

Chairman's Report 2019-20

This year has been particularly busy for the Parish Council. In the early part of the year, following local elections, we started with one new Councillor, Peter Rash, and in July we co-opted a second new Councillor, Mike Smith.

Some major capital projects were completed. Having received significant grant funding from Amey Cespa, new play equipment at the Pond Green play area was finally installed. This has proven very popular with children and parents alike.

Although the first application for grant funding from WREN for the cemetery paths and mortuary chapel were declined, a subsequent application to Amey Cespa was approved. We hope that this work will commence shortly. Our grateful thanks to our Clerk and Councillors Bye and Rogers for their tenacious work in achieving these successful outcomes.

Our programme of upgrading streetlights each year has begun with four lights replaced with modern, low energy LEDs; two in Drury Lane and two in Chapel Lane. We have also negotiated a new maintenance contract and moved to a new electricity supplier, both of which should save costs.

Another big project that has taken a long while to come to fruition is the transfer of Open Space land in Upware to the Parish Council. This is a sizeable area and work has commenced in improving the site. We are working with the Upware Residents Association on how best to utilise the space. This will be an ongoing amorphous project for many years, if not decades.

The Parish Council has supported the Terra Cycle scheme by purchasing some bins that are located at the front of the Methodist Chapel. There are similar bins in Upware.

The project for New Life in the Old West has successfully received grant funding. Areas in the village will be enhanced to encourage insects and wildlife. This will commence during 2021.

The mysterious telegraph poles that appeared along the A1123 between Wicken and Soham turned out to be for our benefit; they are providing fibre broadband to the Parish. This appears to be providing a more reliable service and greater capacity.

We undertook a blitz of overhanging hedges during the year and thank you to everyone that positively responded. Sadly, there are those that refuse to comply. There seems to be a similar mindset for those dog owners who fail to clear up after their hounds.

Highways issues are ones that we continue to have on our agenda and minutes. We have installed a mirror at the top of Lode Lane to help with the problems of vehicles exiting Lode Lane on to North Street safely. We are pursuing the resurfacing of the A1123 through the village up to Dimmocks Cote bridge, but this may not happen for several years. We are waiting for the programme of works to commence on our pavements, all of which need attention; Rachel submitted so many reports through their online system she was asked to desist! Our request to have the speed limit reduced along Lower Road and Hawes Lane from 60mph to 30mph was declined, apparently the area is not built up enough. The big news though is the opening of the Ely bypass and the long awaited A14. There has been a significant decrease in the number of lorries and, until the Covid crisis hit, speeding was tolerable. Sadly, with fewer vehicles on the roads, drivers are deciding to speed through. The police are aware of this national trend and we have seen more police cars and checks taking place in the village. With data drawn from the speed signs, this clearly identifies a significant problem with speeding vehicles, particularly at the Stretham Road end. This data has been sent to the Police. We are also looking into other options to improve conditions at the Stretham Road end, but these are limited.

In January we had separate, informative meetings with Anglian Water and with East Cambs planning department; the latter was particularly robust. Whilst we may not agree with the information supplied, it was a useful exercise in understanding the limitations within which both groups work. Anglian Water are not a statutory consultee when it comes to planning so very often they are unaware of what is taking place until they receive a request to connect from the builder/developer. They are trying to work more closely with planners to ensure they have a better forward view of the pipeline.

The long-awaited application for 19 dwellings on land off Chapel Lane came to Committee in April. This was conducted remotely and both me and Councillor Rogers attended and put the Parish Councils' case for rejection. We were delighted when the Planning Committee came down in our favour and rejected the application. Just a few days later, East Cambs announced they now have a five-year housing supply so any applications submitted that are outside the development envelope can be justifiably refused on those grounds. We hope this is the end of speculative development in Wicken for a long while.

The affordable housing scheme in Hawes Lane was given approval and, as we know, work has commenced. It is important that those interested in one of these dwellings ensures they are on the waiting list. Rachel has the details for who to contact.

The Wicken-Soham cycle path continues to be on our agenda but I'm assured by our newest Councillor that work will commence this summer.

The Covid crisis suddenly and dramatically changed the landscape of our lives. It is very satisfying to see how our community pulled together to support and help each other. Our thanks go to Amy Reeves and Kate Wakefield for initiating the Wicken Covid Support Group that has achieved so much in a very short space of time. We have been working alongside the Group to ensure the flow of communication up through the District and County Councils works effectively.

The Covid crisis has spurred the Council into the use of new technology, along with enforced new ways of working. Our new website is up and running; we are grateful to Matt Cannon for responding and getting this up and working so swiftly. The website is where most of our parish documents can be found, ie fees and charges, minutes, agendas etc. In addition, we have created our own Facebook page. And, amazingly we have been conducting our most recent Council meetings via Skype.

A further positive consequence of the crisis has been the keen uptake of **all** our Butts Lane and Afterway allotments; it's a delight to see so many making use of these facilities. We hope as time goes on the positive behaviours become the norm.

One detrimental consequence of the crisis has been the closure of the Fen and the subsequent appalling parking of cars all over the place. This, combined with the loss of a potential safe path along Lode Lane, has been difficult to address. It is something the Parish Council and the Fen is very aware of and requires a long-term strategy to address.

Our finances continue to be tight and although we increased our Precept by £3k from £23k to £26k, this only allows us to stand still and increase our contingency fund as required by the Auditors. We received an excellent Internal Auditor's report which is primarily due to the efficient and hard work of our Clerk, Rachel.

As ever, we are grateful to the many volunteers who help us in the work we do and ensure our community thrives. Without them much of what is achieved would not happen. We are extremely lucky to have a community that cares.

As always, I would like to thank Rachel, my fellow councillors, our District Councillors and our County Councillor for the contributions they've made throughout the year and for their continued support.

Liz Houghton
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