

## GIRTON PARISH COUNCIL

### Chairman's Annual Report, April 2022

#### Summary

Emergence from Lockdown has meant a return to face-to-face Council meetings and some semblance of normality in our operations, all be it with the restrictions of social distancing, use of masks, and a higher degree of ventilation of indoor meetings.

Significant staff changes have occurred this year with the departure of our Clerk, Susie Cumming, and our assistant to the Clerk, Laura Lawrence. We wish them well. We welcomed our new Clerk Yvonne Murray and assistant Angie Vidler in September/October.

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

- Progression of the Pavilion refurbishment project to the Value Engineering stage of design and construction. Development of back up plans to provide the same outcome at lower cost are being considered. Progress on the project has been slowed by the pandemic and the consequent unpredictability of prices in the current economic climate.
- Successful submission for additional funding from the SCDC Zero Carbon Fund, towards 'green' heating of the Pavilion Hall.
- Repairs to play equipment and resurfacing of the village play areas is now complete.
- Completion of widening of the cycle/footway along Oakington Road with installation of the new street lighting along this very dark section of the village.
- Plans for the off-road equestrian route from Manor Farm Road to the bridleway at Oakington Road Bridge are still being finalised but it is hoped that this will happen this year.
- Use of the MVAS speed monitoring equipment at various locations in the village will provide data in support of future Local Highways Improvement Grant applications.
- Girton Green Team completed the laying of the hedge along the boundary of Town End Close Nature Reserve. This began in early 2020, and completion in 2021 was delayed.
- Footpath/cycling/riding links to the new NMU route, alongside the A14, via Washpit Lane and Weavers Field have been completed.
- A long overdue tree survey has been completed and remedial actions taken.
- Adoption of improved administrative procedures, including, switching to online banking, a new accounting system, ('Xero'), use of MS365 Office applications and the '.gov.uk' domain for more secure online communication between councillors.
- Development of improved village communication using the village website and social media

In the coming year it is hoped to see development and completion of projects including: repairs and replacements to Trim Trail equipment and the MUGA fence; expansion of the rewilding scheme into implementation of a Girton Nature Recovery Plan; development of a village wide litter picking plan; continued deployment of speed monitoring/warning equipment; the 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; improvements to the footpath surface leading to Girton Wood; submission of a Local Highways Improvement grant application to provide further road safety enhancements in the village; provision of safety bollards to the Pavilion car park adjacent to the artistic fence; progression to completion of the Pavilion remodelling and extension works; and agitation for much needed resurfacing work to village pavements and footways, and more substantial tree replanting along the A14

## **Emergence from the Pandemic**

My last annual report of April 2021 was written in preparation for our virtual Annual Parish Meeting on the 27<sup>th</sup>. Our subsequent Council AGM held on May 4th, was the last that was allowed to be held virtually following a High Court ruling that such meetings could no longer legally take place after May 6<sup>th</sup>. Subsequent Council meetings have been held face to face indoors with social distancing, enhanced ventilation and the wearing of face masks. More recent readmission of the public to meetings has made differentiation between the Council and observers more difficult and resulted in rather 'messy' meetings. It is hoped that this will be rectified when we soon return to seating in closer proximity around a table.

Use of Council recreational facilities has continued with a gradual return to use of the changing rooms and limited use of the Pavilion Hall. Reopening of the Parish Office and Hall was complicated by the expectation that we would be beginning the refurbishment work to reallocate the Office to the ground floor and extend the Hall. Delays in the progression of the project have made the timing of the eventual start of work difficult to predict but it is expected that it should begin in the summer.

As last year the Council Committee system has effectively ceased to operate but is now being revived. This was not in time to contribute to an effective budget system however, so again we have resorted to setting an inflation related increase to our precept and budgeted to add to our pots of reserves designated to maintenance of facilities and the environment.

