

ESSEX HIGHWAYS DISCUSSION – Cressing Parish Council meeting 10th January 2024

Everyone who lives in or travels to or through Cressing cannot fail to be dismayed at the amount of roadworks and road closures that have existed on our roads for more than a year. The Parish Council, whilst it has no legal power in regard to roads and footways, has been working tirelessly to chase the organisations who contract for the roads to be dug up. Several companies have been involved in this including utilities and broadband. One of the issues has been the amount of mud and debris left on the roads and verges, the former of which is supposed to be cleared to keep the road surface safe.

The Parish Council has been calling for a long time for a “joined up” approach to the scheduling of roadworks both for repairs and related to residential developments as they seem to be scheduled without any reference to the wider area. To this end we have endeavoured to arrange a public discussion with the Portfolio Holder for Highways at Essex County Council. The first invitation to Cllr Lee Scott was in January 2023 to attend a public Parish Council meeting to discuss policy in respect of highways and to help them understand what we, as a Parish Council, can do to make things better for our residents.

He could not attend, but his deputy, Cllr Shaw was invited (and accepted) to come to the February meeting. Unfortunately this also fell by the wayside and eventually we were able to meet with Cllr Lewis Barber at the PC meeting on 12th April who, at that time, was the Deputy Cabinet Member for Highways Maintenance and Sustainable Transport and Deputy Cabinet Member for Community Equality Partnerships and Performance. Cllr Barber is County Councillor for Constable division. He took away from the meeting numerous actions. On 23rd May he responded to the points raised about Highways’ responsibilities in the planning application process as follows:

“.....In respect of concerns that housing developments are resulting in increased traffic in the parish. When responding to planning applications the Highway Authority will check the planning application against current policy, standards and guidelines and where required seek mitigation in accordance with the tests set out in the National Planning Policy Framework, Chapter 4 Decision making, paragraph 57.

The National Policy Framework in Chapter 9 Promoting sustainable transport paragraph 111 indicates that **‘Development should only be prevented or refused on highway grounds if there would be an unacceptable impact on highway safety, or the residual cumulative impacts on the road network would be severe.’**

In planning the Highway Authority are a statutory consultee which is the same status as Parish Councils. If there are highway matters of concern to the Parish Council raised in connection with planning these will be managed by the Planning Case Officer at the Local Planning Authority who will determine if they should be referred to the Highway Authority for further consideration.

As regards cumulative impact please be assured that this topic is addressed in Transport Assessments provided by developers to support planning applications. The Highway Authority would typically agree in advance with developers what local development under construction or consented but not yet commenced should be included within the Transport Assessment which, combined with current traffic flow data, provides an appropriate baseline to consider the impact of additional development.”

In July the PC raised with Cllr Lee Scott the impact numerous and repeated road closures were having on the residents of Cressing. After several exchanges of emails his final comment on 9th October was:

“.....I am not sure what more can be done as we have no powers over utility companies other than if they overrun whilst we would like more powers this will need a National law change but we are continuing to lobby on this ,I know this will not be answer you want but I want to be honest with you.....”

Soon after this Cllr Tom Cunningham was appointed the Cabinet Member for Highways, Infrastructure and Sustainable Transport, and he was invited to meet with the PC. He is unable to attend a PC meeting but suggested Cllrs attend his “Transport Surgery” on 22nd January at 2.45pm with Cllr Thorogood in attendance. Daytime meetings are not possible for Parish Councillors who are volunteers - they do not receive any remuneration or allowances for taking time out of their working day to attend meetings.

Residents are understandably angry that their lives were disrupted for months during 2023, and now again in 2024. The diversions in place use roads that are not designed for heavy traffic, which is placing a strain on properties within the Cressing Conservation Area. When residents enquire of Essex Highways, they are being told that the PC are advised of these roadworks. This is not true; the PC have not received notifications for much of this work. Some residents are receiving notices from Essex Highways about the roadworks, others are finding out the hard way when their route is blocked or when multiple vehicles are passing their houses on the diversion routes.

Cressing is now facing yet more road closures and restrictions in the next few months. Our County Councillor, Paul Thorogood, is taking this up with Cllr Cunningham and we will publish updates as we receive them.