

Semer Parish Council Meeting

Minutes of the Council Meeting held at Semer Village Hall on Thursday 20 March 2025 commencing at 7.00pm.

In attendance: Councillors Richard Keens (Chair), Jackie Barraclough, John Lawrence, Steve Nuttall, and Victoria Waples (Clerk).

1. Chair's welcome including the statement for the reporting at meetings of the council – the Chair opened the meeting and thanked all for attending. The statement on reporting at meetings of the parish council was taken as read.
2. Apologies for absence:
 - i. Apologies of absence were received from James Pitcher. Council agreed to accept the apologies as submitted.
 - ii. Apologies were also received from County Councillor Robert Lindsay and District Councillor Leigh Jamieson.
3. Code of Conduct and Declaration of member's interests:
 - i. To receive declarations of registrable interests, other and non-registerable interests as detailed in Appendix B of the Local Code of Conduct – there were no such interests declared.
 - ii. To receive notification of gifts or hospitality exceeding £50 – there were none declared.
4. Minutes of previous meetings:
 - i. To approve the minutes of the meeting of 16th January 2025 and to give authority to the Chair to sign the minutes in accordance with legislation - **Council resolved to approve the minutes of the meeting and gave approval for the Chair to sign the minutes in accordance with legislation.**
5. Public Forum:
 - i. To receive a report from the County Councillor Robert Lindsay – Cllr. Lindsay's written report was noted (*a copy of which can be seen at Appendix A*).
There were no questions for onward submission although the following were noted and comments were covered elsewhere within the agenda:
A1141 speed limit change.
Road closure signage.
 - ii. To receive a report from the District Councillor – Cllr. Jamieson's written report was noted (*a copy of which can be seen at Appendix B*).
There were no questions for onward submission.
 - iii. To receive comments from the public on the agenda as published or concerning Semer: there were no members of the public present.
6. Parish Matters: to receive an update on items raised at previous meetings:
 - i. A1141 speed limit change – Suffolk County Council (Parishes of Hadleigh, Semer and Kersey) (Stone Street) (A1141) (Union Hill (A1141) (30mph and 40mph Speed Limit and Revocation) Order 202 – to receive an update on this project, including timeframes. All noted that Cllr. Lindsay had confirmed in his report that he installation was being timed to coincide with resurfacing of the road, to avoid too many expensive closures, which is due to happen around May. Discussion followed as to the breakdown of finances that the council would be expected to find including contributions from local businesses. It was agreed that it was unlikely that money would be handed over until some action was seen.

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- ii. A1141 Union Hill, Semer – to note action taken by Suffolk County Council with regards to overgrown vegetation – all noted the email trail from Suffolk County Council Highways Department regarding the hedges on the east side of Union Hill. It was confirmed that an Enforcement Officer had investigated the vegetation and conducted site visits along Union Hill and will be writing to two separate landowners to request the vegetation is cut back from the road edge with a height clearance of 5.2m to allow high sided vehicles to pass through without crossing the centreline of the road.
- iii. A1141 Union Hill, Semer – damage to verges following the emergency road closure between 6th and 12th February 2025 – whilst all noted the reasoning behind the emergency road closure, all were in agreement that Suffolk Highways needed to ensure that where signage was displayed, it should ensure that it matched the reality of the length of road closure. Network Assurance had stated that they had received some concerns from nearby residents about the lack of signage for these emergency works, and requested Anglian Water and their traffic management contractor, to install additional signage, such as special signs to state the exact location of the closure from either direction of their works. It was noted that some of the side roads, such as Dairy Road and Overgang Road, Semer were becoming rat runs, therefore additional 'Unsuitable for diversion' signs were also requested to be implemented at these junctions as a deterrent. Unfortunately, Network Assurance stated that they had no powers over drivers who choose to find alternative routes instead of following the signed diversion route in situ.