## **Personnel**

- At the 2021 AGM the Chair, Vice Chair and Committee chairs were re-elected unanimously. Over the year we have seen the resignation of one councillor, Shahila Mitchell, for personal reasons; thanks to Shahila for her work on the Council particularly in relation to the response to the Covid pandemic and the work of the Pavilion refurbishment Task and Finish Group.

In December, we also lost Councillor Jane Buckler who very sadly passed away after a short illness. Jane was raised in Girton and returned to live in the village in recent years and joined the Parish Council in the early/mid 2010's. She was keen that the village be made as attractive as possible and in the face of the ravages of the A14, had the declared intention to 'make Girton Gorgeous' again! She was chair of the HR Committee and despite failing health, played a key hand in our recent staff recruitment. We again send our deepest condolences to her husband (Keith),

We have also welcomed three new councillors by co-option: Cllrs. Carney, de Lima and Muston, who have shown great enthusiasm in involvement with the work of the Council. Daniel Carney has become Footpath's Officer and vice chair of the Finance Committee, Marcel de Lima has initiated a Nature Recovery Plan and become vice chair of the Sports and Recreation Committee, and Anne Muston has become chair of the Finance Committee.

- We thus complete the year with 12 Councillors and following the recent call for nominations for election to the new Council we have 7 existing and 6 new members who are elected unopposed. Retiring Councillors are Julie Dashwood, Val Godby, Anne Kettle, Mary Rodger, and John Thorrold. We thank them for the work they have done for the Council, Val, in particular, as she has been a councillor over many years. New Councillors are Angela Blackthorn, Michael Blom, Andrew Clare, Alison Giles, Nas Hayat, Stuart Marshall and Carolyn Wright. We look forward to welcoming them to our AGM on the 17<sup>th</sup> of May.

- This year has seen an unprecedented turnover of Staff. Following the cessation of provision of accounting services by Coles Accounting, (reported last year), we have employed Streets Accounting, a company based in Wellbrook Way, Girton to manage the completion of our Annual Return and provide us with assistance in updating our accounting systems. In July we said goodbye to Laura Lawrence, assistant to the Clerk, who left for health reasons and in September to our Clerk and RFO, Susie Cumming, who took up an administrative position at her Church in Cambridge. We wish them both well in their future activities.

We were very fortunate to be able to appoint our new Clerk & RFO, Yvonne Murray, without the need for any temporary cover. Angie Vidler was appointed to the position of Assistant Clerk after a period of temporary cover undertaken by Cllr Rodger. Both have hit the ground running and have seamlessly transitioned into their roles. Angie has chased up a significant number of overdue debts for use of facilities and since Yvonne's arrival great progress has been made in streamlining our administrative procedures including, switching to online banking, adoption of a new accounting system ('Xero'), to bring our accounts up to date, and ensuring all payments (some of which had become significantly overdue), have been made. Other changes instigated include using our new MS365 platform and moving us to the .gov.uk domain for more secure online interaction; updating and extending our primary polices to enable speed of decision making and to support new Councillors; re-joining CAPALC and NALC, to increase availability of Council training and advice; re-energising of our Committees with development of Mission, Vision and Values statements to give clearer direction and scope to all our committees; approval by Council to sign-up to the NALC Bronze Award scheme which measures Parish Council best practice; and improvements in communication by greater use of the Village website and of social media.

- Thanks are due to Chris Wilson, Groundsman and Norman Lewell, 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), and Daniel Carney, (Footpaths); thanks to all. Sad to say that in October we also lost a friend and stalwart servant to the village, George Thorpe, (Warden of Town End Close and coordinator of 'Girton Green Team' volunteers), who has sadly died. George did a huge amount for the village and is sadly missed. Deepest condolences to Viv, his wife.

## **The Pavilion**

- As we emerge from the pandemic, progress on this project has regrettably been predictably slow, but we have been through a contractor selection process, with the successful firm, (Godfrey and Hicks), now having developed detailed designs and costings. Value Engineering is underway to bring the costs into line with budget. Given the increased building costs being widely reported over recent years, plans are likely to require further modification to meet our financial targets. When the 'best' price is known we shall re-evaluate the project in the light of 'post pandemic' requirements for Office and Meeting Room space and modify the design accordingly.

