

Girton Annual Parish Meeting
Wednesday 17th May 2023
Parish Council Chair's Report
Cllr Daniel Carney

Council

I am glad to report that finally all of the Council's committees are back up and running, some of which had not met for several years. Most of these now have updated missions, visions, and terms of reference, and are working on more robust action lists and budgets.

Unfortunately, this year has seen significant turnover of Parish Councillors. I would particularly like to highlight, and thank, long-serving councillors Douglas de Lacey, Gill Cockley, Andy Griffin, and Julie Dashwood for many years of service to the Parish Council. In addition, I extend my gratitude to councillors Angela Blackburn, Marcelo de Lima, who also have left the council since last year's APM. Since that time we have also been joined by new councillors Gary Betts and Patrick Linton.

We still have four vacancies on the Parish Council, and I would encourage anyone who wishes to volunteer to help contribute to the community by becoming a Parish Councillor to put themselves forwards for co-option.

I hope I can speak on behalf of the whole council in saying that we have been extremely grateful for all the hard work of the Parish Council's staff – Yvonne Murray, Angie Vidler, Chris Wilson, and Norman Lewell. Their contributions this year have been excellent in getting Parish Council operations back to a 'business as usual' state. I would particularly like to highlight that Yvonne and Angie have spent significant amounts of their time bringing the accounts finally up to date and maximising the usage of the Parish Council's facilities, as well as making great improvements in the Council's communication and engagement with residents. As well as carrying out maintenance of all the Council's sports pitches, Chris has been a valuable source of information highlighting areas around the facilities that the Council needs to address.

The Parish Council has supported their work by seeking third-party review of their pay, to ensure they are correctly remunerated, and with training through the Society of Local Clerks and the Grounds Management Association.

Highways

Highway safety has been a key priority of previous councils, and I think it key that it remains so for this one. The past 12 months has seen some serious road accidents in Girton on the A1307, one warranting assistance from the air ambulance, as well as several on Oakington Road, including one resulting tragically in a fatality. These have increased the resolve of the council to push for increased safety measures in and around Girton.

Together with Oakington & Westwick Parish Council we have applied to CCC's most recent round of Local Highway Initiative scheme to implement a 30mph speed limit on Oakington Road, linking the 20mph zones in the two villages. Lowering the speed limit here is something that has been an aspiration for previous councils, repeatedly requested by residents, and now shown by consultation to be backed by a majority of responding residents. The proposal was presented to the CCC Highways committee earlier this month, and we expect to hear whether we have been successful in July. I would particularly like to thank Cllr Tony Starling of Oakington & Westwick PC for leading this application.

We have also applied to CCC's separate 20mph zone scheme to introduce a 20mph speed limit for all roads between Huntingdon Road and the A14 bridge on Girton Rd. The intention is to make almost the entire residential area of Girton. This too was an aspiration of previous councils, but CCC's

guidance had indicated that Girton Road was not an appropriate road to be reduced to 20mph due to the limited number of houses on one side of the road, perhaps neglecting the 800 or so residents of Girton College. This policy has since changed, allowed the Parish Council to make this application. The public response to the consultation on this scheme was considerable, with a clear majority in favour of introducing a 20mph zone.

Safety on the A1307, at its junction with The Avenue, has been compromised by a previous accident completely knocking down the signs at the T-junction, resulting in driver confusion in low light. Getting these signs reinstated has been severely hampered by CCC Highways and National Highways both claiming that the road was not their responsibility. Following some diligent follow-up, in particular from Cllr Fiona Naughton of Madingley PC, the County Council have now conceded that this is their responsibility and that they will act to replace these signs.

A very recent accident, involving a small child and parent, has highlighted that the junction of Huntingdon Road and Eddington Avenue is unacceptably hazardous for cycling. Frequent illegal encroachment by motor vehicles into the cycle lanes in both directions can make this an unsafe stretch of road for vulnerable users. Our County Councillor is raising the poor road design with CCC's Highways department.

Many ongoing Highways issues have been slow to be resolved, in part due to problems with CCC's Highways department. Following repeated requests to CCC, the hedgerow obstructing the cycle path linking the two ends of Manor Farm Road has finally been cut back, as part of the hedgerow cutback campaign, which GPC has supported and publicised. Whilst some further volunteer work was necessary to finish the job off at ground level, this now allows the full width of path to be safely usable. There are further issues of hedges and trees encroaching onto pavements. Once nesting season has finished this year we intend to notify landowners whose foliage is causing difficulties that it is their responsibility to cut back accordingly. The Parish Council reserves the right, following sufficient notification, to commission cut back and charge the landowners for the work where necessary.

