

GIRTON PARISH COUNCIL

Chairman's Annual Report, April 2021

Summary

This year's report is again overshadowed by the continuing Covid-19 pandemic. Any hope we had that it would be short-lived has proved unrealistic but the emergence and roll out of effective vaccinations gives us hope that the corner has been turned and that a gradual return to normality is now possible. For the Parish Council this has meant facilities have largely remained closed for most of the year except for the summer months where outdoor activities and some Pavilion Hall use was possible. Office staff continue to work from home and our groundsman has continued with the various tasks he can safely perform outdoors.

The help system, ('helpinggirton'), established to put volunteers in touch with those in need was stood down for the summer months but reactivated with subsequent lockdown. The burden of maintaining this has fallen mainly on Susie Cumming, our Clerk, and Councillor Shahila Mitchell, to whom we continue to be extremely thankful for their unstinting efforts.

Council meetings have continued remotely and will do so up to May 7th.

The year has also seen progression of a number of projects including:

- Development of plans for remodelling and extension of the Pavilion building to provide a legally compliant ground floor Parish Office, accessible to all, a larger hall to allow indoor sports and staged events, and additional user storage space.
- Successful submission to Cambridgeshire County Council Communities Capital Fund for 50% grant funding, the remainder to be financed from Reserves.
- Successful submission to Greater Cambridge Shared Planning for approval for the work.
- Appointment of Project Management to progress the procurement and construction activity.
- Resurfacing of virtually the entire length of the main road through the village.
- The installation of the 20mph speed restriction zone. Speed monitoring equipment has been received and will be used to identify speeding hotspots for future remedy.
- Plans for an off-road equestrian route from Manor Farm Road to the bridleway at Oakington Road Bridge are being finalised.
- Widening of the cycle/footway along Oakington Road with provision for installation of street lighting later in the year.
- In the next year we hope to see completion of these projects and Improvements to the bridleway linking Oakington Road to the guided bus way; a Local Highways Improvement grant application to provide road safety enhancements in the village; completion of repairs and replacements to Play and Trim Trail equipment; provision of wheel-stop safety additions to the Pavilion car park adjacent to the artistic fence; much needed resurfacing work to village pavements and footways; and more substantial tree replanting along the A14.

Covid-19 Response

- When writing my last annual report in May 2020, we were just emerging from the first lockdown and were optimistic that the worst of the pandemic was over. Plans were afoot to reopen the tennis courts for Tennis Club members and the Bowls Green for Bowls Club members, according to strict safety guidelines. Outdoor facilities, play areas and the Pavilion hall gradually reopened but the changing and shower facilities remained closed. This optimism was short lived however leading as it did to the November reintroduction of restrictions and the subsequent extended lockdown from which we are only now beginning to emerge.
- Office staff have continued to work from home and the new working arrangements have meant that our Clerk, Susie, has effectively been 'on-call' 24/7 for over a year now with barely a day off and we are very grateful to her for this. Council meetings have continued remotely and submissions are still invited from parishioners for presentation at Council meetings in person or via any Councillor. These arrangements expire on May 7th after which we shall be required to revert to face to face meetings.
- The support system 'helpinggirton' established early in the pandemic has continued. This was designed to put volunteers in touch with those who need support and continues to be facilitated by the Clerk and Councillor Shahila Mitchell. Garnering the help of some 80 + volunteers this has been invaluable in providing assistance to those in isolation during lockdown and has stood by to offer assistance whenever needed throughout the year. I repeat our heartfelt thanks go to these two individuals who have put a great deal of effort into maintaining an effective system and the many volunteers who have made it a reality.
- Weekly video conferences were established with South Cambs., our District and County Councillors and other support groups/individuals from the Village. These have continued on a bi-weekly basis to ensure coordination of the village's response and adoption of best practice. I will repeat my words of last year which were that Girton can be rightly proud of its response to this emergency which reaffirms that **there is such a thing as society!**

Personnel

- At the 2020 AGM the Chair, Vice Chair and Committee chairs were re-elected unanimously. Membership of the Council has remained fairly stable this year with no new members having been co-opted and one Councillor having resigned. This was Councillor Roger Hickford on his moving away from the village. Roger joined the Council in 2018 and served as Chairman of the Finance Committee. We thank him for his valuable input to the work of the Council in particular in the Local Highways Initiative grant applications and work on the Pavilion Refurbishment project.
- We thus begin this year with 4 vacancies. No-one has put themselves forward for co-option this year and I will repeat my request to everyone of last year to 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 is a shame 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.

- Since early 2018, Coles Accounting have managed our accounts and the completion of our Annual Return. Regrettably we recently received notice that due to staff shortages and the pandemic, they are no longer able to continue this arrangement. We have their assurance that they will ensure our accounts are brought up to date for year end and will assist any new incumbent in completing the Annual Return. The role of Finance Officer continues to be filled by Susie Cumming, the Parish Clerk.
- Thanks are due to our Clerk Susie Cumming, Laura Lawrence, assistant to the Clerk, Chris Wilson, Groundsman and Norman Lewell, Security Officer for their continuing reliable service in what has been an extremely difficult year. 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. Any suitably able parishioner who would be willing to undertake this position for the Council is urged to come forward.

