

Annual report for parish councils; 2009/2010

Personal notes

First from David: It's been another crazy year. When I wrote this report last year the expenses scandal had not yet broken and we still had 6 weeks of electioneering before the County Council and Euro elections of 2009. Now of course we're into a General Election frenzy and politicians' behaviour continues to come under scrutiny. For my part I began then and continue to post my expenses on our web-site.

Thankfully we appear to be through the worst of the recession, although its aftermath and especially the cost of the banking bail-out will constrain governments, national and local, for years to come.

The weather was one of the big surprises of the year: not just the wet summer but the cold winter (it was a '20 year winter') which resulted in unprecedented road damage

It's been a pleasure to work with Sue who often shames me with her enthusiasm, work ethic and insistence on focussing on long issues first. She has taken to her councillor role with gusto; she has learnt rapidly and delivers a lot.

After I was successfully re-elected, and humbled by coming top of the poll, I continued to serve as the Lib Dem group leader on the County Council. However I have now decided to stand down from this role and will pass it on to Fiona Whelan, councillor for Hardwick, at the end of April. I have enjoyed the role but have felt that it was time for a change. However I will continue to be an active member of the group at Shire Hall and very much intend to remain a County Councillor.

And from Sue:

I was genuinely shocked when I was voted in last year: I did not even go to the count! We were invited to attend Shire Hall after the election, to meet the other councillors and senior members of the staff. At that point, the real work began. I think I surprised officers on the day by bringing up items I had heard on the doorstep. I have a reputation for keeping my issues local and all my questions in Council have been pertinent to the villages I represent.

The lack of money everywhere seems to give all levels of services and Councils a continued headache and my perception is that there is a reluctance to look at ongoing spending. This was brought sharply into focus when we went through the budget scrutiny this year (my first).

My group has appointed me to the Fire Authority, which includes the Scrutiny Committee. I felt this was important as we have our own retained fire station in Cottenham. A local problem is retained availability during the day: this is not an issue for night-time or weekend cover.

I also represent the group on Children's and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee, and believe my habit of asking awkward, but relevant, questions is being put to good use. I have been chairing a Member-led review on Young People in new developments. I have found this immensely useful in finding out about the services that the County does and does not provide.

I am on the Area Joint Committee for Transport, and I am a substitute member for Environmental Services Scrutiny. I have been chairing, along with David, the local Guided Bus liaison.

The A14 widening scheme has been an opportunity to use some of my scientific knowledge to write a report on 'PM2.5's for Impington.

Apart from the standard allowances for Council and Fire Authority I have made no further claims for expenses.

2009/2010 in retrospect

Significant council decisions

In May our group proposed a motion that the Council sign up to the 'Sustainable Communities Act'. This is bold legislation and enables councils to access funding and/or take responsibilities normally reserved for Westminster. The motion was supported by all Members which was refreshing.

In July we proposed a motion that would require the Council to explore options to re-open the Bramley Line which joins Wisbech to March and the rest of the world. There is much evidence that Wisbech suffers because of poor transport links to neighbouring towns. Unfortunately the motion was defeated.

In September the Cabinet proposed a motion to enable it to go ahead with the TIF bid (see below). It was carried easily with some notable abstentions.

Also in September the Lib Dems proposed that the Council sign up for 1010, a commitment to reduce carbon emissions by 10% in 2010. Despite this being a non-political initiative, David Cameron supports it, the Tories first tried to neuter the motion and then proposed to weaken it. The Lib Dems abstained on the amendment after which the motion was carried with only the UKIP councillor voting against.

In November the Cabinet decided to abolish cross party meetings. These are briefing meetings and opportunities for officers to alert councillors of the impact of delegated decisions. They will now be replaced by multiple meetings with the same agendas. That won't do much for council efficiency!

In March the Lib Dems proposed that the Council take a longer term look at roads and footways as it seems to us that having well maintained roads in the first place would reduce the chance of problems with potholes. This was rejected by the Conservatives. Amazingly it was suggested that because other counties have similar problems we shouldn't be over concerned in Cambridgeshire!

Environment and transport services

Despite much optimism 12 months ago, the Guided Bus has still not opened for business. There was a confident plan to do so before Christmas but it came to naught and the contractual stand-off between CCC and BAM Nuttall appears to continue. There are significant issues which need to be sorted and the last we've been told is that a new date for the start of testing will be announced mid April. That's about now and nothing has so far been said. With the current overspend of £30m which has already been paid to the contractors, likely to rise further, there is real concern that the financial problems to the Council will be significant if the money cannot be reclaimed at the end of the contract.

The Transport Forum, set up by the County Council to help it to frame its Transport Innovation Fund (TIF) bid, completed its work and made its recommendations. These resulted in a two part bid: first for the Government to give Cambridgeshire the money for the new station at Chesterton and then a conditional congestion charging bid. After submission of a very elegant bid, the Government simply axed TIF and replaced it with the Urban Challenge Fund. Who knows if the County might have been more successful if it had the courage of its first convictions some three years ago?

There are several Cycling Demonstration Town projects in the county. The one to deliver a safe and complete cycle path from Cottenham to the A14 and over it has started but is proceeding slowly because land purchase has been slower than expected. There are still question marks about the entry to Cottenham and the A14 crossing. A traffic light controlled solution to the latter is favoured, and more sophisticated solutions are being considered.

The speed limit review was completed and recommended that limits on the B1049 be reduced. Speed limit changes are likely to be reductions for Cottenham to Histon down to 50mph, Histon Green to New Road FC 30mph, and New Road to the A14: 40mph. North of Histon Green is still up in the air and will require some 'hard' speed reduction investment. These changes will shortly be advertised, for public consultation.

