

## **GIRTON PARISH COUNCIL**

### **Chairman's Annual Report, May 2020**

#### **Summary**

Any report covering the activities of the last year is inevitably going to be overshadowed by the events of the last two months lockdown following the spread of the COVID-19 virus. For the Parish Council this has meant closure of all facilities with Office staff working from home. Our groundsman has continued with the various tasks he can safely perform outdoors.

A help system has been established to put volunteers in touch with those in need and the burden of maintaining this has fallen mainly on Susie Cumming, our Clerk, and Councillor Shahila Mitchell, to whom we should all be eternally thankful for their sterling efforts. Council meetings continue as video conferences.

Significant events of the year include the retirement of Linda Miller after 18+ years with the PC in various roles. Very best wishes Linda for a happy retirement.

The year has also seen the completion of a number of projects including:

- Provision of a new bus shelter at Mayfield;
- Resurfacing the road adjacent to the Pavilion Car Park;
- Launch of the new Girton Village website;
- Replacement of the MUGA carpet and lighting;
- Securing of funding for a reduced speed limit zone in the village, provision of speed monitoring equipment and improvements to the footpath from the Church to Girton Wood.
- Provisional planning for improvements to the Pavilion building to provide an accessible Office and enlarged Hall and meeting room/storage facilities has also begun.

In the next year we hope to see improvements implemented to the pedestrian/cycleway along Oakington Road, provision of an off-road route for horse riders near Manor Farm road, an application for funding for a crossing near the Co-op Store and establishment of a sound basis for planning, funding and implementing improvements to the Pavilion.

## **Covid-19 Response**

For the Parish Council this has meant closure on the Pavilion and Office and the Pavilion Sports facilities and Play Areas. As I write plans are afoot to reopen the tennis courts for Tennis Club members and the Bowls Green for Bowls Club members, according to strict safety guidelines. Our Parish Clerk and assistant have continued to work from home while our groundsman continues with the various tasks he can safely perform outdoors. No excuse for not having the finest cricket pitch in the County, Chris!

Council meetings continue as video conferences courtesy of Zoom. Security considerations prevent them being open to public attendance but, if required, submissions for presentation at Council meetings can be made via any Councillor.

Early on a support system '*helpingGirton*' was established on the website. This was designed to put volunteers in touch with those who need support and was facilitated by the Clerk and Councillor Shahila Mitchell. Our heartfelt thanks go to these two individuals who have put a great deal of effort into making the system work and also to the 80+ volunteers who have come forward to provide assistance to those in isolation. Thanks also to those who have promoted the support system on our web site (Andrew Haylett), and on social media, (Ruth Wilson, Girton Coronavirus Support Facebook Page) and Twitter, (*girton\_gorgeous*). To ensure that everyone might be aware of how they might offer or obtain help, some 600 parishioners identified as at-risk were leafletted by volunteers and the entire village was subsequently leafletted by a professional delivery company paid for by the Parish Council. Subsequently with the help of Councillor Julie Dashwood we are establishing a voucher system for provision of emergency essentials to those in need. Thanks also to the village Co-op store for their help in this and to David Adamson who continues his Food Bank collections and is also distributing short shelf-life produce from the Co-op on a daily basis.

Weekly video conferences have been established with South Cambs., our District and County Councillors and other support groups/individuals from the Village. These have ensured coordination of the village's response and adoption of best practice. Girton can be rightly proud of its response to this emergency which reaffirms that there is such a thing as society!

## **Personnel**

- At the start of the year we elected Gill Cockley as Vice Chair in place of Andy Griffin who decided to stand down as he recovers from heart surgery. Our thanks go to Andy for the hard work he has put into the role over the past few years. Membership of the Council has been fairly stable this year with only one Councillor having resigned. This was Councillor Rachel Thomason who having completed the development of the new village website, stood down early in 2020. We thank her for her sterling efforts on the web site and send her our very best wishes for the future.
- We thus begin this year with 3 vacancies. Regrettably as yet, no-one has put themselves forward for co-option. Please consider whether you could become a

member of the PC. All you need is some enthusiasm to make our village a better place to live, work and play. Time demand is not onerous, one main meeting per month with occasional committee or task force meetings interspersed. It continues to disappoint that a village the size of Girton has not had sufficient candidates for an election for several years now and continues to operate at 20% below strength.

