

ANNUAL PARISH MEETING

Held on Thursday 15th May 2025, commencing at 7.30 pm. in the Village Hall.

Present:

Chair: Cllr Janice Muckian. Cllrs: Alison Bourne, Mary Morrey, Jane Ranzetta, Iain Lamont, Chris Robinson and Michael Sherman. Twenty members of the public.

1. Opening Statement by the Chair:

The Chair began by welcoming everyone and introduced herself.

The Chair outlined that this is an opportunity for parishioners on the Electoral Roll for Lavenham to raise any matters of concern to them that relate to local matters and for the electors to receive reports from community organisations. The Chair explained that the meeting will be recorded for the purpose of minute taking only and that once the minutes are approved, at the next Annual Meeting, the recording will be destroyed. She asked all to ensure that their 'phones were on silent.

2. To approve as accurate minutes of the Annual Parish Meeting held on 18th April 2024

The Chair introduced the minutes emphasising that these had been on the PC website for a year.

Motion: to approve as accurate the minutes of the Annual Parish Meeting held on 18th April 2024

Proposed: Iain Lamont **Seconded:** Phil Smith

Decision: The minutes of the Annual Parish Meeting held on 18th April 2024 were approved as accurate with no votes against.

3. Reports by County and District Councillors**Report from County Councillor Robert Lindsay**

The Clerk delivered Cllr Lindsay's report. Cllr Lindsay was at the meeting of another parish.

Locality and Highways discretionary budget spending

Cllr Lindsay said that he has used up his Locality and Highways budgets. However, because County Council elections have been cancelled, he is still in office and has been allotted further annual budgets.

He explained that spending of relevance to Lavenham in the past year from those two budgets included £1,000 on fencing for Lavenham pre-schools forest school and £650 paying for painting a 30mph roundel on Bridge Street Road after residents complained about speeding traffic there.

Motions during the year

He told all present of a Green, LibDem and Independent Group Motion in October to ask for a cross-party panel of Councillors to look at lowering the bar with respect to intervening for pavement repairs. Currently they will not repair if the pavement is less than 2cm above the level. He explained that the administration had voted this down but had promised that they would review the criteria they used.

In December 2024 the Group got unanimous approval for a motion calling on the government to adopt policies of prioritising "roofs before rural" when it comes to the roll out of panels. He suggested that there are no real reasons why solar panels cannot be made compulsory in new builds and planning barriers to solar on existing rooftops cannot be eased.

20mph scheme – it's this one or nothing.

He explained that this is something the Parish Council had asked him to apply for five years ago and that he had spent time and energy over subsequent years pushing Highways for action and for a better scheme than the one they first came up with. It had been a case of haggling both by him and by some members of the Parish Council.

He said that, in his opinion, the scheme that eventually won approval, following a statutory consultation, is not perfect but it is better than the scheme that Highways had first proposed and, in his opinion, better than having a 30mph speed limit which is plainly too fast for much of the village.

He noted that the PC has decided not to take a decision on this scheme and instead ballot the village. He said that if the village votes against this scheme, then he will not sponsor or promote any other 20mph scheme in Lavenham because it is clear that no other scheme will be accepted by Highways.

Bus improvements

He told all that he was pleased that the bus from Sudbury via Lavenham and Cockfield to Bury St Edmunds had received funding for extra capacity and that, although not of direct relevance to Lavenham, he had also been pleased that the County Council are looking again – after much lobbying from him - at funding for a daily scheduled bus between Hadleigh and Stowmarket.

Local Government reorganisation

Describing this as Local Government centralisation it being the creation of a Mayor for Norfolk and Suffolk and the scrapping of local districts and the county council, he said that it is becoming clear that the Mayoral tier of government will add a new layer of costs, likely eliminating any hoped-for savings from merging district and county councils.

He explained that the election for the Mayor of Norfolk and Suffolk will happen in May 2026 and that the current schedule is for elections for “shadow” unitary Councillors be held in May 2027 and that the new unitary council(s) will commence in May 2028, at which time county and district councils will dissolve.

He said that there are doubts whether the Government can meet this timetable.

Explaining that the Districts are asking for two and preferably three unitaries in Suffolk whilst the County Council wants only one he said that larger does not necessarily mean cheaper. He said that since many services – such as bin emptying – are already delivered by district councils collaborating in partnership and other services e.g. public toilet maintenance - are often more cheaply serviced using local contractors and more efficiently provided by those staff and councillors with more local knowledge.