In addition to the already secured funding of £275,000 from Cambridgeshire County Council Communities Capital Fund, I can report that my application for £15,000 funding from the South Cambs. Zero Carbon Communities Grant towards 'green' heating was also successful.

We are considering other possible sources of grant funding which will be pursued if we have a further shortfall to make up.

- One positive aspect is the work done to clear the Pavilion loft space which had become something of a dumping ground for various village groups' extraneous property! Many thanks to Paul Clare who as a co-opted member of our Task and Finish group has put a huge effort into this. Essential items are now stored in the container on the carpark. When the work is complete this will be moved to the bottom of the recreation ground to replace an existing container which has deteriorated beyond repair.
- In anticipation of the closure of the building and to accommodate our new staff we negotiated the use of a room in Cotton Hall as a temporary Office. This proved less than satisfactory for several reasons so that the arrangement was terminated after 3 months. It is anticipated that a temporary office will be set up in the Contractor's site-office when building work begins.
- A plan to install safety bollards along the footpath adjacent to the artistic fence has not progressed. The alternative plan to install wheel stops on the tarmac was deemed less favourable and it has taken most of the year to ascertain where we can and cannot dig along the edge of the footpath in front of the artistic fence. County Highways Health and Safety Officer felt that the likelihood of a serious incident was remote and that either of our proposed solutions would be acceptable. Hopefully our plan for the installation will be completed in the coming months.

### **Sports and Recreation**

See separate report from Gill Cockley (Sports and Recreation Committee).

- Repairs and replacements of some items of play equipment were severely delayed by the pandemic. It is pleasing to report that the see saw is now repaired and the climbing frame platforms and safety surfacing on the Recreation ground play area have been replaced. Repairs to the play area surfaces and equipment at Wellbrook Way and Weaver's Field have also been completed. Thanks are due to the resident of Weavers Field who has steam/pressure cleaned the play surface at that location on more than one occasion. Further repairs to the Trim Trail are scheduled.

### **Open Spaces**

See separate report from Andy Griffin/Marcelo de Lima, (Environment Committee), and Daniel Carney, (Footpaths Officer).

- The Girton Green Team of village volunteers which was so ably led by George Thorpe continues to address various tasks relating to management of vegetation alongside footpaths and in the various smaller open spaces in the village. Since the pandemic this has been on a limited more solitary scale dictated by social distancing restrictions. In March, a larger party has completed the laying of the Town End Close hedge alongside Footpath 4 at Woody Green. Thanks must go to Impington resident, Chris Jones, (who is a hedge laying enthusiast), who contributed much effort, knowledge and expertise to the work. We now really are in desperate need of someone who is able to take on leadership of the group and

the wardenship of Town End Close Nature Reserve. Finding someone with George's breadth of knowledge and commitment is proving difficult.

- Last year I reported: "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." Sadly, nothing has changed.
- Following the demise of the plan to convert the old BT phone box at Girton Corner into an art gallery, an alternative idea to install a defibrillator is now to be costed and progressed.
- Councillors lead by Councillor Rodger have conducted a trial scheme of rewilding areas of grass verge and green space in the village. Councillor de Lima is instigating a Nature Recovery Plan which will hopefully incorporate this idea into its development proposals.

### **Planning Issues**

See separate report from Douglas de Lacey, Chair of Planning Committee

- There have been two further contentious applications this year. The application to demolish the former Felix Hotel to build a new Care Home met with wide protest from residents and has yet to be decided by Planners. A more recent retrospective application for development of a bungalow at Duck End has also caused consternation, and a further retrospective application to build a storage unit on green belt land in Oakington Road has received objections from residents. The Parish Council Planning Committee voted to refuse both of these.

