

SWANTON MORLEY PARISH COUNCIL – CHAIRMAN’S REPORT 2014

Dear Resident,

I am delighted to provide you with this year’s Swanton Morley Parish Council annual report. It has once again been my privilege to serve as your Chairman for an eighth consecutive year. The last year has been an incredibly busy period and I would like to take this opportunity to share with you some of our achievements and frustrations during this time.

VILLAGE HALL

The Parish Council is the sole managing trustee of the Swanton Morley Village Hall trust. The day to day management is carried out by a separate committee which comprises of three parish councillors and three members of the public. We currently have a vacancy for one more member of the public to join the committee. The Parish Clerk carries out all of the financial and administration duties. The trust employs two cleaners as well as some part time bar staff.

A much needed programme of improvements has now been completed at the village hall. This programme totalled some £250,000.00 of work. This comprised the refurbishment of the kitchen including the construction of a new serving hatch as well as the installation of automatic fire detection throughout the building. Work to build the new extension at the front of the building was completed in July. An opening ceremony was held in September and the extension has been named ‘Swans Nest’. This will predominantly be used by the Little Swans Pre-School. Little Swans paid for the new electric awning, fencing and turf for the outside play area as well as a financial contribution towards the cost of constructing the outside storage shed. Funds were obtained from s106 development money held by Breckland Council for various building projects constructed in the village. This money was used to provide outdoor play equipment specifically for children aged under five years. We have installed acoustic panelling and a suspended ceiling in the main hall which has dramatically improved the acoustics in the room. There is a new stage, additional storage for chairs and tables and the floor has been resurfaced and a badminton court marked out which is now being very well used. Electric controls have been installed to operate the high level windows to help provide fresh air particularly during warm weather. I believe it is the first time these windows have opened for some 15 years! We have also refurbished the main entrance area and created more storage space in the roof. The Hilton room has been refurbished and an air handling unit has been installed in there to provide greater comfort for users. We have a new patio at the back of the building and we have increased the size of the concrete pad in front of the recycling area to make it easier to keep clean. There has also been extensive work carried out in the bar area to replace the window and install wider external doors for wheelchair access. Security grilles have now been installed around the bar counter allowing us to hire out the lounge area for meetings and social gatherings. With the exception of the toilets all of the main function rooms, kitchen and main entrance foyer have been redecorated. I would like to place on record my thanks to Phil Robson, Bernie Marsham and Brian Moulton for their work to repair our car park. Although this seems like a project akin to the painting of the Forth road bridge, it is in a much better condition now than it has been for quite some time. I would also like to thank the Gardening club and Ursula and Brian Moulton for their kind work in planting up our new flower beds at the front of the building.

We feel that all of this work has been very worthwhile and that Swanton Morley now has one of the best facilities of any village in Norfolk.

YOUTH & PLAYING FIELDS

Recently a working party of parish councillors cut back the trees on the village green which were overhanging the road. Another working party recently spent a Saturday morning washing down and cleaning the ride on equipment at the Gooseberry Hill playing field. We have had a specialist contractor attend site and carry out various repairs to get the site ready for the Spring. A litter pick of the site was also carried out. We have removed one picnic table which was rotten but at the time of writing we will shortly be replacing this with a new hardwood picnic table. The bark chippings will also soon be topped up at both the Gooseberry Hill and village green sites. Car parking continues to be a problem at the Gooseberry Hill playing field and I am pleased to say that this year we have plans to create some additional parking spaces on the site as well as repairing the existing car park surface.

The new youth football pitches on Manns Lane are now being well used by Swanton Morley Rovers FC for which they pay us an amount of rent. In turn we use this money along with the allotment income to pay for the annual lease arrangement for the land which we have with the owner, Mr James Keith.

