

SOMERFORD PARISH COUNCIL



Business Plan 2015 – 2020

VISION 2020

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SOMERFORD PARISH COUNCIL

Business Plan 2015 – 2020

Vision 2020

1. Mission Statement

To promote the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of the parish and to contribute to a sustainable and inclusive community.

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2. Strategic Objectives

2.1 To assist in the creation of a socially inclusive and economically viable community embracing all residents irrespective of age, culture, income race or religion and which seeks to develop their well-being knowledge understanding and mutual co-operation.

2.2 To provide high quality, efficient, cost effective and sustainable services.

2.3 To promote and encourage the provision of a range of leisure, social, recreational and community educational facilities in the parish appropriate to the normal activities of a rural parish.

2.4 To provide a channel for the views and expressions of the local community and to be responsive to its needs and aspirations.

2.5 To develop partnership and agency working with the public and private sectors in terms of resources and finance for the benefit of the community.

2.6 To develop the role of the council under the concept of the Local Council Awards scheme and to achieve appropriate levels.

2.7 To liaise with and support local community associations.

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3. Principles

In all its actions the council will take into account and, where appropriate, act in accordance with the principles enshrined in relevant legislation and best practice for:

- Health and Safety
- Equal Opportunities
- Best Value
- Crime and Disorder Act
- Disability Discrimination Act
- Age Discrimination Act
- Local Council Awards Scheme

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4. Five Year Plan

The Key Objectives for the five years 2016 – 2020 are:

4.1 Planning and Development

4.1.1 The Neighbourhood Plan

In November 2014 Somerford Parish Council appointed a Steering Group to develop a Neighbourhood Plan for the parish. The Steering Group is supported by Cheshire East Borough Council (CEBC) and Somerford Parish Council but is independent of them. The first Steering Group meeting was held in December 2014.

Somerford applied to Cheshire East to be designated as a Neighbourhood Plan Area – the area applied for is the same as the area covered by Somerford Parish. The neighbourhood area was designated by Cheshire East on 20th July 2015 following a 6 month delay by CEBC.

The Parish Council is hopeful that the Steering Group will be able to submit the plan to CEBC for approval during 2016 with a view to having it completed as soon as possible thereafter.

The Somerford Parish Council will continue to support the Steering Group in its task.

May 2017 Update:The Parish Council, having been hopeful that the Steering Group would be able to submit the plan to CEBC for approval during 2016 with a view to having it completed as soon as possible thereafter, accept that this has not proved possible. A number of members of the Steering Group resigned during 2016 – some of them expressing frustration at decisions made by CEBC directly or indirectly affecting the Parish especially with regard to planning issues. The failure of the Brereton Neighbourhood Plan to have a significant impact upon a much contested planning application in that area was seen as a particularly bitter blow.

However, this has not deterred the remaining members of the Steering Group from continuing with the task and the plan has now reached Regulation 14 stage, having been published for consultation on the 2nd May 2017. The consultation closes on the 13th June.

4.1.2 The Local Plan and Strategic Location 6 (SL6)

The Cheshire East Borough Council has been in the process of drafting and submitting a Local Plan for some years and it came before the appointed inspector for the first time in September 2014. The inspector adjourned the hearings for the council to address a number

of issues and in December 2014 the Inspector agreed to a CEBC application to suspend the process. The process resumed in October 2015 and the hearings concluded in November. The Inspector issued further interim views in December 2015 and it is now for the council to consider a preferred course of action and a future timetable. The process is expected to last well into 2016.

May 2017 Update: The Inspector issued further interim views in December 2015 and the process of examination re-commenced and was concluded during 2016. In December 2016 the Inspector wrote to the council indicating that he was satisfied with the plan as it now stood and it is now going through a further period of public consultation the outcome of which is likely to be known in the next few weeks.

A substantial component of the Local Plan is the building of the Congleton Link Road (CLR) which is referred to in more detail under the Transport Issues section below. A direct result of the CLR proposal, or perhaps a cause of it, is the plan to develop a large area of the parish. Indeed, the then Leader of CEBC, attended a meeting of the SPC in April 2013 and announced that he could foresee that the whole of the parish from its boundary with Congleton town to the line of the Link Road would be “ripe for development”.