As was the case this time last year, many of the pavements in the village remain in a very poor state, with a number deteriorating further. We have continued to press Cllr Murphy regarding this, and she has spent considerable time liaising with Highways on this. She has been assured that repairs of the footway on Cambridge Rd/Girton Rd are scheduled and budgeted for, but we are yet to see any progress. We will continue to press on this and other pavements in the village, for example the very degraded patches on High Street, and encourage residents who spot any areas of concern to log them on the County Council's online Highways fault reporting system.

This year two Active Travel proposals have been put forward by the Combined Authority that affect Girton. The first is a change to the junction at Girton Corner that will involve narrowing the road apron to slow motor vehicles and a shared pedestrian and cycle crossing of Girton Road, linking to the Huntingdon Road crossing and on to the Ridgeway. The second, just outside the village boundary, is effectively a northwards continuation of the widened cycle and footpath on Oakington Rd, going from the junction with Gatehouse Road to the Oakington crossroads. Funding for the first proposal has been secured, and we hope that monies will also be found for the second.

Sports & Recreation

See also separate report from Nas Hayat (Chair of Sports & Recreation Committee)

The Sports & Recreation Committee has made a point of trying to co-opt representatives from the various sports clubs that make use of the Parish Council facilities, and it is pleasing that the committee now contains representatives from Girton United FC, Girton Colts FC, Girton CC, Girton Tennis Club, and Girton Bowls Club.

Inspections of the football and cricket pitches have been carried out by the Football Association and the English Cricket Board and we now have expert guidance to help our groundskeeper, Chris Wilson, on how to best care and maintain for these facilities. A neglected mower has been overhauled to assist with this work, and some much-needed ditch clearing should assist with pitch drainage. Long overdue periodic maintenance to the tennis courts has been commissioned (and may have been completed by the time of the APM). Repairs to the basketball court have been scheduled – thank you to the pupils of Girton Glebe Primary School for their letter highlighting the problems at the court.

The Recreation Ground has returned to being heavily used for sports fixtures at weekends, resulting in equally heavy demands on car parking space. Thanks to the hard work of the Parish Council's Assistant Clerk, Angie Vidler, and the helpfulness of Girton Glebe headteacher Chris Butler, the school grounds are now available as overflow parking space for the busiest times. This relationship has also led to a future agreement whereby the playing field behind Girton Glebe is to be improved by the Parish Council team to allow it to be used as an additional sports facility outside of school hours.

A long-term issue has been that of the provision of toilet facilities for users of the bowls green on Wellbrook Way and disagreements about how to resolve this. The Parish Council brought together a working group, including the Girton Bowls Club and Girton Town Charity, to try to move towards a solution that is satisfactory to all three parties. Whilst there is still some way to go, the group has made good progress with reaching an understanding that all are able to agree on.

In a further measure to improve cooperation across the village, the Parish Council has offered use of its online booking facilities to the Cotton Hall Foundation with the proposal of a single location in which users could book rooms, etc. at the Pavilion or the Cotton Hall. The Cotton Hall Trustees have decided not to implement this at the moment, but a good working relationship has been established between the two parties.

The Pavilion refurbishment project started in 2020 has been paused and is due to be re-scoped. The escalating cost of the project, mostly due to matters out of the Council's hands, led to the majority of councillors and co-opted members of the Pavilion Task & Finish Group concluding that an outcome that delivered good value for money and even a minimally satisfactory outcome could not be achieved within budget. Council reserves earmarked specifically for Pavilion refurbishment remain, and further public engagement will be undertaken to ascertain the post-Covid requirements for our main sporting hub.

Finance

See also separate reports from Ann Muston (Chair of Finance Committee) and Yvonne Murray (Responsible Finance Officer)

As noted earlier, a significant amount of work has taken this year to put the Parish Council's accounts into good order. Following many hours of diligent work we have no outstanding invoices and almost all outstanding debts and owings have now been rectified.