Suffolk Libraries brought in house

He told all present that in March 2025 the County's cabinet had approved a recommendation to take the Suffolk Library Service in house after they failed to agree a renewal of the contract with the charity that has been running them since 2012. There had been no other bidders. His Group had attempted to “call in” the decision – giving it another chance to be scrutinised at the Scrutiny Committee but their call in and that of the Labour group had been rejected.

Council Budget 2025-26

He concluded by telling all present that the County Council budget for 2025-26 included the maximum permitted rise in council tax of 4.99%, including the 2% social care precept for adult care. He said that the budget does not include borrowing from the council's reserves, which had been a concern last year but relies on delivering £28.4m of savings across many council services. The Schools Grant, SEND and adult social care are providing much cost pressure. The Council is also forecasting that in the next few years, it will have budget ‘gaps’ which will only grow: £33.1m for 2026-27, and £96.2m in 2028-29.

Report from District Cllr Maybury

Cllr Maybury told all that District Council has been dominated this year by the introduction, in January, of car parking charges. These had been vigorously opposed by her and Cllr Clover.

She reported that Housing laws had caused Babergh to report itself to the governmental housing regulatory body its lack of compliance over certain energy certificates. This “marker” has now been removed with proactive repairs and refurbishments being undertaken by Babergh's housing department.

She reported that the National Government has implemented change to local government with Suffolk becoming one of the new cohort of Mayoral and Unitary applications saying that she awaited the outcome of both issues.

She told all present that due to the Government's new target of building 1.5 million homes in this parliamentary term, Babergh District Council are to review their Joint Local Plan which will more or less double each parish's Housing target.

She listed ward issues which your district councillors have interacted with such as Meeting with James Cartledge, MP and other stake holders to resolve parking issues in Lavenham, lobbying successfully against the closure of Market Hill car park in Sudbury, making available Locality budget for printing of the Lavenham tourist map and guide and the T500 brochure, liaising with Babergh DC on funding of footpath at Green Willows, reporting on litter and fly-tipping issues and consulting with Babergh planning on various issues

She reported that next month will be her tenth anniversary of being elected a district councillor, serving Lavenham for six years. Two years ago, she had been delighted to welcome Cllr Clover into the fold as a fellow district Councillor for the Ward. She said that Cllr Clover and her attend as many parish council, social events, volunteering positions, Babergh committee and council meetings as is possible. Describing their work as varied, fulfilling, sometimes frustrating but thoroughly enjoyable she thanked parishioners for their welcome, questions, challenges and friendship.

4. Reports by the Chair of the Parish Council and a statement on the Parish Council Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2024.

Cllr Muckian explained that during the year the Parish Council has invested in a number of projects to resolve several long-standing traffic and travel related issues.

She explained that progress, however slow, is being made with the Green Willows footpath. With support from County Cllr Lindsay, Suffolk Highways and Babergh's Local Cycling and Walking implementation team, a bid for District Community Infrastructure Funds to cover 100% of the costs continues to grind its way through Suffolk Highways and Babergh processes. The bid and therefore the cost of this project is likely to be about £80,000. The PC has been told today that Suffolk Highways are finalising the construction estimate with their contractor Milestone and the application for District Funds will be sent to Babergh next week. She explained that the bid for District Community Infrastructure Levy funds cannot cover the installation of a street light in this area. The Parish Council has voted to purchase this light should the bid for District CIL be successful at a cost of £10,000.

She spoke next of the long-running issue of over-sized vehicles unlawfully using the A1141 eastbound explaining that a multi-agency meeting had been organised by our MP James Cartledge last May to explore what options were available to manage this traffic. As a result, additional signage costing £9,000 paid for by the Parish Council has been installed at the Bury Road junction near Cockfield. This gives clearer advice to lorry drivers that they should avoid Lavenham as a "through road". She told all present that after careful consideration of the streetscape, additional lorry signage within the village had not been approved by the Parish Council, this can be revisited at a later date.