May 2017 Update:A considerable number of housing development proposals have already received full or outline planning permission in the parish which will most likely lead to the number of houses in the parish increasing from about 150 just a few years ago to over 1000 in the next few years.

4.1.3 Planning Applications

Somerford Parish Council receives notification from the Cheshire East Borough Council (CEBC) of any planning applications submitted in respect of properties located in the parish and those in adjoining towns and parishes which may directly impact upon the parish. These notifications are circulated to parish councillors by email and the applications themselves are available for all to view online. The SPC will respond to each one of these applications as appropriate and wherever time permits they will be discussed at the next available PC meeting prior to such response.

In responding to the applications the PC will have regard to the emerging Neighbourhood Plan and any representations made to it by parishioners.

4.2 Open Spaces and Community Buildings

4.2.1 The Village Green

On the 4th May 2013 local resident Bobby Bell lodged an application with the Cheshire East Borough Council (CEBC) to have the grassed verge area along Chelford Road and Blackfirs Lane designated as a Village Green (VG). The rules relating to such applications meant that the application itself could not be submitted by the Parish Council but from the outset and

throughout the process the PC supported the application and received regular updates on progress at their general meetings. On the 28th August 2013 an application for planning permission for 180 houses to be built on land bounded by these verges was submitted to CEBC and on the 2nd April 2014 permission was granted for the building of 170 houses. At this time the Public Rights of Way (PROW) Committee of the CEBC, had not begun to consider the VG application.

It was not until the 16th March 2015 that the PROW committee heard the VG application, at a time and date upon which they knew the applicant wished to attend but was unable to since he was then away from the area. The application was refused. This situation was reported to the Somerford Parish Council who then resolved to Judicially Review (JR) the decision of the PROW Committee. The application for permission to proceed with the JR was considered by HHJ Pelling QC in the High Court at Manchester on the 21st August 2015 and granted on four grounds. The SPC has now instructed solicitors to represent them in the full hearing and they in turn have instructed Mr. Vivian Chapman QC as advocate. Both the solicitors and counsel are acting for the PC under a conditional fee agreement (otherwise known as “No win, No fee”) thus reducing the costs risk to the PC should the JR fail. Further, the PC has secured an “Aarhus convention” ruling which again limits costs risk by providing that any award of costs against the PC should the JR fail be limited to £10,000, an amount secured by a resident’s fund made available to the PC.

A full hearing of the JR will take place in the High Court in Manchester on the 18th February 2016. If the PC is successful in its application, it is expected that the CEBC will be required to arrange for an independent authority to conduct a fresh hearing of the Village Green application.

The Parish Council has taken all reasonable steps, including making representations to CEBC to discuss a possible compromise of the proceedings, to protect the residents of the Parish from the worst excesses of a potential costs order should the PC lose, or indeed win, the application. Unfortunately the CEBC has steadfastly refused to entertain any compromise discussion.

If the VG application should fall to be reheard, the PC has resolved to support the applicant in any reasonable way possible in pursuit of a determination that the grass verges of Chelford Road and Blackfirs Lane be protected for future generations.

Addendum: On the 16 March 2015 Mr Justice Stewart’s judgement was handed down. He quashed the decision of the CEBC to refuse the application for the VG and ordered the CEBC to pay the PC costs, summarily assessed at £35,000.

May 2017 Update: On the 13th June 2016 the PROW committee resolved: *“That the Director of Legal Services be authorised to appoint an appropriately qualified independent expert to conduct a non-statutory public inquiry to consider the application and provide the Public Rights of Way Committee with a report and recommendation for determination.”* That public inquiry opened on the 8th May 2017 and was concluded on the 10th May. The independent expert is expected to report his findings and conclusions to the PROW committee.

4.2.2 Rhead's Common

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) own the freehold of land in the parish of Somerford which lies to the rear of houses on Blackfirs Lane and those on Longdown Road, West Heath, Congleton, following a generous bequest made by Mrs Lavinia Rhead who was a local resident. Mrs Rhead, in making her bequest, expressed a wish that the land should be used for the benefit of wildlife without creating a binding obligation.

