

Hempnall Parish Council - Chairman's Report – March 18th, 2025

As always it has been a busy year for the parish council.

We continue to pursue policies that will protect our village and the local countryside from over development and have made our views known during the various consultations on planning including with regard to:

- Changes to the NPPF
- Planning and infrastructure
- The Land Use Framework
- Scoping in regard to the East Pye Proposals
- Pylons from Norwich to Tilbury
- A New Town in South Norfolk

Current government policies appear to be based on the premise that weakening the planning system will promote economic growth. There is little, if any, evidence to back up this assertion and it seems a great pity that the protection afforded to the countryside by planning policy is being eroded. The previous government also had plans to de-regulate in order to “build, build, build,” and it is a great pity that national politicians pursue policies that undermine planning rules as it is these rules that have protected our countryside and landscape from over development since the introduction of the Town and Country Planning Act in 1947.

Hempnall Parish Council opposes the proposals put forward by Ben Goldsborough MP for a new town of 10,000 houses (24,000 people) in South Norfolk. Current housing site allocations in the GNLP (the plan that covers South Norfolk, Broadland and Norwich) for 45,000 new dwellings by 2038 are already unnecessarily excessive and the addition of a further 10,000 houses to this total is a completely preposterous idea.

The Parish Council opposes National Grid's plans to build a 2nd pylon route from Norwich (Swardeston) to Tilbury. We want a better alternative to be chosen – either an offshore grid connection or the under-grounding of cables. National Grid, a private company, is looking to save money at the expense of our local landscape.

In our response to the recent NPPF (National Planning Policy Framework) revision we argued for the retention of footnotes which gave local communities the final say on whether a renewable energy scheme could happen in their area. Unfortunately the government did not listen to us and many others on this issue and those footnotes have gone.

Which brings me to the biggest issue facing Hempnall and the local area namely plans for a mega size solar power scheme stretching from Great Moulton to Seething. 2718 acres of farmland (99 large fields and meadows) would be covered by solar panels up to 4.5 metres high (the height of the guttering at the top of the 2nd storey of a house) if the scheme is permitted. Many of the solar fields are located either in Hempnall or close to our parish boundaries and in total the development would transform the appearance of

our local countryside in to an industrialised landscape. The initial map supplied by the developers (Island Green) was inaccurate and misleading and so the Parish Council produced an accurate OS based map of the scheme which it distributed to all Hempnall households together with an invitation to a meeting at which we were keen to hear the views of parishioners and other affected local residents. Around 300 people attended this meeting and only one person spoke in favour of the proposals.

We are still pursuing, together with Saffron Housing, an extension of social housing provision at Millfields. The Parish Council continues to press for these new dwellings to be “truly” affordable and for the needs of older residents and families with the greatest needs to be prioritised.

The Millfields development is on a Rural Exception Site but elsewhere the Parish Council seeks to restrict new development to within the current development boundary (Settlement Limit).

We also consider it very important that the character of the conservation area of the village is protected against inappropriate development.

Plans that we have developed in partnership with the Environment Agency in an attempt to instigate natural flood protection measures that will help prevent the kind of severe flooding that has had such a major impact on a number of households in the village are progressing well. The involvement of a local landowner has enabled these plans to proceed. The Hempnall scheme was “flagged up” at a CPRE Norfolk flood prevention conference in May last year as an exemplar as to how other parishes might approach this issue.

At the moment the measures apply to the feeder streams and ditches east and south east of the village but we have asked Fritton and Morningthorpe PC to introduce similar measures to the southwestern streams and ditches to lessen the risk of flooding to properties on the B1527 at the west end of Hempnall. We still await a response from Fritton and Morningthorpe.

The much expanded and improved play area at the playing field is well used and much appreciated by residents and visitors alike. The Owl sculpture, which recognises the contribution of councilors Peter Workman and Richard Delf to the project, is now in situ and looks very impressive. I would like to take this opportunity to once again thank the team of local volunteers and those parish councilors who have put in a considerable amount of time and effort to create such a successful play park. Sarah Bachelor, Katie Barnes and the aforementioned Richard Delf and Peter Workman deserve very special thanks.

The Parish Council has made a substantial contribution to the total cost of the play area with the remaining money (a very considerable amount) coming from grant applications and fund raising activities.

It is encouraging that so many of us continue to use the footpath system that is treasured and valued by so many – it really plays an important part in maintaining our mental and physical well-being. Our paths are generally reasonably well maintained and open. Many local paths would be significantly affected if the mega solar scheme is approved with long sections of path having solar panels, security fences, cameras and other infrastructure alongside one side or both sides – e.g. Pymars Lane and Nobbs Loke.

Speeding in the village continues to be a major concern. Our SAM 2 machines show consistent law breaking and some truly horrendous top speeds. The 20 mph limit is not observed by a large number of drivers. We are campaigning for traffic calming measures to be implemented and for the B1527 to be declassified in order to enable chicanes to be put in place. Unfortunately Norfolk County Council Highways Department has said that it lacks the financial resources to even investigate the possibility of de-classification.

As reported in previous years the safety improvements we have managed to achieve along the B1527 continue to offer positive benefits. A very high historic accident rate has been reduced considerably as the change of surface material that we persuaded NCC to employ seems to provide a better grip and the lack of road markings does encourage at least some drivers to drive in a more cautious manner.

We would like to see a 20 mph speed limit throughout the village but the Parish Council has at least secured partial coverage. The picket gates installed at 2 entrances to the village and the flashing sign warning of a sharp bend at the bridge at the western end of the village were proposed by the parish council.

I would like to thank the Hempnall Speedwatch Team for the work they do in monitoring speeding in the village. The team would benefit from more volunteers so please consider joining and translate your concerns in to positive actions to help tackle the problem of speeding vehicles in Hempnall. In this context I would like to highlight the efforts made by Councillor Robert Elliot (a member of the speedwatch team) on this issue.

Councillor Mike Turner does a great job looking after our Sam 2 speed monitoring devices – Mike - these efforts are very much appreciated by all of us.

All my fellow councillors undertake good work on behalf of our village. Phil Bates is our Footpaths Representative and I would like to thank him for all the work he does on this issue. I would also like to thank Joan Cann for representing us on the Village Hall Committee, Richard Delf and Peter Workman for their work helping to look after the playing field and the children's play area and Hamish Rose for his help and support.

Being a parish councillor can be a thankless task – we have a say in decisions but our views are often overlooked or ignored by higher level authorities.

In this report I have only mentioned just a few of the things your councillors do in the course of the year. They are a good team and it is a privilege to be their chairman.

And finally, as always, a huge vote of thanks to our clerk, Ian Nelson, Ian does an enormous amount of work on behalf of this village. He keeps the accounts (and us) in pristine order. He produces the agendas, the minutes, writes numerous Emails and letters and does so much more in the pursuit of our objectives. He is a great source of support to me as chairman.

Please feel free to ask any questions in regard to the matters I have mentioned during the discussion period.

David Hook – 18th March, 2025