The Pavilion

- In the past year considerable progress has been made in plans for the development of the Pavilion. These provide a ground floor Office space accessible to all with a larger hall which would allow indoor sports and staged events and provide additional user storage space. Consultation with all existing user groups and identification of additional users who might be attracted by a larger hall, was conducted and plans which are believed to be achievable within a realistic budget have been produced. An application to the Cambridgeshire County Council Communities Capital Fund for 50% funding was successful. I should like to place on record my personal thanks to County Councillor Lynda Harford for her valuable help and advice in achieving this. An application for planning consent to SCDC was made in September 2020, and was also successful. We are now at the point where we have developed a detailed construction brief and appointed a Project Manager to progress the procurement process and see the construction work through to completion. Plans have been published on the village website for some time and there is still time for comments and suggestions on ways that they can be improved.
The efforts of our Task & Finish Group, in which I am joined by Councillors Cockley, Mitchell, Hickford (up to January 2021), and Dashwood, co-opted member Paul Clare and assisted by Susie and Laura, is gratefully acknowledged. Thanks are also due to David Adamson for invaluable preliminary advice and David Mitchell for huge input to the construction brief. Two additional co-opted members will be welcomed shortly to assist in the fine tuning of the plans and developing additional grant applications to fund green aspects of the project and any fitting out items which may prove beyond the current budget.
- A plan to install safety bollards along the footpath adjacent to the artistic fence has been delayed due to technical problems relating to the foundations of the fence. An alternative to place safety wheel stops on the tarmac is now being progressed instead.

Sports and Recreation

- Repairs and replacements of some items of play equipment and the Trim Trail have been severely delayed. Play equipment parts ordered in early 2020 have failed to materialise.

These will hopefully be fitted shortly. The rocking horse was repainted by the groundsman and the climbing frame and seesaw will be refurbished once parts are received. Similarly the new log lift will be installed on the Trim Trail as pandemic restrictions ease.

Open Spaces

- See separate reports on Footpaths, (Corinne Garvie), Drainage and Flooding, (Mary Rodger) and Town End Close Nature Reserve, (George Thorpe).
- 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 but on a limited scale dictated by social distancing restrictions. Individuals have continued to maintain open spaces and larger parties have completed tree maintenance in Weavers Field and gathering of hedging stakes in the Millennium wood. These are intended for use in laying the second half of the hedge along the boundary of Town End Close and Woody Green footpath, an activity that proved not to be possible this winter.
- Installation of new signage showing a map of the dog walking route on Parish Council land, and refurbishment of new signs along the route has received an unexpected response. Given that it was requested by residents, both dog walkers and just walkers, it was surprising to find signs were pulled up and one removed completely. The recognised dangers to children of exposure to dog faeces means that we cannot allow off-lead running of dogs on the playing fields or woodland footpaths. This is allowed on St Johns Field which the Parish rents for that purpose.
- The issue 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.
- Transformation of the old BT phone box at Girton Corner into an art gallery seems no longer to be feasible. Alternative uses for the box will be considered and ideas for this are welcomed.
- Early in 2021 a group of Councillors lead by Councillor Rodger proposed to trial a scheme of rewilding areas of grass verge and green space in the village. This seems to have captured the imagination of many villagers and trial plots are being developed in various places.

Planning Issues

- The transition from SCDC to Greater Cambridge Planning has not been without difficulties. The software for viewing plans on-line seems now to have resolved teething problems but delays in registration and decision making continue. We were fortunate that our planning application for the Pavilion was not subject to any delays and progressed smoothly to a tight timescale.
- There have been few contentious applications this year. Only two have raised noticeable public interest and these have yet to be decided. They are the variation application for the alms house apartments in the High Street and the demolition of the former Felix Hotel to build a new Care Home. Some feel the former revises the plans to become very similar to

the original, rejected application for the site, and there is a groundswell of support in the village for retention of the original Victorian Felix Hotel building.

- The publication of the list of submitted sites in the South Cambs. Local Plan development 'Call for Sites' lead to some consternation in the village. I wrote to a number who expressed concern reiterating that these are suggestions from would-be developers and do not have any status beyond that. Several have been suggested and rejected in earlier years. They will be reconsidered of course, as will the new ones which include: land along the A1307 next to Girton College; the golf course practice field opposite Gretton School; land along Oakington Road; and land behind Marks Way and Redgate. The Parish Council was invited to comment informally on all the sites proposed and has done so by completing the on-line submission forms. Any of the sites which survive this initial screen will be subject to a full formal consultation process later in the year where residents can be sure to make their feelings known.

