be available for hire again, and there will be an annual programme of community events and performances.

REPORT OF CHAIR OF AMENITIES & SERVICES COMMITTEE

In the past year the Committee has had a 4 strong team of members actively working on improving and maintaining our local amenities.

MEMORIAL FIELD & PLAY AREAS

We looked at all of the children's play areas and particularly the Memorial Field, which we felt needed some additional seating and bins. These were installed in the autumn. We also carried out some betterment works to the Youth Booth in the Memorial Field, and are engaging contractors to redecorate its exterior. We have also reacted to requests from the public and have replaced and provided some additional waste bins in the town. We are looking at a project to carry out a major landscaping project on the Memorial Field for the centenary year 2022.

STATION AREA AND COUNCIL OFFICES



Community Fridge volunteers at the Town House

The council offices opposite the station – now renamed the Town House - have been refurbished with the installation of new windows and internal decoration. The

building now has a new sign saying 'Saxmundham Town Council'. In addition to housing our staff, the Town House has in recent months been the base for IP17 GNS and the Community Fridge.

We have also carried landscaping works by planting a number of trees around the perimeter of the frontage. We have future plans to plant bulbs in the coming autumn, and have been helping with planting in the station forecourt itself, alongside Greater Anglia's renewal of the station building. A new town map has been commissioned to help guide visitors to the many attractions of Saxmundham; it will be located opposite the station in the Town House car park.

TOWN CENTRE

We have arranged the hanging baskets for the town centre again this year and hope to increase the planting in and around the town in 2022 as part of the overall improvements to the centre. Following a request from one of our residents, we are putting in place a new walking trail around the town - details to be published in due course.

ADMINISTRATION

We reviewed our health & safety administration and introduced some new forms, to build on the good work already carried out by the Clerks. We have started to produce a database of contractors for the ongoing work needed on council assets. We have reviewed the asset register and started to develop a maintenance schedule for works needed to be carried out on an annual basis.

Tim Lock, Chair

REPORT OF CHAIR OF PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT CONTROL COMMITTEE

Saxmundham Town Council is a statutory consultee for planning applications for development within the parish. This Committee (currently of 3 members) comments on each application received and also discusses other planning related issues. We met via Zoom on 12 occasions during the year ending March 2021 to consider 26 planning applications and 8 applications for tree works. Applications ranged from small alterations & extensions to a pair of semi-detached dwellings.

East Suffolk Council has recently adopted the latest revision of the Suffolk Coastal Local Plan which includes

a proposed South Saxmundham Garden Neighbourhood with 800 dwellings. This and the development of a Saxmundham Neighbourhood Plan are two of the major planning issues in the town, but these are being looked at by a separate working party.

I would like to thank the committee members for their dedication and give special thanks to Jen Morcom, Assistant Town Clerk, for all her organising of us.

John Fisher, Chair

THE COUNCIL'S STRATEGIC AIMS

Back in June 2019, the Council agreed its broad strategic priorities which have guided our work:

- **To communicate effectively and engage positively** with all parts of the local community,
EXAMPLES: newsletter, household survey, more use of Facebook sites, development of new town & council website
 - **To define an effective strategy for sustainable development and regeneration** for the future of our town and benefit of our citizens
EXAMPLES: development of Neighbourhood Plan including expert consultants' advice; response to district council's Local Plan; response to developer's proposals for masterplan for new South Saxmundham Garden Neighbourhood
 - **To help create a stronger sense of community cohesion and self-confidence**, working with local organisations and (within our means) supporting their activities
EXAMPLES: practical and financial support to
- COVID-emergency community work of IP17 Good Neighbour Scheme;*
 - **To promote our town and its interests effectively** as a great place to live, work and invest in and visit,
EXAMPLE: interviews with regional press and broadcast media; advertising supplement for Saxmundham businesses in East Anglian Daily Times
 - **To be a good, forward-looking steward of our community assets and facilities**, and – within our means - to provide and develop good local public services
EXAMPLE: Refurbishment of Market Hall, development of improved signage around town centre
 - **To develop a more effective council administration** based on strong adherence to values of efficiency, responsiveness, professionalism, value for money and public service.

OFFICE-HOLDERS

The following were elected by fellow councillors at the Annual General Meetings of the Town Council held in May 2019 and (by Zoom meeting) in May 2020:

2019-2020

Chair of the Town Council: Jeremy Smith

Vice-Chair: John Fisher

Chair of Resources Committee: John Fisher

Chair of Market Hall Management Committee: Jeremy Smith

Chair of Amenities Working Group (set up later in year): Tim Lock

2020-2021

Chair of Town Council: Jeremy Smith

Vice-Chair: Diana Eastman

Chair of Resources Committee: John Findlay

Chair of Amenities and Services Committee: Tim Lock

Chair of Planning & Development Control Committee: John Fisher

Chair of Market Hall Management Committee: Jeremy Smith

YOUR COUNCILLOR TEAM

Only four persons chose in 2019 to stand as candidates for the eleven Town Council seats, and were thus elected. Four was the legal minimum to avoid the council being taken over by the district council. This indicated to us that interest or trust in town-level local democracy in Saxmundham had reached a very low ebb, and we needed to act positively to reverse this and seek to rebuild confidence within the local community.