7. Statutory Business:

- i. Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government – council to consider whether it wishes to formulate a response to the [consultation on proposals to create a Mayoral Combined County Authority across Norfolk and Suffolk](#). The deadline is 13th April 2025. At this stage the council agreed that it had no comment to make on this consultation.
- ii. To review and adopt the Council's Financial Risk Assessment for the year ending 31st March 2025 (*Paper entitled Financial Risk Assessment 2024-2025*) – the meeting **agreed that having reviewed the risk management procedures, it confirmed that they were in place and that whilst those risks highlighted were subject to further action, there were no regulatory or contractual issues that would impact on the council for which a further risk assessment would be required, aif.** All agreed that during the coming year, the council's ambition would be to adopt practices that would amend those risks that are still to be evaluated / actioned.
- iii. To review and adopt the Council's Internal Control Statement for the year ending 31st March 2025 (*Paper entitled Internal Control 2024-2025*) - **Council considered the circulated Statement of Internal Control, and having reviewed it, considered that the controls currently in place were effective and appropriate for Semer Parish Council in its management of public finances and agreed that the system of internal control was sound and provided an adequate foundation to mitigate the risks associated with the operation of public money, aif. Council further resolved that, having reviewed internal audit in terms of independence, competence, proportionality and effectiveness it had complied with its duty under the 2015 Regulations and met the standards of audit provision. It was also resolved that, having regard to the Audit Plan as per Appendix A, Council agreed to the appointment of Mr Trevor Brown CPFA to carry out the internal audit on Semer Parish Council at a maximum cost of £175 plus pro rata travelling expenses at £0.45 pence per mile. It was anticipated that the audit will take place in late April 2025.**

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- iv. To review and approve the Asset Register for the year ending 31st March 2025 – (*Paper entitled Asset Register 2024-2025*) – having reviewed the asset register provided by the clerk, all were in agreement that the register fairly represented the assets under the control or remit of the parish council for ownership and maintenance for the year ending 31st March 2025.
- v. To review and adopt the revised Standing Orders 2025 – [revised document](#) - aif
- vi. To review and adopt the revised Financial Regulations 2025 – [new document](#) - aif

8. Planning Matters:

- i. To note the following planning application:
 - DC/25/00792 - Application for a Lawful Development Certificate for an Existing Use or Operation or Activity including those in breach of a Planning Condition Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended) - Use of building as a dwellinghouse (Class C3) and associated residential land. Location: Woodlands, Ropers Green, Semer – council noted the provisions of the application understanding that it was the applicant who needed to prove to the Local Planning Authority that the development benefitted from planning permission.
- ii. To note commentary made by the council in relation to the following applications received from the local planning authority:
 - DC/24/05549 – Householder Application - Erection of single-storey side extension. Location: Westonia, Watsons Hill, Semer – council had made no comment on this application.
- iii. BMSDC – to receive commentary on the Babergh and Mid Suffolk Joint Local Plan Update – all were made aware that given the changes to the NPPF and the new housing targets for Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils, it had been agreed that the councils would not continue with the preparation of a Babergh and Mid Suffolk Joint Local Plan Part 2, but would instead produce a full Joint Local Plan Review Development Plan Document under the provision of the new plan-making system. This would cover the period of development to 2044.
- iv. BMSDC – to note the adoption of the Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Council's [Joint Local Development Scheme](#) – March 2025 – council noted the adoption of the new scheme which not entirely replaced the one adopted in November 2023. This scheme will be reviewed annually.
- v. Neighbourhood Planning – council to consider whether there might be benefits in completing a Neighbourhood Plan for Semer (stand-alone) or in conjunction with neighbouring parishes. All understood the benefits of a Neighbourhood Development Plan in terms of allowing communities to develop a shared vision for their area, but uncertainty was raised as to whether it was appropriate for a community the size and spread of Semer. It was agreed that, once further information was forthcoming on the manner in which Babergh District Council would handle the increased housing targets, this matter should be brought back for further discussion.