Girton College has recently revived an application approved in 2016 which is time lapsed. The Council considered it recently and requested that the provision of a new car park entrance along Girton road should be subject to detailed safety scrutiny and that all requirements for net biodiversity gains are met or exceeded

- All the submitted sites for Girton, in the South Cambs. Local Plan development 'Call for Sites' were rejected as being unsuitable.

### **Highways**

- Our Local Highways Initiative grant application for Double Yellow lines in junctions at St Margaret's Road and Thornton Road, and safety bollards at Weavers Field junction with Girton Road was unfortunately not successful. Our application was rated 26<sup>th</sup> out of 42 with the first 16 being approved. The cut off score being 3.6/5, we scored 3.5/5. In general, it seems that speed reduction measures were favoured this time, and we have had our share of those already. However, I have requested information on the factors that decide the scoring, and that the safety bollards still need to be replaced at Weavers Field. We are considering that this year's LHI application should probably request extension of the 20mph limit to Girton Corner and reduction of speed along Oakington Road to 30mph.
- The speed monitoring equipment received under an LHI grant application has been used at several locations in the village, Cambridge Road, Oakington Road and Huntingdon Road. The data recorded over 28 days at each location has been forwarded to the Police authority. This

should prove useful in supporting any further speed reduction measures we should wish to implement.

- The widening of the cycle path along Oakington road being carried out under S106 funding from the Northstowe development, to improve non-motorised links between Oakington and Girton, has been completed within the Girton section. A proposal to improve safety in crossing the bridge by widening the foot/cycle path and instating single lane traffic on the bridge was considered and consulted upon. The response was not enormous and was evenly split. However, there was sufficient concern raised about the safety of horses crossing from the nearby stables to the bridleway that the Council felt the case for its' introduction could not be supported.
- As part of the work on the cycle path widening the repairs to the bridge parapets were also carried out. The structure of the bridge supports is deemed sound and plans for further flood relief measures will concentrate on providing additional water channels outside the bridge upports and possible lowering of the stream bed below the bridge. Cllr Murphy reports that funding for work on the Oakington Bridge remains in the highways' maintenance budget, and preparatory work assessing the requirements for flood control measures is underway.
- Following our securing of funding from the A14 legacy fund, the new street lighting along the section of Oakington Road was finally installed in March and is now working. It is gratifying that apart from improving the safety to pedestrians and cyclists, it really does reinforce the point that the area is a part of the village and not some abandoned outpost. We will periodically monitor traffic speeds along this road and if supported apply for speed reduction measures including reduction in speed limit to 30mph.
- Many pavements in the village are still in need of resurfacing and in some cases renovation. We have raised concerns about the quality and location of recent resurfacing in the village. We are exploring this with County Councillor Edna Murphy who has taken it up with Highways Officers. It appears that shoddy cosmetic 'top coating' of less worn pavements has taken priority over substantial repairs to those in very poor condition. Edna has also gained an assurance that the long-needed renovation of the pavement at Woody Green is scheduled for 2023, though interim repairs may happen sooner. Similar assurance is being sought for those in Cambridge and Girton roads. The requested replacement of bollards at Woody Green to prevent reckless cycling has been denied on grounds of maintaining disabled access. We are considering erection of cycle restriction warning signs.
- The problem of ensuring safe traffic access to the new Gretton School site at the junction of High Street and Cambridge Road was discussed with the school management. 'Banksman' control of taxis entering and leaving, control and staggering of arrival and departure times and introduction of warning flashing light 'School' signs were discussed. There do not appear to have been many subsequent problems reported. The further issue of staff parking along the High Street was also reviewed but still persists. The use of this road by heavy vehicles servicing the Dovehouse Court building works has meant that the pavements here have become damaged. Contractors have undertaken to make good, when the work is complete.
- Plans for provision of off-road access for horse riders from Manor Farm Road to the bridleway at Oakington Road Bridge, progressed by former County Councillor Lynda Harford

have yet to be realised. County Councillor Murphy has had difficulty identifying the responsible Officers and the funding source. This has recently been established to be approved expenditure from the County Council Social Values Fund. There should now be no further obstacle to completion of this important road safety improvement measure.