The land has been identified by Cheshire East Borough Council (CEBC) as being within a proposed economic growth area and is identified in the draft Local Plan as being a housing development site – Strategic Site SL6. CEBC is actively encouraging the development of this site as well as others in this part of the parish.

Much community concern was expressed that this land would be developed for housing and the proceeds, likely to be several million pounds, used by the RSPB to develop land for the benefit of wildlife in other parts of the country. It was felt that Mrs Rhead had principally wished to see this area of Somerford protected and used for wildlife.

The Somerford Parish Council (SPC) met with representatives of the RSPB in 2015 and were very happy to reach an agreement in principle with them that a triangle of land measuring approximately 8.29ha would be sold to the SPC for a nominal amount (£1) and that the rest of Mrs Rhead's bequeathed land would be developed to raise funds for the RSPB, out of which they would allocate £25,000 to the initial set up costs and donate £50,000 toward the establishment and maintenance of a publicly accessible wildlife area on the land. The RSPB would also provide advice and assistance toward ensuring a firm basis upon which the management of the land would be ensured.

The SPC is committed to protecting this land and promoting its use for the mutual benefit of both wildlife and the community at large. Once the legalities of the transfer of ownership have been resolved, we will have a meaningful engagement with both residents of the parish and the wider community to ensure the Mrs Rhead's wishes are fulfilled.

May 2017 Update: On the 24th February 2017 the CEBC Strategic Planning Committee granted planning permission under planning reference 16/1921C to the Somerford Parish Council and the RSPB jointly for the development of a community nature park on the land referred to above. The two parties are now negotiating the sale of the land to the PC and arrangements for the financial security of the project.

4.2.3 All Saints Chapel of Ease

All Saints' Chapel of Ease is Grade II* Listed, having been built in 1725 as a domestic chapel to Somerford Hall by Peter Shakerley. Since 1943 it has been a Chapel of Ease. It is situated in the former parkland and the only access is from the A54 via a single track road. It is beautifully preserved: all the fittings are of oak, with oak panelling to the internal walls. Of note also is the stained glass window by Irene Shakerley from the 1920s.

The parish is fortunate to have such a treasure within its bounds and SPC will continue to support the church authorities in their responsibility to maintain the chapel, its contents and surrounds.

4.3 Transport Issues

4.3.1 The A54 corridor

The A54 runs through the length of the parish and this stretch is known as the Holmes Chapel Road. It is a single carriageway country road with many sharp bends and junctions. It is variously subject to both 60 and 50 mph speed limits which are considered to be too high given the amount of new housing development which has been built alongside it in the last few years.

A route review consultation was held in February 2015 with Local Ward Members and Parish Councils. There was a consensus for a speed limit reduction through Somerford, which is expected to be included within the report and subject to the usual consultation with the relevant professional organisations. There was to be a further meeting in November 2015 with Cheshire Constabulary and Highways staff to discuss their opinion of the proposal for a speed limit reduction in Brereton Heath and Somerford with the assessment of the limit throughout the A54 from Holmes Chapel to Congleton but the PC has not been advised of the outcome of this meeting.

We currently await the report from this consultation which will form part of the consultation process. The A54 review scheme was due to be implemented within this 2015/2016 financial year.

The SPC will continue to monitor the very slow progress of this route review and will continue to press for a significant reduction in the speed limit through the parish – ideally a maximum of 30 mph in more heavily populated sections and 40 mph elsewhere.

May 2017 Update:The outcome of the route review was published in a report dated June 2015 although this report was not made public until 2016. The recommendation was for a reduction of the speed limit along part of the A54 through Somerford parish from 50mph to 40 mph. Whilst SPC was disappointed that the reduction was not greater in both permitted speed and duration, it represented a move in the right direction. However, in September 2016 CEBC adopted a new Speed Management Strategy which led the Highways Portfolio Holder, Councillor David Brown, to abandon the proposed reduction. The SPC has since met with Councillor Brown in a public forum held on the 27th March 2017 when parish councillors from Somerford and Brereton PC's and members of the public were able to make their views known. At that meeting it was agreed that the decision not to implement the report's recommendation would be reviewed.