A very full set of accounts has been produced this year, with a great deal of granular detail which will help for budgeting and forecasting going forwards across the Council's activities. Unfortunately, as not all of the outstanding bills had been resolved in time for setting it, the Council again had to submit a request for a precept value based on an inflationary increase. Whilst the increase in the total precept is a little over 7%, the projected increase in households in the parish over the forthcoming financial year means that results in a very small annual increase of around 92p per Band D household.

Following a two-year freeze on hire charges, an increase of 10% has been applied to all fees. These are now set such that they came into effect on the 1st of April for most facilities but are delayed to June 1st for football so that it is not implemented partway through a season that has already been budgeted for by football users. It is intended that that arrangement continues in future years.

The year end report shows that expenditure slightly exceeded income, by approximately £1,200, but this has included paying off some significant outstanding debts. Council unassigned reserves are currently higher than most guidelines suggest, and it is planned to reduce this level over the coming years.

Environment

See also separate report from Alison Giles (Chair of Environment Committee)

An excellent development this year has been the first actions of the Local Nature Recovery Plan Working Group, formed at the tail end of the last Council. The group has held two well-attended public meetings and has already begun work, supported by the Parish Council, on improving the habitats for our resident flora and fauna with an aim of improving biodiversity in the village. The Parish Council is taking part in No Mow May, allowing long grasses and wild plants to grow at a number of our green spaces.

More recently, a group has been established to create a Neighbourhood Plan for Girton. This is independent from, but supported by, the Parish Council. The group will be collecting information from a wide range of sources in the village to create a plan for future development in the village which will be put to public referendum for approval once completed. Building on the previous Village Plan completed a few years ago, an approved Plan would be a legal document which must be consulted and considered in all Planning decisions. It is hoped that this will be a strong effective voice representing the views of Girton's residents for the future.

After some abortive efforts to convert the disused phone box at Girton Corner to an art space and then location for a defibrillator, the Parish Council is supporting an initiative by several residents to convert it into a book exchange, with a focus on books for children. A fundraising effort is underway, and staff at Girton College have offered their time for free to help repair the box and install shelving.

Some of the benches in the village have needed repair or replacement. Three new benches have been installed at the Pump Garden, Smithy Green, and on Washpit Lane. I would like to thank Girton's Neighbourhood Watch for their donation of the latter two, along with their installation. Through use of new software we have been collating an asset register in order that maintenance of all Parish Council assets can be better managed and scheduled. Some repair work that has taken place on the parapet of Beck Brook bridge on Oakington Road. Two courses of brick have been replaced on the parapet, and the crack that had developed is now less than 1mm wide. Whether this cracking, which had previously reached 11mm, reappears or not we will find out in due course. Further repair work on the bridge is planned and budgeted for by CCC.

Extra sets of litter picking equipment has been purchased and made available to residents, who have been doing great work helping to keep our village tidy. The Council has purchased extra litter and dog waste bins for the Recreation Ground and is looking at how to generally improve bin provision around the village.

Following a long period of opacity about ownership, a number of streetlights have now been adopted by the Parish Council, including the new ones on Oakington Road.

The appearance of a kebab van parked outside St Andrew's Church was a highly divisive issue, with many residents strongly in favour and many strongly against. The van was operating under a licence issued by SCDC, under their new street trading policy, but the process did not sufficiently notify neighbours or the Parish Council. Whilst the Parish Council sought to find ways in which the van could operate in the village in a way that was not contentious, the operators were found to be in breach of their licence, which was then revoked.

The substantial reduction in the bus service offered to Girton by Stagecoach, as part of their sweeping range of cuts across Cambridgeshire, was opposed by the Parish Council. Discussions with Stagecoach were not productive, with the company insisting that the route was not profitable. The only solution they were willing to countenance was that the village raise a precept specifically to fund extension of the Citi5 and Citi6 timetable, which does not seem to be acceptable. The Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority have now passed the motion for a Mayoral General Precept to support bus routes across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. This is apparently only to support the status quo of the county's bus services, but we are seeking information via our County Councillor if there is any opportunity for these funds to help Girton's services return to a pre-Covid state.

Planning

The Planning Committee has been kept busy with a steady stream of planning applications throughout the past 12 months. The work has regularly been hampered by problems with the Greater Cambridge Planning Portal. It is not uncommon for documents to be missing, corrupted, or not accessible.

Two contentious applications from the previous year are still yet to be fully resolved. The proposed demolition of the former Hotel Felix was taken to appeal and then to a Public Enquiry. The outcome of this is yet to be published. The extension at 2 Duck End, for which planning permission was only applied for retrospectively, also went to appeal which the Planning Inspector partly upheld. We will be checking that this decision is appropriately enforced.