She spoke next of Car Parking, describing the issue as 'thorny'. Referring to the Babergh decision to introduce parking charges in our two largest car parks from the beginning of this year she said that we wait to see the impact of Babergh's decision during our busiest times. She told all that the imposition of parking charges has had an impact on the finances of the Parish Council. Donations for use of the car parks and toilets has dropped by approximately 80% which will cost the Parish Council about £12,000 this year. She concluded saying that she recognised that some would have liked the Parish Council to pay Babergh to make the charges go away and reminded everyone that this would have required an increase in Council Tax of some £60 per household.

The Chair spoke next of the issue of excessive speeds by vehicles explaining to all that two Speed Indicator Devices (SIDs) costing £8,000 have been purchased by the Parish Council this year. These have been installed on Melford road in such a way that they alert motorists of their speed on entering and exiting the village. This is intended to cover the stretch of this road where speeding is a particular concern and could not be included within the proposed 20 mph scheme.

The Chair explained that at the most recent Parish Council meeting a motion had been passed to invite members of the public, at this meeting, to request a Parish Poll asking the following question:

“Should the Parish Council ask Suffolk County Council to implement the proposed 20 mph scheme at a cost of £24,065.46 +VAT at 2024/25 prices? (There will be an inflationary uplift to 2025/26 prices.)

She told all present that such a request would need to be from ten members of this Parish’s electorate (including eligible Councillors) and that this request could be done this evening. Should this be done, then Babergh Council will organise the poll.

The Chair spoke next of Public Realm items:

Council is proceeding with the plan to have the EV Chargers in Water St and Prentice St taken over by Suffolk County Council, all the Chargers will be commissioned and updated as required.

The First Meadow play equipment has been refurbished and repainted and is looking much smarter. The safety matting surrounding the equipment, which had shrunk and degraded over the years, has been replaced. This work cost £13,000. Additionally, the First Meadow Bridge has been replaced at a cost of £9,000 which further enhances this amenity area and access to it.

She informed all that after a rigorous tender process Council has renewed its street cleaning and green maintenance contract with an increased focus on weed and moss removal from our streets, issues which have previously caused public concern.

Cllr Muckian spoke next of litter bins saying that some may have noticed that a number of the litter Bins in the busiest area of the village and two key dog waste bins are now being emptied twice per week. This will be done during the busiest months of the year to reduce street litter and unsightly overspill. The damaged bins near the bottom Co-Op will be replaced.

Cllr Muckian spoke of her delight that the refurbished telephone boxes are now in situ saying that the Council would be very happy to display posters advertising community events and groups in them.

Describing the Box bushes in the grounds of the church as a real feature of the village she explained that they had been suffering from attack from box moth caterpillar. Council has funded a program of ongoing care for these important assets; they are looking much healthier now and hopefully will remain an important asset for many years to come.

Council had been pleased to be able to make a grant of £2,500 available to the Lavenham Woodland Project to help towards the cost of a shelter adjacent to the Outdoor Activity Area which will be used by visiting children and others. She expressed her thanks to Lavenham Volunteers who have worked together to make the village more presentable and to all those who quietly volunteer without any public recognition for example litter picking, maintaining our defibrillators and curating floral displays. All of these actions, she said, enhance the environment in which we live and work.

Cllr Muckian spoke of the Neighbourhood Plan and its defeat in the referendum saying that a new revision has begun. In the near future residents will receive a questionnaire asking for their views.

She concluded by saying that it is unfortunate that a disproportionate amount of the Clerk’s time, and hers, has this year, been spent handling complaints and grievances from a small number of people. She acknowledged that there are varied opinions with respect to the underlying causes but explained that this has resulted in the Council having to pay for legal advice. She told all present that having been re-elected as Chair earlier this month, her aim is to move forward and ensure the Council works together to focus on the needs of the whole village

She thanked her fellow Councillors, in particular those on the Planning Group commenting that they have had some particularly complex planning applications to consider this year and noting that in the vast majority of cases their opinion and indeed that of Council coincide with those of the Planning Authority (Babergh).

She thanked the Clerk saying that his guidance and support to the PC and to her had been invaluable.

Statement on the Parish Council's Accounts

The Clerk told all present that full Statements of Income and Expenditure and also of Receipts and Payments have been tabled and discussed at each Parish Council Meeting this year and so he was not going to repeat the full detail.

The Clerk explained that the big picture is that the Parish Council was delighted to this year, for the first time in many years, not to raise Council Tax.