- After 18½ years of service to Girton, Linda Miller retired from her post with the Parish Council at the end of February. I'm sure the village joins with us in grateful thanks to Linda for all she has done, and in wishing her a very happy retirement.

The intended presentation to Linda to coincide with the opening of the refurbished MUGA has had to be postponed but will happen eventually.

- Following interviews with excellent candidates, Laura Lawrence was appointed and took up her post as Assistant to the Parish Clerk during March. I am sure all will join me in wishing her a long and fruitful relationship with the Council.
- Since their appointment in early 2018, Coles Accounting continue to manage our accounts. The role of Finance Officer is now filled by Susie Cumming, the Parish Clerk.
- Thanks are due to our Clerk Susie Cumming, Chris Wilson our Groundsman and Norman Lewell our Security Officer for their continuing reliable service. Finally we should not forget the contribution of our voluntary officers, Cllr Andy Griffin, (Trees), Cllr. Mary Rodger (Drainage and Flooding), Cllr. Val Godby, (Police Liaison), Cllr. Ann Kettle, (Youth liaison), George Thorpe, (Warden of Town End Close and coordinator of 'Girton Green Team' of volunteers), and Corinne Garvie, (Footpaths); thanks to all. The position of Health and Safety Officer remains vacant but statutory safety inspections of facilities are fulfilled by contracted experts.

## **The Pavilion**

- As previously reported consideration of development of the loft space in the Pavilion into usable Office or meeting space has been under review for a number of years. The installation of a lift while desirable is an expensive option and given the split level of the current layout will not be the optimum solution in terms of use of space. The Council has set up a task group to explore the possibilities of more radical changes which would see the Office relocate to the ground floor and provide a focal point for the use of the building which would be accessible to all. The long stated need for a larger hall which would allow indoor sports and staged events and provide additional user storage space is also being explored. Provisional plans have been drafted and are being costed. The most cost effective solution would appear to be movement of some changing rooms to the first floor and provision of additional stair access externally. Consultation with all existing user groups and identification of additional users who might be attracted by a larger hall, is underway and sources of grant funding are being sought.

- Development of a new Parish web site was concluded with its launch in early 2020. It has a much fresher look and can be easily maintained without specialist technical skills. Our thanks go to Alison Giles who developed the new site and to Andrew Haylett and Rachel Thomason who fine-tuned and completed the process. It is hoped that it can become the go-to point for news and information relating to Girton.
- Following the redevelopment of the car park/footpath/artistic fence/bus shelter, all that remained was for the adjacent road to be resurfaced to an acceptable standard. While the road is jointly owned by the Parish and County Councils the responsibility for its maintenance lies contractually with the County Council. Following years of pestering them and with much needed support from County Councillor Lynda Harford the work was finally undertaken in December 2019. Thank you Lynda we would not have got there without your persistent pressure.
- There have been rumbles of disquiet relating to the openness of the new bus shelter. This relates to comfort for users and to screening of our trade waste bin at the rear. GTC have costed modifications to improve matters but declined to proceed on grounds of the high cost. The Parish Council will consult on the need for improvements and depending on the outcome decide what should be done.
- Regrettably the new Artwork fence adjacent to the Church Yard was damaged by a motoring mishap. GTC have pursued an insurance claim and the requisite repairs have been authorised but are delayed by the Covid-19 lockdown. A plan to install safety bollards along the footpath has been similarly delayed.