- The possibility of improving the surface of this bridle way to the guided bus way has been explored but it is proving difficult to define a solution that is friendly to pedestrians, cyclists and horses. The footpath leading from the Church through the Millennium Wood and on through Girton Wood to the guided bus way could also benefit from addition of road planings and their provision is to be investigated.
- Following the A14 upgrade works, links to the NMU at Washpit Lane and Footpath 4 to Weavers Field have now been completed, but regrettably do not restrict motorcycle access. This situation will be monitored. The route of the path over the A14 has now been formally revoked. Improvements to the path on the other side of the A14 bridge linking to Huntingdon Road have yet to be progressed, being apparently hampered by issues relating to the land ownership.
- The tree replanting along the A14 and local road has sadly not flourished, and County Councillor Murphy continues to badger National Highways (the new name for Highways England), to ensure failing trees are replaced.
- The issue of rat running through the village remains a concern. The possibility of a direct link from the A1307 local road to the M11 appears to have been kicked into the long grass. We shall continue to monitor the situation and renew our efforts to address matters, as evidence of need emerges. The plan for the Northstowe Southwest access road which also has potential for exacerbating traffic flows through Girton was recently included in a further Northstowe development planning application. Our concerns were made known that this should not encourage use of Girton roads as a route to Cambridge.

## **Finance**

See separate reports from Ann Muston, (Finance Committee), and Yvonne Murray, (RFO).

- As reported in October, following the appointment of our new Clerk/RFO, it became apparent that our accounting/bill paying process had unravelled over the period of lockdown, and a number of aggrieved unpaid contractors and service providers emerged from the woodwork. These matters were rapidly addressed by Yvonne and following our setting up of on-line banking and a new Accounts package, we now have streamlined system for accounts management.
- Difficulties in identifying a suitable accountant to complete our Annual Return meant that it was not possible to submit this until after the specified time limit for public on-line display of the documentation. As soon as Streets were appointed, they completed the task very efficiently and the official Audit of our Return was completed with only one additional minor qualification referring to a clerical error in posting of a receipt of monies from SCDC with the precept payment. Thanks to our RFO and Streets for achieving this.

- Over lockdown, with Committees being unable to meet, the precept was set by applying an inflationary increase to provide a surplus for addition to reserves. Also, as in the previous year, we froze our hire charges for the year at 2020 levels. Having re-established all our committees, we shall work on the development of a rolling three-year budget process in order to anticipate expected expenditure.
- Emergence from lockdown in 2021 meant that our income from letting of facilities recovered from the previous year's shortfall. However, our plans for refurbishment of the Pavilion meant that we closed the Pavilion Hall unnecessarily early, and this is reflected in a slow pick up in bookings and reduction in income during the middle of the year. While the Profit and Loss account shows a loss of some £11,000 over the year, once we consider the payment from reserves on Play surfaces/equipment, and fees associated with the Pavilion refurbishment, this translates to a surplus transferable to reserves of more than £30,000.

### **The Future**

Projects that we hope can be carried out in the coming year include:

- Completion of repairs and replacements to Trim Trail equipment and the MUGA fence.
- Expansion of the rewilding scheme into implementation of a Girton Nature Recovery Plan.
- Development of a village wide litter picking plan.
- Continued deployment of speed monitoring/warning equipment.
- Installation of the 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 if a suitable compromise in surfacing materials can be found.
- Improvements to the footpath surface leading to Girton Wood.
- A Local Highways Improvement grant application will be progressed to provide further road safety enhancements in the village.
- Submission to the NALC Bronze Award scheme which measures Parish Council best practice
- Provision of safety bollards to the Pavilion car park adjacent to the artistic fence.
- Progression to completion of the Pavilion remodelling and extension works.
- We shall continue to press for much needed resurfacing work to village pavements and footways and more substantial tree replanting along the A14.

**Haydn Williams,**

**Chairman,**

**Girton Parish Council**

**4<sup>th</sup> May 2022**