We acted rapidly to ensure the Town Council was viable, by seeking candidates to "co-opt" as councillors. I am delighted to say that some talented and committed local citizens stepped forward and were co-opted, and have played a great role during what has turned out to be a complex as well as busy period. It's worth recalling that town councillors are all volunteers who receive no financial remuneration for their work.

The full councillor "team" by late 2019 was as follows:

Elected: Councillors John Fisher, Nigel Hiley, James Sandbach, Jeremy Smith

Co-opted: Councillors Diana Eastman, John Findlay, Charlotte Hawkins, Tim Lock, Jonathon Macro, Anne-Marie Reynolds, Georgia Watson

We were sorry that, of those co-opted, Anne-Marie Reynolds and Georgia Watson resigned in 2020 due to the impacts of the pandemic, while Jonathon Macro left us due to a promotion which took him away to Wales! More recently (February 2021) we have made a further co-option, Roger Hedley Lewis. This leaves two current vacant positions.



Roger Hedley Lewis



James Sandbach



Nigel Hiley



Charlotte Hawkins



John Fisher



Tim Lock



John Findlay



Jeremy Smith



Di Eastman

CURRENT COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

Resources Committee: Cllrs John Findlay, Diana Eastman, John Fisher, Nigel Hiley, James Sandbach, Jeremy Smith

Amenities & Services Committee: Cllrs Tim Lock, Diana Eastman, Charlotte Hawkins, Roger Hedley Lewis, James Sandbach

Planning & Development Control Committee: Cllrs John Fisher, Charlotte Hawkins, Nigel Hiley

Market Hall Management Committee: Jeremy Smith, John Findlay, Charlotte Hawkins, Tim Lock, plus non-councillor members Carol Cecil, Rosie Hoare

OUR STAFF TEAM

Our long-standing Town Clerk, Maddie Gallop, gave notice of her retirement in late 2019, and her employment ceased in March 2020. We are grateful to Maddie for her long service and dedication to the town.

The Council decided to engage an interim Town Clerk to give time for a full recruitment programme to take place, and in March 2020 engaged the services of Karen Forster as Interim Clerk. This coincided with the start of the COVID pandemic and lockdown, and we are extremely grateful to Karen for helping the Council most ably through this complicated period.

Over the summer, we advertised the permanent Town Clerk position, and were pleased to engage the current Town Clerk, Rosalind ('Roz') Barnett who started with us in November 2020, Roz is also very experienced, having worked as Town Clerk in Eye and Deputy Town Clerk in Thetford.

Our Assistant Town Clerk, Jen Morcom, has remained with us throughout, and has helped greatly in ensuring continuity during this period of rapid change.

OUR TOWN COUNCIL MEETINGS

Until March 2020, all Town Council meetings were held – mainly monthly - in person and in public, at the Market Hall. From March 2020 to April 2021, all of our meetings were held online using Zoom technology, which a temporary change in the law permitted. Members of the public have been able to join, and

a few have done so, but not on any significant scale. From 7th May this year, the temporary power to hold online meetings has ceased, so we must now, by law, meet again in person. In so doing, the Town council will of course follow government guidance in relation to ensuring health and safety guidelines are followed.

THE TOWN COUNCIL'S FINANCES

The Town Council each year (normally in January) agrees its budget and the amount of the precept (Saxmundham town element of council tax) to support that budget. Our Resources Committee, which normally meets monthly, oversees financial performance. The Town Clerk acts as our Responsible Financial Officer.

For the 2019/20 financial year, precept income was around £207,500, while ordinary expenditure at the end of the year was around £201,000.

For the financial year 2020/21, the accounts have not yet been audited, but again we anticipate a modest surplus, in part due to the COVID situation which has meant that some originally anticipated expenditure (e.g. for music festival) did not take place or was lower. Precept income was £224,500, with a 5% increase in the Saxmundham element of the Council Tax. In addition to inflation, this increase was in part due to the sharp continuing shortfall in market fee income (previously £5,000).

For the current year, 2021/22, the Town Council agreed a budget which includes precept income of £223,000

with a zero increase in our Saxmundham element of the Council Tax (Band D).

In addition to the ordinary budget, like all parish councils we receive an element of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), paid by developers for new housing etc. in the parish area. It can be spent on infrastructure or in meeting needs due to the pressures of development on our area. In both 2019/20 and in 2020/21, we received payments of over £30,000. In 2020/21 the Town Council agreed to spend a total of £18,000 on capital items relating to new equipment for the Adventure Playground, new kitchen equipment for the new Fromus Centre premises in Street Farm Road, a contribution to the Art Station at the old GPO telephone exchange building, and a contribution to the Market Hall refurbishment and new equipment. The CIL balance as at 31st March was £48,000.

The Town Council's accounts are audited annually; they may be inspected and are posted on the town council's website.