### **Sports and Recreation**

- The scheduled replacement of the MUGA carpet took place at the end of 2019 and the upgrade of the lighting to provide better quality LED illumination was completed in February this year. This completes the replacement of the Pavilion sports surfaces begun in 2015 with the resurfacing of the tennis courts.
- Improvements to the Trim Trail have been delayed by difficulties in obtaining replacement parts. It is hoped they will be completed this summer.

### **Open Spaces**

- See separate reports on Footpaths, (Corinne Garvie), Drainage and Flooding, (Mary Rodger) and Town End Close Nature Reserve, (George Thorpe).
- The dilapidated bus shelter at Mayfield has been replaced with one provided in compensation for one of those removed from Huntingdon Road following the cycle lane and bus stop works carried out by Highways.

- George Thorpe's "Green Team" of village volunteers who are addressing various tasks relating to management of vegetation alongside footpaths and in the various smaller open spaces in the village, continues to flourish. This year a major activity was the laying of the hedge along the boundary of Town End Close and Woody Green footpath. The hedge was originally planted over ten years ago and has now reached sufficient height to be pleached. With the help of an enthusiast from Histon who had 'been on a course' over half the hedge was completed over several days in February. Congratulations to all who helped, it really looks a picture.
- Following interminable delays in obtaining the correct paper work from solicitors we can at last report that the transfer of the land comprising the car park and adjacent open green space from the PC to GTC at Wellbrook Way was at last completed.
- The saga of replacement of the diseased Holm Oak near Cotton Hall is still unresolved. We continue to send reminders to SCDC and hopefully will see a replacement planted eventually.
- Attempts to engage with the insurance company responsible for removal of trees adjacent to 1A Duck End have failed. Given that the land in question is unregistered we shall begin the procedure for its adoption by the PC. This may take some years...
- Transformation of the old BT phone box at Girton Corner into an art gallery seems to have ground to a halt. Hopefully this can happen in 2020, Covid-19 permitting.

## **Planning Issues**

Planning continues to be one of the areas of greatest concern to parishioners and regrettably one that the PC is least able to influence. Objections need to be soundly based on planning law to have any bearing on planning decisions, which are now within the remit of the combined Cambridge City and South Cambridgeshire District Councils, (Greater Cambridge Planning).

- An application to convert the former stable block/classrooms adjacent to the entrance roadway to the Cambridge School of English to two dwellings was fiercely opposed by neighbours and the Parish Council. It was however approved; the inaccuracies of the plans and the access issues being apparently unpersuasive.
- Following rejection of an earlier application, Girton Town Charity have submitted revised plans for redevelopment of their alms housing in Michael's Close. Following debate the Parish Council, after hearing some opposition from neighbouring residents, was largely in favour of the proposals and subject to reassurances on drainage matters, approved them. The District Planning Committee is scheduled to meet (virtually) on May 26<sup>th</sup> to consider the application. The Officer recommendation is for approval.
- Discussions have been held with neighbouring parishes about the status and management of the Darwin 3 development. In particular of concern is the potential

for further development on the proposed Country Park area. We need to ensure this cannot happen either by planning restrictions (of dubious value), or adoption of the area by the village, (potentially a quite expensive undertaking).

- Following the granting of permission for 9 (net 8) new houses on land to the rear of 39-35 Pepys Way in 2018, we have recently received a further application for one additional large house to the rear of number 33. This opens up the prospect of continuing the development, garden by garden, along the rear gardens of the whole of Pepys Way with the potential to extend the total number of houses in the development to beyond the threshold for provision of affordable housing.
- There is no progress to report on work on a Neighbourhood Plan. I am reluctant to press anyone to get on with this as I am increasingly persuaded that it is a pointless exercise designed to have us believe we have some say in the planning decisions affecting our environment; a situation which on many fronts is demonstrably untrue.