4.3.2 The Congleton Link Road

The Congleton Link Road is a scheme which has been planned by CEBC for some years, the intention being primarily to take traffic from the A536 Macclesfield Road and the A34 Manchester Road headed for the M6 motorway around the town of Congleton and distributing that traffic to the A54 Holmes Chapel Road (for M6 North) and the A534

Sandbach Road (for M6 South) and vice versa whilst leaving A34 traffic travelling between Manchester and Stoke on Trent to travel along the Clayton Bypass through Congleton town.

In order to reduce the traffic impact upon those Congleton residents living adjacent to the A34 as it passes through the town, the CEBC has resolved to take much of this traffic through the rural parishes of Somerford, Hulme Walfield and Somerford Booths and Eaton by a road scheme which takes up many acres of unspoilt Cheshire countryside and will destroy large sections of the parish.

For this reason the parish council is fundamentally opposed to the scheme. We do not accept that the potential benefit to those who have chosen to live beside a main road will be such that the ruination imposed on the parishes is justifiable, especially given that the A34 through the town will remain a primary route for much of the current traffic. Any problems caused by the volume of traffic could be better addressed by improvements to the existing route.

The CEBC has submitted a planning application for the scheme which will be considered by the council itself during the early part of 2016. The SPC has lodged an objection to many aspects of the scheme which directly affect the parish and we will take whatever action we can to mitigate the effect of this damaging proposal.

May 2017 Update:The planning application for the CLR (15/4480C) was finally approved by the CEBC on the 28th July 2016. The council is now dealing with outstanding compulsory purchase procedures and the inquiry opened on the 16th May 2017. Following the grant of the application, a “log-jam” of outline development applications for neighbouring land were considered and granted toward the end of 2016. See paragraph 4.1.2 above.

4.3.3 Radnor Bridge

Chelford Road runs from its junction with Holmes Chapel Road in the south to the parish boundary with Hulme Walfield and Somerford Booths Parish. As the road approaches the River Dane it drops sharply and crosses the river at Radnor Bridge, the River Dane being the boundary line. Radnor Bridge is the only road crossing point between the A34 at Congleton and the A535 at Holmes Chapel. The bridge has a weight limit of 10 tons applied to it but this is often ignored by drivers of heavy goods vehicles, possibly misled by satellite navigation system. The use of this route by overweight vehicles threatens the future safety of the structure as well as the safety of other road users, in particular pedestrians, equestrians and cyclists, along this hazardous section of road.

The parish council will continue to encourage the Highways Authority to ensure that the traffic restriction is properly and sufficiently signposted and the police to enforce the weight limit.

May 2017 Update:The edges of the road surfaces on each side of the bridge are giving considerable cause for concern as they continue to crumble, doubtless affected and

aggravated by water ingress from the steep banks. We will continue to lobby the Highway Authority to take effect action to improve the situation.

4.3.4 Footways

There are two metalled public footways adjacent to roads within the parish, these being (i) a footpath running the full length of the northern side of the A54 Holmes Chapel Road from the boundary with Congleton town to the east to the boundary with Brereton parish to the west, and (ii) a footpath running along the western side of Chelford Road from its junction with Holmes Chapel Road almost to its junction with Blackfirs Lane. Responsibility for maintain these footpaths lies with the CEBC as the Highway Authority. Neither of these is well maintained with the Chelford Road footway in particular being neglected. It has been substantially damaged over recent years by the persistent and increasing habit of drivers parking two wheels of their vehicles, often heavy goods vehicles, on the footway which is particularly affected where there have been repairs carried out following utility excavations. This footpath is also much affected by fallen leaves during the autumn and winter.

The footway adjacent to Holmes Chapel Road will also be considerably disrupted by the Congleton Link Road (CLR), if and when built, inasmuch as under present plans, pedestrians, as well as cyclists and equestrians, will have to cross the CLR at the roundabout junction with the Holmes Chapel Road.