STREETLIGHTING

Last year we were encouraged by Norfolk County Council to request funding from them to replace all of our street lighting stock as part of their Parish Partnership initiative. It was our intention to replace all of the old orange sodium lights with new low energy white LED fittings. These fittings work at 60% brightness between midnight and 5am to save even more energy. They are anti-glare fittings and greatly reduce light pollution. Under the terms of the scheme Swanton Morley Parish Council was to provide 25% (£8,257.00) of the funding for this project by way of a public works loan. When taking account of the potential savings in energy cost and maintenance, we estimated that we would realise a saving of between £2000 – 3000 per annum in terms of electricity usage and maintenance. There would be no need to replace any columns as these were done in 2007/8. Unfortunately Norfolk County Council subsequently advised us that their scheme was oversubscribed and that they could only provide funding to replace 30 of our 84 lights. In view of this news the Parish Council decided to fund a 25% contribution towards these and 100% of the funding for a further 7 light fittings. This has meant that only half of our village has the new lights at the current time. Norfolk County Council has since announced that it will no longer provide funding for street lighting. Having investigated the finances needed to replace the remaining 48 lights in 2014/2015, we have obtained a further loan from the Government's Public Works Loan Board to finance this work. This will be repayable over five years. The lights come with a manufacturer's 10 year guarantee and the monthly repayments for the loan is offset by the savings in electricity usage and maintenance had we opted to keep the remaining orange sodium lights. In fact, due to current low interest rates the loan repayments are cheaper than it would cost to keep the existing stock going. An order has been placed for the work and this will be carried out at the end of May/early June this year.

CHURCHYARD WALL

The poor condition of the west gate and boundary wall at the churchyard gave us a great deal of cause for concern. In 1993 the Parish Council of the day agreed to takeover the responsibility for the maintenance of the churchyard and boundary wall after receiving a request to do so from the Parochial Church Council. This is a statutory function of the Local Government Act 1972. Having commissioned an Architect's report about the state of the wall and a specification, we carried out the necessary repair work which cost nearly £24,000. In due course we will carry out the painting of the west gates. In the coming year we have plans to install rabbit fencing around the churchyard. The rabbits are causing a great deal of damage to the ground and making it quite dangerous to walk in some places. They also cause damage to flowers and memorial items left on graves. Once the fencing is installed we will seek to reduce the rabbit population in the churchyard in as humane way as possible.

CRIME & ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

Thanks to some hard work with the Police and other agencies, the village continues to enjoy low levels of crime and antisocial behaviour. The installation of the CCTV system at the village hall has also helped. I attend the Safer Neighbourhood Area Partnership (SNAP) meetings held in Dereham which are held every two months. This forum allows members of the public the opportunity to discuss specific issues in their neighbourhood and Police resources are allocated to work in those areas identified at the meeting as having a high priority. This has been beneficial for Swanton Morley. I am also pleased to say that our Vice-Chairman, Alex Sommerville is also an independent member of the Norfolk Police Crime Panel which works closely with the Police Crime Commissioner. The main issues of antisocial behaviour in the village are:-

- a) People who walk/exercise their dogs on the Village Green, Gooseberry Hill Playing Field, Village Hall Field and New Football Field on Manns Lane. These are signed 'No Dog' areas and I would ask dog owners to respect this and the health and safety of families and in particular children who use these areas for recreation and sport.

- b) We continue to have on occasions a problem with dogs roaming free on the highway in the Town St./Gooseberry Hill area. If this continues we will have no choice but to once again call the dog warden and ask for assistance to deal with this.
- c) We have been advised of persistent dog fouling in some areas such as Gray Drive and Middleton Avenue. This is inexcusable and I would remind all dog owners that it is your responsibility to clear up your dog's mess. We have numerous waste bins for this around the village.
- d) Litter is very problematic in our village. Please can I remind everyone to dispose of your waste in the numerous bins provided by us or take it home and dispose of it in your own wheelie bin. I am in the process of trying to organise a litter pick around the village and would be pleased to hear from anyone who would be willing to give up a little time to help with this.
- e) We continue to experience occasional problems at the village hall bottle banks where sometimes people dump rubbish, broken glass and large glass ornaments or even horticultural panes of glass in front of the bins. This is a bottle bank and by its very name it is not a place to dump any other kinds of rubbish or glass. Please take such items to the Dereham Recycling Centre where they are equipped to deal with them. Our CCTV system monitors this area at the village hall and we have already successfully reported one individual to the appropriate authorities.

