

Swanton Morley Annual Parish Meeting 26th April 2021

Dear Resident,

The last year has been unprecedented in its affect on all our lives. The Covid 19 pandemic has placed a huge strain on our family lives and local businesses and it has made us do things differently. Breckland Council has also had to adapt very quickly with most staff working from home during the last year. I would like to pay tribute to them because they have worked very hard to not only provide the Council's normal services but also provide support for communities and businesses through both practical support and efficiently distributing business support grants to eligible businesses and organisations. As your ward member I have not visited Elizabeth House now for over a year as all council meetings have been carried out virtually using Zoom. As the year has gone on we have become very used to such meetings. In my view they have been advantageous because the public have had greater access to the meetings which are streamed live on Youtube. There is also the environmental benefit of not having 49 councillors regularly driving to Elizabeth House. It now looks like the Government will not be extending the emergency legislation which allowed such virtual meetings. In my view this is a mistake and councils should be given the flexibility to do either in person or virtual meetings going forward.

I am a member of the Planning Committee and our work has carried on throughout the last year. There is a great deal of uncertainty at the moment because the Government introduced its White Paper on the future of the planning system. The idea of this seems to be to make it easier for developers to get planning permission at the expense of local accountability. The Breckland Local Plan is supposed to be reviewed and updated but frustratingly the Breckland Council Cabinet seems to have been dragging its feet on this since August last year. They cite the White Paper as the excuse for this but I continue to push for a more proactive and transparent approach. My worry is that if the Local Plan is not reviewed and updated in a timely manner a number of key planning polices will cease to carry 'weight' and developers will find it much easier to obtain planning permission which will sometimes be to the detriment of local communities.

I am also the Leader of the Independent Group of Councillors and along with Labour and Green Councillors we form the opposition at Breckland Council. I try to work collaboratively and not oppose for the sake of it. An example of this is my support for the Council's 2021/22 budget and also its environmental sustainability strategy. I see my role as that of a critical friend trying to suggest improvements to policies, procedures, spending priorities and improving transparency in all areas of the Council's work. I believe that since being elected in 2019 I have garnered a constructive working relationship with officers and work hard with my colleagues to form a more effective opposition group.

I recently provided the Parish Clerk with details of Breckland Council's 'Inspiring Communities Programme' grant funding scheme for local communities. If there is a project in the village which you think could benefit from up to £5,000 of match funding I would be delighted to hear about it and if it meets the scheme's criteria I would be only too pleased to write in support of an application.

As always, I am available to help residents where I can and would encourage anyone who needs assistance with a Breckland Council related matter to either call or email me.

Yours Sincerely

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Ward member – Lincoln Ward

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