

## Thurston Parish Council Annual Report 2021

The last time an Annual Report was produced by the Chair was more than two years ago, in March 2019.

It would be an understatement to say that a lot has changed since the last report. Our Neighbourhood Plan had not been approved in March 2019, major housing developments around the village had yet to build any actual new homes, the site for the new primary school had not been confirmed and who could have predicted that a global pandemic would devastate world economies, cause 165m infections worldwide and result in 3.5m deaths to date.

The coronavirus has affected all our lives and our thoughts are with those who have lost family and friends to the disease or have been impacted in other ways because of the impact on other health and community services and the downturn in the economy.

For the Parish Council the past year has been one of adapting to changing circumstances, delivering our functions and services regardless of the restrictions in place, maintaining our meeting schedules through virtual communications and home working. This week marks the return to in-person meetings for the council for the first time since March 2020 and for some members of the council the the first opportunity to meet in person.

As we emerge though from what is hopefully the final period of lockdown, we look forward to a return to normal life in as many ways as possible. We will welcome more new members to the community in the coming year, continue to work with existing developments in the village and manage the impact of future proposals. New facilities will open for the community and our existing services and infrastructure will continue to be developed to ensure that Thurston remains a thriving community, able to supports the needs of both existing and future residents.

Moving on into the main body of the report, this is my opportunity for a number of important thank you's.

- A thank you first to all the members of the council who have committed their time and energy to the parish this year. We currently have 10 councillors working to try and achieve the best for the village.

Since my last report, councillors Richard Fawcett, Anne O'Connell, Ian Hasler, Peter Robinson and Alastair Angus have left the council, while Sarah Cornell, Julian West, Keith Towers, James Hay and Nigel Turner have joined.

My thanks again to Vice Chairman Brian Rainbow, for supporting myself and Vicky, Clerk to the Council and to all the councillors, including Barbara Morris, John Thurlbourn and Derrick Haley chairing or serving as part of our committees including Planning, Recreational Facilities, Emergency Planning and our new Environment Awareness and Climate Committee and Youth Council, helping to support the development of the village, ensuring that Thurston offers the best environment possible for those who live, work and attend school here.

To Steve, our litter picker for maintaining the public areas and to Trevor our village handyman for maintenance and repairs around the village.

Thanks also to our Suffolk County Councillor, Penny Otton and Mid Suffolk Councillors Wendy Turner and Harry Richardson for their support on county and district issues including road infrastructure and planning.

And to our Clerk. Despite the lockdown periods, there has been no let-up in the work, expectations, or requirements of the council, indeed the volume and breadth of work of the council appears to increase continuously. Vicky has continued to ensure that the council maintains and exceeds the standards expected of us in all aspects including financial management, health and safety, our role as a statutory consultee on planning matters and in professionalism in delivery and working with other organisations and stakeholders.

I am very pleased to report that during the year we recruited a Deputy Clerk, Antonia, who already has experience as a parish clerk and has assumed some of Vicky's responsibilities such as providing clerk support to some of our committees, allowing Vicky to concentrate on matters including planning and the overall operation of the council. Antonia has settled in quickly despite the difficult circumstances and is making a significant contribution to the day-to-day work of the council. We also acknowledge our previous Administrative Assistant, Angela Dean, who left the council last year.

I would like to take the opportunity to pass on thanks to everyone involved in the delivery of the Thurston Covid-19 Emergency Plan, which, through a network of local volunteers, so successfully supported many in the village forced to self-isolate during the pandemic. Local coordinators helped to organise and prioritise the volunteers, supported by Councillor Keith Towers, Mr Richard Fawcett and Mr Graham Dixon, with overall delivery managed by Vicky, Parish Clerk. The scheme was one of the quickest in Mid Suffolk to respond to the emergency, largely due to the numbers of volunteers who so readily came forward to help, including offering support with shopping, collecting prescriptions and providing overall support to residents unable to leave their homes

In planning matters, our Neighbourhood Plan was overwhelmingly approved at a referendum by the parish and subsequently adopted by Mid Suffolk District Council in October 2019. The Neighbourhood Plan will help to support sustainable development in the future by becoming a key reference for planning applications. Although we were disappointed when other residential developments, including additional homes along Ixworth Road and Beyton Road received planning permission in early 2020, a key test will be a judicial review of the Beyton Road development and we expect to hear more on this soon. Payments from the Community Infrastructure Levy or CIL are now being received by the parish and this funding will increasingly support the cost of essential infrastructure necessitated by the growth of the village. Finally on planning, the new primary school is quickly taking shape on Norton Road, with completion scheduled for summer 2021.

We are pleased to be able to support local organisations each year with small grants so that they are able to provide services to support our residents. Organisations supported over the last two years include New Green Community Trust for maintenance of the open space and for improved CCTV, The Cavendish Hall, The Recreation Ground Charity, St Peters Church with maintenance of the Church Yard, Friends of Thurston Library, Royal British Legion, Ixworth Patients Association, Mid and West Suffolk Citizen's Advice Bureau, Suffolk Accident Rescue Service, EACH The East Anglia's Children's Hospitals, Headway Suffolk, Suffolk Age UK, the Fresh Start/New Beginnings charity, Suffolk neighbourhood Watch Association and Tiny Toes Toddler group.

Organisations within the village who provide services to local residents, can apply for a grant using a simple application form available from the Clerk and the request will then be considered by the Parish Council. Requests for grant support from organisations based outside the village including regional groups may be considered where there is or has been a recognisable benefit to Thurston.

Thurston Parish Council has a number of responsibilities many of which have a financial implication, including maintaining the village sports, recreational and play facilities and equipment, some street lighting and general village maintenance and litter clearance. The village also fully funds its own Police Community Support Officer for Thurston, Matt Smith. The combined cost of these services along with the core running costs of the parish council is supported by the annual precept, funded by the Council Tax paid by each household. For 2021/22 the Parish Council has determined to keep any rise in the precept to a minimum and it will therefore increase by 1.3% - £1.13 per annum or just over 2 pence per week for a Band D Property. As income to the parish has risen as a result of the receipt of funds such as the Community Infrastructure Levy there is a greater emphasis on accountability and ensuring financial information is provided in a transparent and concise manner. All papers including those relating to finance are uploaded to the website for perusal by Councillors and members of the public ahead of all meetings.

Our monthly Parish Council meeting is held on the first Wednesday of every month at the Library. Anyone can attend the Parish Council meetings and raise an issue or an area of concern in public forum. The public are also invited to attend our other committee meetings planning meetings, the majority of which will be held at the Library. The dates of all of these meetings are advertised on the notice boards around the village and on the Thurston website. Until Covid-19 social distancing requirements are fully lifted, there may be restrictions on the numbers able to attend meetings.

Moving forward, key tasks for the council in the coming year include:

- Partnership working with the Library for acting as a conduit for signposting newcomers and existing residents to services and facilities within and without the village and the new Thurston Guide for Residents will complement this process.
- Update and reissue the footpath map
- Increase the social media presence of the council including maintaining a Facebook page
- Revamp of the village website to incorporate additional local information
- Taking on responsibility for the clearing of footpaths rather than scheduling works by SCC Highways

Christopher Dashper Chairman of Thurston Parish Council May 2021