He said that a large part of this was that, in the end, Babergh did not introduce the car parking charges until January 2025 and so effectively your Council got very nearly a full year of car parking and toilet donations in 2024/25, some £11,000, which had not been anticipated in the budget.

Also, interest rates had remained higher than the budget had assumed meaning that Council received £4,000 more interest than it had expected and, equally importantly, Council costs were well controlled and below budget.

All of this had led to a surplus for the year of some £27,000 and your Council having 11 months of reserves which is above the standard best practice of 6 to 9 months. Hence the freeze in Council Tax.

The Council has budgeted to make a loss for the next year of some £10,000 to reduce the reserves to an appropriate level. He described, in summary the Council's financial position as healthy.

He explained that Developers pay Community Infrastructure Levy when they build houses saying that whilst the vast majority of this levy is retained by Babergh District Council a portion comes to the Parish. The Parish Council had received some £21,000 of these funds in 2024/25 and had spent £45,000.

He said that this £45,000 spend had been described in the Chairs Report with the significant items the two Speed Indicator Devices on the Melford Rd, the First Meadow Playground Equipment repairs and Bridge replacement, the new large Lorry Sign on the Bury Rd and the refurbishment of the Phone boxes.

He explained that the Parish Council currently has some £63,000 of these Community Infrastructure Funds remaining of which £10,000 has been earmarked for the Green Willows Streetlight and commented that the 20 mph scheme would take approximately half of the remaining £53,000.

He noted that since there are no ongoing significant housing developments in Lavenham there will be no substantial further funds shortly coming to the Council saying that this of course may change, but obviously not immediately, consequent of the Governments Housing Targets.

He concluded by saying that against this healthy financial position Council has two financial headwinds. The first is the legal costs, likely to be some £10,000, of answering the Data Subject Access Requests received in March and the second is the cost, over the next two to three years, of preparing a new Neighbourhood Plan. He said that he knew that the new group is very mindful of the costs and will apply for Grants wherever possible and will aim to use as much of the failed LNP2 as possible in the context that they are very aware that a new plan cannot be the same as the rejected plan.

5. Reports by local Organisations

The Rev Pitcher thanked the Parish Council for the Box Bushes. He said that the Church will shortly need to spend £175,000 on routine repairs and is considering installing solar panels on the church roof.

He outlined the upcoming events to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Church tower including the upcoming Tudor Fete, a service to commemorate those who served in WW2 with the USAAF, an open day for those who would like to climb the tower and a Family Fun Day including the opportunity to zip wire a teddy bear from the top of the church tower to the churchyard.

Phil Smith spoke of the activities of the Community Council detailing the range of community activities which take place in the Village Hall including the Thursday Coffee Mornings and explained that the rooms, sports fields, tennis courts and the pavilion are available for anyone to hire.

Carolyn Jenkins spoke on behalf of the Gardening Club saying that the club is thriving with some 65 to 70 members who meet on the last Wednesday evening of the month. The Club invites guest speakers, organises trips and donates funds and resources to local community groups.

Sue Heald spoke on behalf of the Theatre Group saying that the club has 100 members and organises trips to a wide variety of plays, musicals and even opera throughout East Anglia. She explained that trips are made by coach and that the cost of the coach and ticket is nearly always less than £70.

Sue Heald spoke on behalf of the Hidden Gardens Group with the objective being to raise money for local charities and community groups, typically some £7,000 is raised.

Robyn Lloyd Hughes spoke on behalf of the Royal British Legion telling all that the branch is in good health and good spirits and explaining that the purpose of the Legion is to support the serving and ex serving personnel and their families and friends and to maintain remembrance of the fallen. The Legion he explained welcomes new members and invited local residents to join. He spoke of the recent VE Day Barbeque and the success of last years Poppy Appeal which had raised over £5,000.

Cllr Morrey (Vice-Chair of the PC) read the report supported by the Lavenham Community Hub. The Hub reported that footfall has increased by 15% over the last two years to approximately 7,000. The Hub has worked with a Publisher to print and produce a brochure to be distributed outside the village encouraging visitors to come to Lavenham. The hub welcomes new members and volunteers; more volunteers would enable the Hub to open for longer hours and/or on more days.