9. Financial Report:

- i. To consider and approve the following items for payment: **all agreed for the following payments to be so approved and paid:**
 - V Waples – Clerk's Hours to date including reimbursement of expenses - £416.48
- ii. Council to retrospectively approved the following payments settled since the last meeting: **all agreed for the following to be retrospectively approved:**
 - HMRC – PAYE to 5 January 2025 - £95.40 paid 23rd January 2025.

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- iii. To note receipt of the following monies: the meeting noted receipt of the following sums of money into the council's bank account:
 - Eastern Power Networks – Wayleave Cricket Pitch - £4.60
- iv. To note the bank balances to date and consider the financial position at 13th March 2025 – the bank balances, following a review of the statement versus the cashbook, were confirmed at £7,729.15.
- v. To consider and review the actual versus budget for the period to date – following a review of the finances incurred to date, council noted the overspend of £1002.69 as the position at 13th March 2025. All noted the anticipated outcomes for the year ending 31st March 2025 which were not expected to differ from that as predicated at 13th March 2025.
- vi. GDPR/Data Protection Fee 2018 – council noted the increase to the annual data protection fee which would rise from £40.00 to £52.00. This would be reduced to £47 as council had elected to pay the fee by direct debit.

10. Councillor Reports:

- i. Bridge at Church Meadow – still trying to find prices and a contractor to carry out the work – a detailed specification would be required against which contractors would be asked to quote. It was agreed that an engineers report /commentary would be useful to allow the council to take this project forward.
- i) Correspondence: to receive matters of interest not requiring a direct response –
 - i. SALC – all noted that SALC has produced [a blog page](#) with dedicated information on the Devolution White Paper and Suffolk County Council's communications on this matter.
 - ii. Hadleigh Neighbourhood Plan (BDC) – [to note the adoption of the Hadleigh Neighbourhood Plan 2023-2037](#) – all noted the adoption on the NDP. It was considered that there would be little impact on the village of Semer.
 - iii. BMSDC – Town and Parish Updates – [to receive the monthly report of March 2025](#) – all confirmed receipt of the updates.
 - iv. SALC – News Bulletins – to confirm receipt of the news bulleting via email.
 - v. To receive matters of interest not requiring a direct response
- ii) Date of next meeting: Council noted the following:
 - i. To approve the dates for the financial year 2025-2026 –
 - 15 May 2025 – Annual Council Meeting only.
 - 17 July 2025
 - 20 November 2025
 - 22 January 2026
 - 19 March 2026
- iii) There being no further business to transact, the Chair closed the meeting at 20.12

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Appendix A – Report from County Councillor Robert Lindsay

40mph Speed limit on Union Hill - The installation of this is being timed to coincide with resurfacing of the road, to avoid too many expensive closures, which is due to happen around May.

Mains leak Union Hill – 5 day closure in February - You are probably aware of this, since I expect there were resident complaints. I have asked Highways to explain what happened. AW closed the road under emergency procedures while it repaired a leak. The road had to be closed because, by law, if the remaining width is under 3m they can not use traffic lights.

The official diversion, although signed, was not used by many drivers and some of the minor village roads became something of a muddy rat run. In response to resident complaints Highways put extra “unsuitable for diversion” signs for Dairy Road and Overgang Road. But there is little they can do about drivers choosing to ignore the diversion. There have also been complaints from Kersey PC about roads through their village.

Vegetation intrusion onto Union Hill (East side) - Highways informed me earlier this month, having raised this issue again with them, that Enforcement team have written to two landowners to request that vegetation is cut back up to 5.2m height to prevent lorries and buses having to cross the centre line of the road.

