

Report by District Councillors Schwier and Tattersley to the Parish Assemblies within the 3 Fields Ward of Braintree District Council

The last year has been both challenging and interesting for us as your District Council Representatives. We were elected in May 2015 to represent the Parishes of Great Bardfield, Finchingfield, Panfield, Shalford, and Wethersfield, and will face reselection by the Conservative Party, and re-election in 2019.

We are not full time or salaried but receive a monthly allowance. In addition to attending Parish Council Meetings, we also have a role in the District Council and between us we attended around 340 meetings, seminars and events related directly to our elected responsibilities. This is in addition to the telephone and e-mail queries that occur on a daily basis.

Whilst this is a significant workload, we feel privileged to represent our Parishes on issues affecting them at the District Council. We also aim to keep the Parish Clerk aware about issues that the parish council may find interesting and informative which they may otherwise not get to hear about. Over the last couple of months, these have included external funding and grant opportunities, clarification about the legal definition of affordable housing and rents, road closures, Braintree Town Centre Redevelopment proposals, A120 improvements, improved Wi-Fi, Assets of Community Value and clarification about the availability of brown field sites for development. We are also able to direct the Parish Council to the most appropriate Council Officer, Department or body that is able to deal with local Parish issues.

Whilst we would normally support the Parish Council's views on all things affecting their Parish, sometimes we have to consider issues in the wider community interest. A typical example would be the Braintree District Local Plan, and in particular the development of larger community settlements.

The District Council is obliged to provide within the Local Plan development space for around 850 new homes each year, up to the year 2033, when the Plan will be updated. Failure to provide this space will result in the Council's planning powers being handed to Government appointed, unelected Officers.

Clearly, the aim would be to restrict all new building to areas which have the local communities support, but unfortunately this is not always the case, although a good number of Parishes have recognised that some small scale development can be helpful in maintaining schools, shops and pubs. However, the Council can only allocate land where the landowner is willing to allow development. A criticism that the Council could have met its housing obligations through only allocating Brown Field Sites is misguided. Statistics gathered during the development of the Plan show that if all the brown field sites in the District were offered for development by the landowner, they would only provide 17% of the housing numbers required. This falls to 5% when the sites actually offered are considered.

The majority of the identified developments will take place in and around the major settlements of Braintree, Witham and Halstead, but in order to avoid widespread development of our villages it has been necessary to consider new developments to the East and West of Braintree. The proposal that is most likely to affect our Parishes, a development proposal to the West of Braintree, is for 2500 homes during the life of the Plan, although

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space is being identified for more properties, depending on circumstances after 2033. These proposals will help ensure there is housing available for our children and grandchildren, with the necessary infrastructure of roads, schools, health and leisure facilities, shops, and employment land. Of particular concern is that planning permission has been granted for over 1800 new homes where building has not started. This appears to be due to developers sitting on land waiting for property prices to increase.

The Council is also looking to deal with the problem of homes being left unoccupied by doubling the council tax on those properties.

Against a backdrop of well-publicised reductions of Central Government Grant to local councils, the Council has found savings or opportunities for raising income for the financial year 2018/19 of around £877,000. We also continue to maintain all essential services and support the local economy and infrastructure by

- Providing a financial contribution to speed up a consultation on the preferred routes for the widening of the A12 and new route for the A120
- Working in partnership with the NHS to provide modern health care facilities in Braintree, Witham and Sible Hedingham
- Purchasing 63 acres of land at Great Notley to provide spaces for new factories and employment land
- Redeveloping the Braintree Town Centre
- Securing £4.95 million to build new slip roads to reduce the congestion around the A120 and Millennium Way
- Handing over the management of the Braintree Museum and Warner Archive to external Trustees who have the background and expertise to further enhance this asset
- Awarded over 80 grants to local community groups through the councillor grant scheme
- Provided improved disability access at our swimming pools and continue to introduce more schemes to allow over 60s to become more active, introducing new dementia friendly swimming and exercise sessions at our leisure centres and swimming pools, and investigating the growing problem of childhood obesity.
- Carrying out research into the extent of social isolation and loneliness, especially in our more rural areas, and helping to minimise the problem through continued use of the community transport and similar schemes.

We are proud to be associated with our dedicated Parish Councils, individual Parish Councillors and community groups in one of the most picturesque area of Essex.

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