Cllr Morrey (Vice-Chair of the PC) read the report supplied by David Jones of the Lavenham Woodland Project which highlighted the role played by John Knight who had very recently died. He wrote of the wonderful legacy which John leaves for all to enjoy. He appealed for more volunteers who during the last year have helped care for 1,500 trees, 600 metres of hedging and 2,000 metres of footpaths. Sometime in July 2024, they had a 'secret visit' from the Green Flag Award Judges who had awarded the project a second Green Flag Community Award. Thanks to a generous grant from Lavenham Parish Council and another generous donation, they are building a shelter adjacent to their Outdoor Activity Area which will shortly be in use. He reported that 15 Daubenton bats have returned to the WW2 pill box on the site, they are now protected behind a wrought iron gate made by local blacksmith, Geoff Locke, and comfortably roosting in special handmade bricks from Bulmer Brick Works.

The Chair read out a report from Love Lavenham who are working to increase membership back to previous levels and are planning floral displays in shops and businesses to coincide with the Hidden Gardens weekend. They will shortly release an updated version of the Lavenham map, which is hugely popular amongst visitors and residents and are grateful to Babergh Council for their grant to be able to continue with this lovely publication. They are preparing plans for Christmas activities.

The Clerk read out a report from the Lavenham Guildhall Committee which expressed a hope that more residents of Lavenham will become members of the Local Committee and/or the Museum committee, so that the people of Lavenham are more actively involved in the "ownership" of the Guildhall as was Sir Cuthbert Quilter's wish.

6. Matters raised by Members of the Public

A Member of the Public asked about plans to celebrate VJ Day, the Chair of the British Legion said that the Legion was intending to celebrate the day. The Parish Council agreed to see if the beacon was in the Parish Council store.

A Member of the Public questioned whether the Parish Council could have more aggressively opposed the introduction of Car Parking Charges by Babergh conceding that such opposition would most likely have been futile but queried why the Council had not more aggressively negotiated for a discount from Babergh of the Babergh requested amount to cancel the introduction of the charges in Lavenham. He pointed out that a show of hands at the Public meeting had been in favour of an increase in Council Tax to keep free car parking. The Chair replied that negotiations had taken place but it was clear that Babergh were only prepared to discount slightly and that the negotiations with Babergh had led to the very significant concessions now in place concerning the use of the Church St Car Park when using community facilities.

A Member of the Public asked about the proposed 20mph scheme, the Chair read out the Motion passed at a recent Parish Council Meeting. The Clerk explained that the poll cannot legally be binding but Council has committed to taking full account. The Chair explained that should electors not call for a Poll then the decision would have to be made by the Parish Council.

A Member of the Public asked if the Parish Council would have to pay for the Poll, the Clerk replied that the Council would have to pay Babergh between £1,000 and £2,000 to run the Poll.

A Member of the Public spoke criticising the design of the scheme referring to the National rules. The Chair replied that she understood the Member of the Public's concerns but re-emphasised that this scheme is the only one permitted by Suffolk Highways and Suffolk Police. The Chair said that she really hoped that the poll would attract a high turnout. The Vice-Chair reiterated the words of the Chair.

A Member of the Public asked whether the Poll result concerning the 20 mph scheme would be honoured when the views expressed by the show of hands at the Village Meeting concerning car parking charges had not been honoured. The Chair replied that the Poll and the Village Meeting concerning car parking charges were very different things. She said that the Village Meeting had been a meeting called to inform and discuss the car parking proposal at which there had been an informal show of hands, it had not been a meeting organised to hold a vote.

The Vice Chair described the decision about the 20mph scheme as a big one for 11 Councillors to make on behalf of the village and said that everyone who lives in the village should have the right to make the decision on behalf of themselves and their families.

A Member of the Public said that the details of the scheme need to be well publicised.

Ten members of the Public requested a Poll.

A Member of the Public asked what data had been received concerning car park usage and footfall. The Clerk replied that Babergh had promised to provide car park usage data in the Autumn. District Cllr Maybury said that no-one had written to her concerning reduced footfall and invited people to write her and Cllr Clover should they have such concerns.

A Member of the Public asked about the removal of the signs on Water St, the Vice-Chair replied that the CCTV survey had shown that following the removal of the signs that there has been no noticeable increase in traffic conflicts. A Member of the Public asked why there was no camera on Water St which automatically fined large vehicles, the Chair replied that a camera could not be installed because the road was a legitimate route for large vehicles doing local deliveries.

The meeting closed at 9.37pm.