A simple solution to this, that is a diversion of the footway to take it under the CLR using the new Loachbrook Bridge, has been put forward by the SPC in its representations to the planning committee.

The parish council will continue to press for resolution of this issue through the planning system and will also actively and persistently remind the HA of its responsibility for the maintenance of these footways.

May 2017 Update: The SPC continues to be concerned regarding the state of the two footways and will continue to press the Highways Authority to maintain them. The A54 footway is once again suffering from the encroachment of soil and debris from the hedgerow banks thus much reducing the walkable width whilst the Chelford Road footway is extremely uneven and damaged. On a brighter note, the PC was able to ensure that the footway diversion under the Loachbrook Bridge to avoid pedestrians and others having to cross the CLR at the Holmes Chapel Road roundabout was incorporated into the CLR planning application.

4.4 Local Council Award Scheme

The new Local Council Award Scheme has been designed to celebrate the successes of the very best local councils, and to provide a framework to support all local councils to improve and develop to meet their full potential. The scheme offers councils the opportunity to show that they meet the standards set by the sector, assessed by their peers, and to put in place the conditions for continued improvement.

The Award Scheme has been designed to provide the tools and encouragement to those councils at the beginning of their improvement journeys, as well as promoting and

recognising councils that are at the cutting edge of the sector. It is only through the sector working together, to share best practice, drive up standards and supporting those who are committed to improving their offer to their communities that individual councils and the sector as a whole will reach its full potential.

[Download the Local Council Award Scheme 2016 guidance \(pdf\)](#)

[Download the Local Council Award Scheme 2016 guidance \(doc\)](#)

The Local Council Award Scheme undergoes a review every year and new guidance is issued in January each year. Councils must meet the criteria of the guidance that is in place at the date they submit their completed application form to their local accreditation panel.

May 2017 Update:In the summer of 2016 the SPC achieved Quality Gold Award standard, only the 3rd such award in Cheshire and 19th in the whole of England. We intend to work hard to ensure we maintain that very high standard.

4.4 Training of Councillors

Somerford Parish Council is committed to providing a training strategy as part of the Quality Council requirement. This ensures that staff and councillors are trained to the highest standard and kept up to date with new legislation. To support this, funding is allocated to a training budget each year.

TRAINING NEEDS

The types of training will differ between the Clerk and the Councillors. However, all are entitled to:

- Equality of opportunity in all aspects of their development
- An induction programme into their own roles and the workings of Somerford Chapel Parish Council
- An understanding of the objectives and direction of the council
- An understanding of the contribution that is expected of them.

Training will include formal training courses, briefings and seminars and conferences such as SLCC, NALC, regional and national.

All new councillors when joining receive an information pack which includes:

The Good Councillors Guide, Members list, Meetings timetable , Code of Conduct , Standing Orders, Financial Standing Orders , Copy of polices. They are also expected to attend a training course run by CHALC (Cheshire Association of Local Councils) on basic induction or roles and responsibilities.

IDENTIFYING TRAINING NEEDS

The training needs for staff will be identified through an annual appraisal. Training needs will also become apparent as a result in changes in legislation, new equipment etc. The Clerk will

notify Councillors of appropriate training/briefing sessions. A Chairman should be expected to undergo appropriate training in chairmanship as provided by ChALC.

4.5 The Parish Clerk

The role of the parish clerk is one that has increased considerably in the recent past. From humble beginnings as a “keeper of records” to the current role of effectively being a chief executive or business manager of the council. In smaller parishes such as Somerford, the Clerk is very much the “glue” which sticks the council together. The role encompasses not only the original purpose of taking notes, keeping records and arranging meetings but also extends to being the legal and financial advisor, publicity officer, event’s organiser , liaison officer for residents and outside agencies, confidant, etc.

The current Clerk to the Somerford Parish, Julie Mason, carries out the role on a part-time basis and also clerk’s the neighbouring parishes of Hulme Walfield and Somerford Booths, Cranage and Twemlow. This combination of roles benefits each of the parishes considerably since the experience gleaned by one council can be shared with others and this can often lead to costs saving.

The parish is fortunate in having such a dedicated individual and we are determined that her role continues to enjoy the respect earned over several years.