Bus route Whatfield to Elmsett being gritted - I’m pleased to say that Highways have finally agreed to put this road on their gritting schedule. They needed quite a bit of pushing, with a list of all buses that used it before they realised that they were not compliant with their own policy. I.e: regular bus five days a week

Local Government centralisation - Suffolk’s councils have now been accepted into the Government’s “fast track” scheme for merging councils into “unitaries” and creating a mega Mayor for Norfolk and Suffolk combined. The councils have until March 21st to come up with submissions for how many unitary councils they want in Suffolk – so the government has allowed no time for them to consult with public before submitting.

The county has said it wants one, the districts are likely to go for two or three.

The government is insisting that new councils must have a minimum of 500k people, which doesn’t go into 780k Suffolk population.

Personally, I believe that the financial and democratic costs of rejigging existing local government on this scale outweighs any optimistic financial savings that the Conservative County council administration and the Labour government is relying on. Increasing the size of councils and giving much of their powers to a new higher tier mayor will erode local accountability and democracy. But the Government is forcing this on to every council in the country so there is little we can do but try to get the best deal we can.

The current Government proposed time table of elections

- May 2026 Postponed Suffolk County Council elections, using new divisional boundaries, county councillors will serve for only two years. (Some doubt over whether this election will happen at all.)
- May 2026 Election for Mayor of Norfolk and Suffolk
- May 2027 Elections for parish councils and for “shadow” unitary councillors.
- May 2028 Suffolk County and Babergh district councils will dissolve, new unitary council(s) will commence.

The government has launched a public consultation on its proposals to create a Mayoral Combined County Authority for Norfolk and Suffolk, and you can give your views on the proposals by using this link: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/norfolk-and-suffolk-devolution>

Council Pension funds being centralised too - I sit on the Suffolk pension committee which now manages £4.5bn in investments (nearly six times the turnover of the council). The government, alongside its move to centralise local authorities into the hands of a mayor for Norfolk and Suffolk (which for some reason it calls “devolution”), is also forcing all local authority pension funds to give up most of the democratic control they exercise over investment strategy. Our funds will be pooled with other local authority funds into the hands of paid professional City managers who will have the power to select individual sub fund managers and decide on most of the details of where funds are allocated.

The pension committee of councillors at Suffolk – which has been advised by professionals - will have a mere supervisory, rather than deciding role. The government wants to encourage “local investment” by these pooled funds. What, where and how much local investment will be decided by

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the professional managers in consultation with the new Mayor for Norfolk and Suffolk - who must produce a "growth plan" for the two counties. The problem here is that the legal responsibility for providing adequate pensions rests currently with the committee, not with the mayor or professional managers.

Challenge to Conservative's decision to take Suffolk Libraries in house - My political group, (Green, LibDem, independent) is seeking to "call in" the decision on March 18th by Suffolk County Council's all-Conservative cabinet to take the libraries in house. The administration had failed to agree a renewal of the contract with the charity, The Suffolk Library Service, that has been running them since 2012. There were no other bidders. If our call-in request is approved by the council's monitoring officer, it means cabinet decision can be examined again in public by a committee of councillors – scrutiny committee. The charity insisted the terms it was offered (same budget as last year with no annual increase for inflation etc) meant opening hours would have to be cut by 30%. The council say they can run it with no hours being cut. The fear is that this will mean cuts in staff numbers and an increased reliance on volunteers. The amount the library charity was being paid has not risen significantly for more than ten years. Meanwhile, the county council itself will be abolished in May 2028 meaning that the future of an house library service is perhaps less certain than if there was a long term contract in place with an outside provider.

Appendix B - Report from District Councillor Leigh Jamieson

Devolution & Local Government Reform (LGR) - Tonight (20th) at Full Council we will be discussing the proposals that the district councils and borough council have agreed to put forward for, what they feel will be, the most sustainable way of reforming the councils.

The districts and borough councils have engaged KPMG on a consultancy basis to assist with the development of proposals for LGR and they are working together across the region to ensure that their interim plans are ready by the 21st March target date. The councils will then need to firm up the initial proposals for submission by 26th September this year.