Highways

- The 'informal' cycle lanes that appeared along Cambridge and Girton roads at the outset of the pandemic met with a mixed response. Some found them useful in providing added security to cyclists while the more experienced cyclist feared they were unsafe as they were advisory only and not of the approved width. They were however removed during resurfacing works, and as a compromise cycle roundels have been installed as part of the 20mph zone installation,(see on).
- Our Local Highways Improvement initiative to install a 20mph speed limit zone was finally implemented earlier this year. It now covers the through road and all side roads between Weavers Field and Manor Farm Road. It is disappointing that some residents have complained of lack of consultation for a project that received widespread support at a public meeting in early 2018, at Annual Parish Meetings in 2018 and 2019, was consulted on by Highways in 2020 and has been regularly reported in GPN and on the village website. The cycle roundels were painted as a compromise between nothing and the informal lanes which were deemed unsatisfactory.
- Our 2020 LHI proposal was for a pedestrian crossing near the Co-op store with single lane road narrowing. For technical reasons it was modified to two informal crossings near the A14 Bridge and Pepys Way, with double yellow lines at Weavers Field, but did not receive a high enough score to be progressed. In the light of the recent introduction of the 20mph zone and the limited nature of the improvement it is not surprising that it was deemed to provide insufficient added value. We are now considering options for our 2021 application which may include extension of the 20mph zone to include roads up to Girton Corner, extension of the 30mph limit along Oakington road and imposition of double yellow lines at various problematic junctions in the village.
- After appeal and a feasibility meeting with contractors our application to the A14 Legacy Fund for improved lighting of the pedestrian/cycle path along Oakington road was finally agreed. Work to widen the cycle/footway has recently begun and the services for the new lighting are being installed concurrently. The lights themselves are promised for later in the year. Residents are disappointed that the speed limit is to remain at 40mph along this road and we shall continue our efforts to find ways of ameliorating this. Use of the speed

monitoring equipment received under the last LHI grant will help in providing evidence to support speed control measures.

- We were very pleased that the promised resurfacing works were carried out along the length of the village in the middle of the year. Many thanks to County Councillor Lynda Harford for her efforts in getting this scheduled. Our attention has turned to campaigning for improvements to our pavements and footways and it is anticipated that we shall see some improvements here in the coming financial year.
- Plans for provision of off road access for horse riders from Manor Farm road to the bridleway at Oakington Road Bridge, which I reported last year, have been progressed by County Councillor Harford. She has identified a source of funding for the work which is expected to be undertaken later this year.
- The A14 upgrade works having been largely completed, efforts have concentrated on ensuring that minor works facilitating the NMU/cycle way links are completed satisfactorily. Somewhat belatedly Planners realised that use of footpath 4 as a cycle way linking Weavers Field to the NMU was not possible so they turned their attention to upgrading the link to Wash Pit Lane. This now has a widened verge to accommodate equestrians but does not as yet have a way of preventing motorcycles accessing the NMU. The promised tree replanting has taken place but many of the plants have died. Cllr Harford is assisting us in campaigning for more substantial replanting along the length of the road from Histon to Lolworth but HE are not being particularly co-operative.
- The potential for increased rat running through the village is ever with us. Reduced access to the A14/M11 from Oakington/Dry Drayton Road has already had an effect on traffic throughput and it is disappointing that Highways England see no urgency in bringing forward a direct link from the A1307 local road to the M11. The Parish Council has been beating the drum on this issue since 2015 when the plans for the A14 upgrade were being finalised. It is dispiriting however that at least one Political party appears to now be claiming credit for its efforts in this regard, where very little has been evident until quite recently. The plans for Northstowe South West access road also have potential for exacerbating traffic flows through Girton and we are carefully monitoring them.

Finance

- It is pleasing to report that the official audit of our Annual Return was completed without qualification. Thanks to Susie and our accountants for this. Details are posted on the web site to fulfil statutory requirements.
- The closure of the Pavilion Hall and sports pitches etc. for much of the year has meant that our income from users has been severely affected. We have spent less on utilities and cleaning and hope to be able to obtain a rebate on business rates so it is likely that the effect on our finances will be limited to an inability to add to our reserves this year.
- More detail of the PC financial situation for the year are summarised in a separate report.

The Future

Projects that we hope can be completed in 2021 include:

- Completion of repairs and replacements to Play and Trim Trail equipment.
- Deployment of speed monitoring/warning equipment;
- Completion of the widening of the pedestrian/cycle route along the Oakington road, including provision of new street lighting;
- Provision of an off-road equestrian route from Manor Farm Road to the bridleway at Oakington Road bridge;
- Improvements to the bridleway linking Oakington Road to the guided bus way;
- A Local Highways Improvement grant application will be progressed to provide road safety enhancements in the village.
- Provision of wheel-stop safety additions to the Pavilion car park adjacent to the artistic fence.
- Progression to completion of the Pavilion remodelling and extension works.
- Much needed resurfacing work to village pavements and footways.
- More substantial tree replanting along the A14.

Haydn Williams,

Chairman,

Girton Parish Council

20th April 2021