The County resolved to implement 20mph speed limit experiments: one in the City and one in South Cambs. In July it was decided to implement the latter in Girton. Unfortunately no-one asked the Girton residents, who said no thank you. The County then offered it to Melbourn with the same result. Because of the resulting delay the funding for the experiment is no longer available in South Cambs.

A revised HCV strategic route map is in draft. This defines the B1049 as a Local Route. An advantage of this is that the Council can impose conditions related to planning applications to exclude hauliers from using this road to access development sites

Adult and community services

The new Central Library finally opened. It's a great new facility and probably worth the wait. Library services across the County are facing a cut in funding in the next financial year.

Adult Social Care discovered a £5m black hole in its accounts relating to its 'pooled' budget with the Primary Care Trust. This did not go away and resulted in a major "virement" (see below) and future plans can only result in a reduction of service.

Children's services

There was an 'unannounced' OfStEd inspection. This addressed services for safeguarding and looked-after children which were criticized last year. The Council is now rated 'adequate' in 26 areas and 'good' in 8 making it 'adequate' overall. OfStEd were positive about some changes which have taken place. One of the five County's childrens' homes was found 'unsatisfactory'.

The County Council has failed in its bid to secure extra funding for primary school buildings to meet the shortage reported last year. This means more investment in lower-cost temporary structures.

The Council announced that Equitix (www.equitix.co.uk) would be its partner for developing the first phase of its Building Schools for the Future project. Equitix is an investment

company designed to deliver and manage PFI/PPP projects from bidding and closing through to construction and service provision.

St Neots Community School in St Neots 'failed'. It is now to be federated with Longsands Secondary School. The debt of the former is to be written off.

Corporate services

The Council enjoyed windfall benefits from low interest rates during the year because it is a net borrower, and these helped to counter the Adult Social Care black hole (see above) albeit after the usual mid-year virements.

The government released its 'One Place' report on Cambridgeshire. This brings together performance data on all public agencies within the County. The headline is a 'green flag' for recycling and no red flags. In the detail there's a mix of excellence and poor performance.

Local issues

- The HCV no parking restrictions were successfully implemented in Impington. These were needed to stop HCVs from parking overnight at the south end of Cambridge Road (by the A14) but extend back up the village to the Baptist Church.
- Finally we secured agreement with South Cambs to be able to limit the heights of Guided Bus noise barriers at the back of Melvyn Way to meet residents' needs and not simply be dictated by the Inspector.
- We met, along with parish councillors, Andy Campbell of Stagecoach to argue against Stagecoach's plans to change the Citi 7 bus service following the start-up of the Guided Bus. We were partly successful which prompted one Cottenham parish councillor to say that it was the first time he'd seen Andy Campbell make such a concession.
- We supported the discussions about the need to remove 3 lime trees from outside 333 High Street for safety reasons. This has now taken place and the spacing of trees is now uniform on both sides of the High Street.
- We have continued to push for a bus service to Rampton and supported a petition to Council. At our most recent meeting with Officers they have agreed to support us in another approach to Stagecoach about Rampton. We are also still in discussions about services to the north end of Cottenham.
- After many months of discussion safety fencing was put up at Flack End in Orchard Park. We are still very concerned over the latest problem which means that other areas of Orchard Park and the Guided Busway will be left unfenced.
- We were able to intervene and enable Impington Village College to present a business case for taking over the gatehouse at the College. It will now be leased to IVC at a peppercorn rent.
- We have brokered a meeting between the Histon FC board and Histon and Impington Parish Councils. This went well and appears to have established the basis for good ongoing co-operation.
- Building on our good relationship with Premier Foods it has agreed to instruct its hauliers to not send night-time trucks down the B1049 including, of course, Cottenham High Street. We expect this to remove approximately 2500 lorry movements per year from the B1049 at night.

Priorities for 2010/11

This is what we expect to be involved with in the year to come:

- traffic plans for the villages (again): looking to developing coherent plans and not just responding to short term funding opportunities;
- Northstowe: making sure that this development does not do irreparable damage to the villages that border on it. We will specifically be looking to ensure appropriate green belt separation is implemented;
- local transport: finding ways to make public transport more accessible and, if possible, ensuring that the Guided Bus actually makes a net positive contribution to the villages through which it travels and, ideally, connecting to those that it doesn't;
- road systems: ensuring that new and existing road systems actually serve the people that use them, thinking especially about the B1049 and the A14 junction. We continue to think that this is unsafe for pedestrians and cyclists and we should get some improvements implemented. We support simple solutions in the short term.
- A14 widening: this goes to Public Inquiry this summer, and we will support Parish Councils in their presentations;
- cyclists: making sure that whatever is planned for cyclists is sensible and safe and actually does contribute to the objective of encouraging more cycling. (this point applies equally to walkers);
- schools: being ready to support our excellent local schools should they need extra input in their dealings with the County Council;
- social care for both adults and children: ensuring that large organisations don't forget they are dealing with vulnerable individuals and personal issues; and
- cross council activity: working with colleagues on South Cambs District Council on issues in which we both have an interest including waste management and planning.

Please contact one of us directly if you have any questions and/or comments regarding the above.

Sue Gymer and David Jenkins
 County Councillors for Cottenham, Histon and Impington
 (and the Meadows Rampton, Oakington and Westwick, and Orchard Park)

Sue Gymer
 07919 036246
suegymer@ntlworld.com

David Jenkins
 07739 758859
ccc@davidjenkins.org.uk
www.davidjenkins.org.uk

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