Initially, they have agreed that creating multiple unitary authorities for Suffolk would achieve greater outcomes for residents, grow the economy and provide flexible solutions to meet the needs of local communities – in a way that a single council covering a vast geographical area would fail to do.

The initial proposals are for either two or three unitary councils. Two will be East Suffolk, Ipswich and some of Babergh, while three unitary councils will be East Suffolk, made up of some of the current East Suffolk plus some of Mid Suffolk. Greater Ipswich which will include Ipswich, parts of East & Mid Suffolk and parts of Babergh, and West Suffolk which will be West Suffolk, parts of Mid Suffolk and part of Babergh.

There is also no evidence that bigger councils with less councillors will provide you with a better service. Local government should be what it says – 'local.' The closer councillors are to their residents the more responsive they can be to local issues. In large councils with many more residents to serve, the councillors will become more remote with less local knowledge.

The governments reasons for doing this is supposedly to save money, reduce councillors and drive its growth ambitions. What it is currently doing is costing officer time and diverting everyone's attention. Just in producing the detailed plan for the 26th September will cost Babergh £20k. The Cumbria devolution deal cost them £19m so how this is saving money is questionable.

There is currently a government's consultation open until 13th April on this, and I would encourage everyone to have their say, if you have not already done so.

Budget - The budget this year shows a gross expenditure of £28.699m, with a budgeted gross income of £28.069m. Despite making savings and additional income totalling £2.6million, the council still had to use £630k from its financial resilience reserve to plug a budget gap and still faces a budget shortfall of £14.6m over the six years from 2024/5 to 2029/30 – at this rate it is due to run out of useable reserves by 2028/29.

Last month the Council agreed a 2.99% increase to its share of council tax bills raising Babergh's element of the bill for a Band D home from £188.10 a year to £193. 73. Unfortunately, the major financial challenges facing the council made the budget difficult, with many fees and charges also increasing. However, it was necessary in order to protect services.

Babergh keeps less than 10% of the total council tax bill, to assist with services that include waste collection, planning, maintaining green spaces, supporting the local economy, culture, and communities, and helping those at risk of homelessness.

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It was also necessary to increase social rents by £3.01 a week, on average, along with increases on garage rents, sheltered housing service charges and sheltered housing utility charges.

The net cost of providing Babergh's services, after income and the use of earmarked reserves are considered, will rise by 8% to just over £15m this year. Despite this Rural Councils generally get less government grants than urban councils, which means that our residents pay, on average, 20% more per head in Council Tax. As an example, the Government's sudden removal of the Rural Services Delivery Grant just before Christmas, without notice, has left a £308,000 gap in Babergh's budget.

The plans to restructure the Councils is unlikely to resolve the funding crisis that local authorities face.

Planning notification consultation - At last month's Council meeting members also agreed to undertake a consultation on whether, to stop sending out notification letters to residents where minor planning applications or householder applications may affect them. There will be notifications posted on lamp posts, parish councils will receive notifications and they will also be available on the councils' website. The consultation will also propose that the Council continues to send out letters for major applications.

The reduction in printing and postage costs will generate savings subject to the level of planning activity in year. Forecasting based on previous years activity indicates that this could result in potential savings of c£18,000.

Remembering the impact of the pandemic - Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils planted special memorial trees at Beaumont Park in Hadleigh and in Green's Meadow, Stowmarket for the national Covid-19 Day of Reflection this Sunday (March 9) – marking five years since the pandemic and its impact on families, businesses, and communities.

The cherry trees will provide a lasting legacy, commemorating lives lost or forever changed by the pandemic, as well as honouring the dedication of our districts' key workers and community volunteers who worked tirelessly to support others.

National recognition for building control - Judges crowned Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils' building control team winners of the prestigious 'Local Authority Building Control Team of the Year' award at the 2024 LABC Building Excellence Awards grand finals. They cited the team's dedication to raising industry standards, its exceptional problem-solving skills, and customer services.

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