HIGHWAYS

Thanks to continued successful lobbying by the Parish Council, another significant stretch of the B1147 Tuddenham Road has been resurfaced. The state of the footpaths in Thompson Close continues to give us cause for concern. These concrete footpaths which are 60 years old are in a very poor condition and in some places dangerous. We will continue to press Norfolk County Council (NCC) for action to repair these. Our request for funding from NCC to widen Manns Lane as part of their Parish Partnership initiative was successful. The stretch of road between the houses and the Village Hall has now been widened to 5 metres. This road is a vital link to our school, village hall and allotments and we hope you will agree that this has been a good improvement. Under the terms of the scheme the Parish Council provided 25% (£3,400.00) of the funding for this project. We have unsuccessfully lobbied NCC to get Manns Lane gritted during the bad winter weather. However, now that the road is widened we will continue to press NCC to reconsider this decision. We are very aware of the persistent problem on Manns Lane with surface water drainage during periods of heavy rainfall. We have made NCC Highways aware of this problem on more than one occasion. Recently we were advised by them that a £25,000 drainage scheme is currently being designed however they have no money to carry out the necessary work until the 2015/2016 financial year. We will continue to press them about this.

We continue to have a very good working relationship with our designated NCC Highways Engineer. We often request that the NCC Highway Rangers team visit the village and carry out minor repairs such as potholes, sunken drain covers, cutting back vegetation and line marking to name but a few.

It is also a fact that Breckland Council is responsible for the maintenance of some roads and footpaths in the district. One such access road exists in Ward Crescent. A year ago they carried out some very shoddy repair work after repeated requests by the Parish Council to attend site. It is a fact that no maintenance had been carried out since 1980 when the site was handed over from the MOD. When I complained about this I was told that they had no money to put right their work or indeed carry out any further works. I am pleased to say that having tackled the Leader of the Council about this again recently, Breckland Council has now carried out all of the necessary repairs and improvements requested. Let us hope they don't leave it another 34 years before they carry out any further maintenance!

ALLOTMENTS

We are very pleased that the allotments continue to be a success and that currently we have tenancy agreements in place for all of the 27 plots. We were dismayed when a number of our access gates around the site were stolen last year. These have been replaced and additional security measures put in place to try and prevent this happening again. The water supply was recently connected to a fourth water storage tank on the site and we have plans this year to install sub-base material such as crushed concrete inside the site to make vehicle access and parking easier for allotment holders.

PLANNING

The Parish Council has been working very hard on planning issues affecting the village. You might be aware that major changes to planning rules have been implemented by central government to try and make it easier for developers to build new homes. As a direct result of this I have been very concerned about the impartiality of Breckland Council when it comes to planning decisions. It now receives a financial incentive from central government called a New Homes Bonus for each new house that is built. This money is used to help offset the reduction in the central government grant which Breckland Council receives annually to help pay for the services which it provides. This gives them a clear incentive to approve as many planning applications as possible. Clearly there is a need nationally for new homes and here in Swanton Morley we feel that we have done more than our fair share in this regard. The twenty new homes in Liberator Close are now complete and there was an allocation of 'affordable' homes in the development. Planning permission was recently granted for an additional twenty five bungalows in the Woodgate Park development (Lincoln House site). The Parish Council strongly objected to this because the applicant made no provision to provide an element of 'affordable' dwellings for local elderly people having a clear medical need. The application in our view also contravened Breckland Council's own Local Development Framework (LDF) which has clear policies in relation to this area of our village and the fact that Woodgate also had its settlement boundary removed as part of the LDF so as to protect it from over development. We also raised serious concerns about the safety of the Woodgate Road junction given that there will be an increase in vehicle movements. All of this was ignored despite our strong opposition because Breckland Council apparently does not have a sufficient five year housing land supply and as such its own LDF policies are superseded by a central government directive to increase its supply. It is our view that this particular project does not enhance our village in any way. We believe it is inevitable that the owner will, in time, seek to expand the site even further. Recently we received the planning application for fifty two new homes on Rectory Road. The proposals contain a good level of 'affordable' homes and a large area of green open space. We broadly welcome the layout of the site but we felt that we had to object to the application because the surface water drainage scheme as proposed was inadequate and the fact that there is no provision to improve the quality of the surface along the length of Harker's Lane which can be very muddy particularly in winter months. We very much want to see this used as a safe walking and cycling route to the school and village hall for children from the new proposed development and Town Street. At the time of writing this report we still await Breckland Council's decision on this matter. Some of you will also know that there is currently a planning application pending for the Billingford Lakes development which incorporates land on the Swanton Morley side of the River Wensum. Along with other neighbouring parishes, we have strongly objected to this proposal because in our view the applicant has carried out a considerable amount of work without first obtaining planning permission and he has destroyed a great deal of the existing wildlife habitat in the process. This proposed camping and leisure park, if given permission would be built adjacent to the River Wensum which is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). We feel that this will be put at risk if planning permission is granted. At the time of writing this report we still await Breckland Council's decision in this matter. All in all planning has been our biggest frustration in the last year and it is a feeling which shows no sign of going away any time soon. Together with the introduction of the Localism Act which many of us have found to be very frustrating, there is an unwelcome increase in 'red tape' and bureaucracy to deal with. I foresee many challenging planning issues for our village in the future given that the Government has effectively given a 'green light' to aggressive developers with its new planning policies. We are not against building houses but we feel strongly that any development should enhance our village for the better.