## Highways

- As agreed at last year's APM, our application for a Local Highways Improvement grant in 2019 was successful and the proposed 20mph speed limit in the village from Dodford Lane to Hicks Lane should be implemented later this year. We are currently preparing this year's proposal which will be for a pedestrian crossing near the Co-op store. Discussions with Highways Officers indicates that to accommodate this a single lane road narrowing will be required which will serve the additional purpose of slowing traffic through this very busy section of road. Achievement of this improvement will obviate the need for replacement of the bollards which were broken and then removed at the junction with Weavers Field.
- After being encouraged to make three applications to the A14 Legacy Fund we were disappointed to find that only one was successful; our least favoured project concerning improvements to the footpath from the Church to Girton wood. The other two, improved lighting of the pedestrian/cycle path along Oakington road and a crossing at the Co-op were rejected on spurious grounds. A follow up meeting with County Councillor Lynda Harford and a contractor from the A14 was more encouraging in that the lighting project was deemed both feasible and a significant safety improvement. Communication on subsequent decisions has been haphazard and inconclusive.
- We have recently been informed that resurfacing works are to be carried out along the length of the village in June this year. The extent of these works remains unclear however.
- The proposed Speed watch group has not materialised. However provision of mobile speed monitoring/warning equipment as part of this year's LHI grant will be deployed periodically at various points in the village.
- Following a request from a village horse rider we have explored the possibility of providing off road access for horse riders from Manor Farm road to the bridleway at

Oakington Road Bridge. County Councillor Harford has facilitated discussions with the tenant and County Farms and provision of a simple wooden bridge should make this possible at minimal cost. This will keep horses off this busy stretch of road at this rather difficult bend

- The A14 upgrade works have ground on inexorably. During the year it became apparent that Highways England were renegeing on their promise that access to the M11 from the north of Cambridge would be retained either via the A14 from the existing Oakington road slip road or directly from a new one from the A1307 Local road, I have therefore campaigned to various levels seeking explanations and reconsideration. These have met with a stone wall of high handed boiler plate responses which show no respect at all for the needs or concerns of local residents. Closure of access from Oakington Road must inevitably lead to rat running through Girton and Eddington in preference to travelling all the way to Bar Hill and negotiation of the ludicrous traffic light system to get onto the Southbound A14. This simply confirms our original objections in 2015 that the upgrade was to establish a faster, less accessible motorway system through our village together with an inadequate local road system designed to make us dance around it!

## **Finance**

- Our Annual Return External Audit revealed an historic miss-posting of figures which was requested to be restated. This related to S106 funds which had been held as an accrual even though the sum had been spent on the Bowls Green construction some years ago. It should have been released at that time but changes in Finance Officers over the period failed to pick this up, (as did the last four years' annual audits!). This makes no material difference to our financial position and will now be released to reserves. The Full Return and Auditors report has been published on the village web site. This restatement will be covered in this year's Return.
- Details of the PC financial situation for the year are summarised in a separate report.

## **The Future**

- Projects that we hope can be completed in 2020 include the introduction of the 20mph speed limit and deployment of speed monitoring/warning equipment; the improvement to the footpath from the Church to Girton Wood; improvements to the pedestrian/cycle route along the Oakington road; and the off-road equestrian route from Manor Farm Road to the bridleway at Oakington Road bridge.
- A Local Highways Improvement grant application will be progressed to provide a width restriction and pedestrian crossing near the Co-op store.
- Feasibility of remodelling of the Pavilion building to provide a ground floor Parish Office and an enlarged hall will be fully evaluated and a provisional application for funding submitted to the County Council Communities Capital Fund.

- Much needed resurfacing work is planned to happen in June this year. Many thanks to our County Councillor Lynda Harford for her efforts in getting this scheduled.
- Means of improving the effectiveness of the Bus shelter near the Church will be explored and improvements to the safety of the footpath adjacent to the Church Yard will be implemented.

**Haydn Williams,  
Chairman,  
Girton Parish Council  
16<sup>th</sup> May 2020**