Another construction undertaken without applying for permission beforehand is a barn at a site referred to as Sloe Fen Farm, on Oakington Road. We believe that this Green Belt development should not be granted permission. At time of writing, the planning application has been withdrawn and clarification on next steps has been sought from Great Cambridge Planning.

A number of substantial pieces of planning documentation for three plots of land in the Girton part of Eddington have been scrutinised. These are mostly reserved matters, with more detailed planning applications to follow. It is noted that in this there is a proposal at some point to close the Ridgeway temporarily. We will be pushing to ensure that this is for as short a time as is possible, and that any diversion is also short. The other major development planned is for Girton College, who wish to expand their student accommodation and facilities, as well as changing the site's vehicle access. The Parish Council has concerns about the possibly unnecessary felling of protected trees along with an increase in traffic along Girton Road, which both the Parish and County Council are planning steps to improve safety for.

Rights of Way

A very productive Active Travel workshop was held, led by Camcycle, to help highlight the existing Rights Of Way, to show potential plans for possible Active Transport improvements, and to collect feedback on problems identified by the community where ways of getting about by foot, bike, horse, etc. could be improved. This information is currently being collated and we hope to use it to inform future schemes.

An issue highlighted by residents several times by correspondence, at the Parish Council's stall at the Girton Feast, and at the Active Travel workshop is that of Footpath #4, where it links Huntingdon Road with the A14 footbridge, down the side of Girton College. A first problem of hedgerow spilling over from Girton College has been addressed by the College, and they assure us that it is now listed in their routine maintenance tasks. More generally, there has been a strong desire from many parties for many years to upgrade and suitably improve this to a bridleway. This was supposed to be an outcome of the A14 works but has not occurred. It was previously understood that the landowners were proving to be an obstacle to this development. Thanks to follow-up on some discussions with the British Horse Society at the Active Travel meeting, we now have clarity from the landowners that they were

prepared to facilitate this and that CCC had failed to progress the scheme. With the assistance of Cllr Murphy we are trying to progress this with CCC.

Earlier in the year I attended CCC's Highways Committee to ask about the stopping up of Bridleway #6, a part of the A14 upgrade works. This was done without providing a replacement, nor determining that one was not required, which we take to be in contravention of the Planning Act 2008 under which the A14 works were undertaken. Highways have acknowledged that they need to resolve this appropriately and have promised to meet us to try and progress matters. We still await this meeting being arranged.

After repeated pressure from a good number of people, including our Clerk and District Councillors, the lights along Footpath #13 (linking Thornton Close to Whitehouse Lane) were finally turned on a few days before Xmas. The path is now a lot safer to use in the hours of darkness. The ownership of these lights currently lies with the developers of Darwin Green but they are due to be adopted by, and handed over to, CCC Highways at a date to be determined.

Whilst there has not been any tangible progress on providing an equestrian link from Manor Farm Road to Bridleway #16 by Beck Brook, this is now being scheduled by CCC Highways.

Events

The newly formed Events Working Group put together a very well-attended event for the Coronation weekend. The group made a deliberate choice to be a facilitator to allow for local organisations to come together in a way that suited them best. The group is now considering events for 2023-24.

Future plans

Many of the Council's future plans remain issues that were hoped to be resolved in the past year, but a number of newer items are added to the to-do list.

Two key issues remain unresolved at the Recreation Ground car park – drainage, and safety measures by the pathway. The Trim Trail still requires improvement and will be considered more generally as how to help with recreational activities for both older children and older adults. Improvements to the fencing around the MUGA are also required along with trying to improve drainage of Ten Acre Field.

A tree-planting scheme is ready for the upcoming planting season for increasing the existing canopy and replacing some trees more recently felled. With input from the LNRP group we hope to improve the management of the Council-owned parts of Wellbrook Way and a CCC-owned plot behind Girton Glebe school.

For the next round of LHI applications it is intended that another submission is made. Possible schemes include an improved application for double yellow lines at several junctions between the main roads and side roads, improvements to the Huntingdon Road/Eddington Avenue junction, or extension of the 30mph on the entrance to the village on Huntingdon Road. Pressure will continue to be put on CCC to improve footways and Rights Of Way across the parish.