COMMUNITY CAR SCHEME

Swanton Morley Community Car Scheme remains a vital part of the village. This scheme is designed to provide low cost transport for parishioners, who cannot access transport by any other means, for medical related appointments. This Scheme is only possible thanks to the organisational skills of its co-ordinator, Anne Sadler, who I would like to thank for all her hard work this year, and also the volunteer drivers who give up their spare time. Between April 2013 and March 2014, between them these drivers clocked up in excess of 5,600 miles. We are pleased to welcome 3 new drivers who have joined the scheme over the last few weeks, but there is always space for more.

FINANCE

Looking to the future, you will be aware that the Parish element of your council tax bill has increased this year by 2.9%. A band D house in Swanton Morley will pay £1.26 a week for all the services that the Parish Council provides. This amounts to an increase of £1.85 for the whole year. 83% of homes in Swanton Morley are in Bands A, B or C and will therefore pay less than this. You may have seen in the press that I very publicly took Breckland Council to task over its decision to withhold money allocated by the Government specifically for parishes. This funding is designed to help offset the effect on our village tax base (number of households paying council tax) caused by the changes to the Council Tax Support Grant provided to some qualifying households. Breckland Council was deliberately trying to keep hold of this money totalling £305,000 for the district, for its own purposes. I am pleased to say that after a great deal of correspondence and attendance at their meetings, Breckland Council relented and reversed their original decision. They agreed to pay the full £305,000 to the district's town and parish councils of which Swanton Morley will receive £2,399 to help reduce its precept requirement. It is my sincere hope that when you consider the amount of work that we carry out on your behalf, you will agree that we provide very good value for money.

The Future

Looking to the future there is still a great many challenges ahead of us. Swanton Morley is growing and thanks to the number of new homes earmarked we can look forward to welcoming a significant number of new residents to our village. In the summer of 2015 we are also scheduled to say goodbye to the Light Dragoons and say hello to the Queen's Welsh Dragoon Guards. This will in all likelihood cause some pressure on local services and businesses during this period. I hope that you will join me in trying to make this process a smooth one during the transition. We will of course do our very best to work with local authorities and service providers to this end.

And Finally...

On a lighter note my wife and I were very pleasantly surprised to be invited to represent Swanton Morley at this summer's Buckingham Palace Garden Party which just goes to prove that this job is never dull. We are looking forward to the occasion.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my fellow parish councillors as well as the volunteers on the sub-committees for their efforts throughout the last year. I would also like to say a special thanks to our Clerk, Faye for all of her hard work, much of which is done behind the scenes but without who, we simply could not function properly.



ROGER ATTERWILL
CHAIRMAN, SWANTON MORLEY PARISH COUNCIL

14th April 2014