

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT 2024

Dear Resident,

I am delighted to provide you with this year's Swanton Morley Parish Council annual report. I would like to take this opportunity to share with you some of the work the Parish Council has carried out on your behalf and our plans for the year ahead.

YOUR PARISH COUNCIL TEAM

Last summer, we carried out a thorough review of our staffing needs. This resulted in the redundancy of our Assistant Clerk. Our Clerk, Kelly Pickard works in our Parish office based at the village hall. The public opening hours are Monday - Thursday 9am-12pm. The Mardler newsletter has been further improved and Kelly and I continue to communicate with residents using social media. I would like to take this opportunity to thank those councillors who have taken on responsibility for specific aspects of our work and have carried out practical work as well as providing regular reports for the Parish Council meetings. The proactive attitude of our Council team ensures that this is a vibrant and effective Parish Council.

For personal reasons, Bob Almond has recently left the Council. We thank Bob for his work on behalf of the village and wish him well for the future. John Phillips was co-opted onto the Council last year and he has recently been joined by Stephen Gauntlett. We welcome them both to their new roles.

YOUR COUNCIL TAX BILL

Our budget for 2024-25 is £105,592.00.

Our precept has increased from £90,565.00 in 2023-24 to £99,384 in 2024-25.

This year, thanks to a significant increase in our tax base (number of households paying council tax) up from 720 up to 792, we were able to freeze the Parish Council element of your Council Tax bill at £125 for a Band D property. 82% of households in Swanton Morley are in bands A – C so pay a lower figure than this. The increase in the tax base can perhaps be attributed to the number of new houses now occupied at the Swanton Vale development. One particular item of additional expenditure we have taken on for six years, is the repayment of a £30,000 government public works loan to pay for a new heating system at the village hall. The village hall simply could not afford this essential work. The old heating system had lasted almost 30 years since the hall was built but had become unreliable and inefficient. It was important to ensure that all of the user groups and hirers, and in particular Little Swans Preschool, are warm in the winter months. The village hall paid for the consultant fees to produce a specification and drawings for our formal tender process, and also to inspect and sign off the completed work. The Parish Council was also able to reclaim the VAT expenditure for this project which is something the village hall could not do.

The Parish Council is not immune to the cost of living pressures being felt across the country with costs going up across the board. One area of significant increase is that of ground maintenance. Our net cost for this has increased by some 80% since 2021-2022.

We always endeavour to try and obtain grant funding and match funding where possible to assist with capital items such as play equipment. In addition, we also seek to receive commuted sums of money from qualifying housing developments to pay for the ongoing maintenance of new assets such as open space areas and these funds are kept in an interest bearing account. Swanton Morley has a significant amount of assets and facilities compared to most other villages, all of which require ongoing maintenance and improvement. Our budget provides the means to do this so that residents can continue to take pride in our village.

CHURCHYARD & BURIAL GROUND

In the Burial Ground we have budgeted to install a permanent water supply for use by relatives and to help us better maintain the memorial rose garden. This has not been expedited as quickly as we would like due to frustrating delays in obtaining a legal wayleave agreement across third party land to connect the water supply. Solicitors for both parties are working on this and we continue to push for a resolution as soon as possible. In the last year we had all of the gates repaired and repainted at both sites.

ENVIRONMENT

The Parish Council are responsible for maintaining Burgh Common, located on the bank of the River Wensum. After consultation with the Environment Agency, we have paid a specialist contractor to go out onto the water with a Truxor machine to cut the weeds and tidy up the riverbank making it easier for Anglers to use the site for fishing. The Parish Council also maintains Mill Common. This is a site of special scientific interest and is subject to a Countryside Stewardship scheme for which the Parish Council receives an annual income of £1,212.00. In the summer months, as part of this agreement we allow a local farmer to graze their cattle on there. Last year, Rose, Silvia, Jane & May (cows!) had an enjoyable summer there. The use of cattle is important to promote healthy growth of the scientifically important fauna which grows on the common. We are very grateful to the Harris family for their help with this.

We have an ongoing agreement with Swanton Morley Farms to keep open several footpaths in the village. These are all detailed on our website including location maps. We know that it is important to residents that these footpaths remain open for them to enjoy, but the Parish Council does pay an annual fee for this access and this forms part of our precept. I would ask that you treat the countryside with respect and pick up your litter and your dog's mess and place it in the bins provided by the Parish Council, or alternatively take your rubbish home. In order for us to plant and nurture tree saplings for future planting around the village, a tree nursery was constructed last year on the allotment site. We successfully applied for some tree saplings from Norfolk County Council and these have been planted in the tree nursery.

HIGHWAYS

It is fair to say that the most frequent complaints we receive are about speeding traffic and the poor state of the roads and footpaths in the village. Norfolk County Council (NCC) is responsible for highway maintenance. When defects are reported to the Parish Council our Clerk logs these on the NCC website and tracks progress. At that point we are completely in the hands of the NCC Highways Department as to if/when a defect is repaired. To help the Parish Council I would encourage residents to also log defects on the NCC website. This can be done anonymously if preferred and the weblink is:

<https://apps.norfolk.gov.uk/HighwaysDefect/>

I would also encourage you to contact our county councillor, Bill Borrett, with your concerns. His contact details are on the NCC website but for your ease of reference he can be contacted by telephone: **01362 860200** or by email: bill.borrett.cllr@norfolk.gov.uk

After the worst of the winter weather was over, the Clerk and I surveyed every road and footpath within the parish boundary of Swanton Morley. We compiled a list of 122 defects and submitted these to Norfolk County Council. I am pleased that they have already carried out repairs to the worst

problems and should be back in due course to repair the rest. Our Clerk continues to monitor their progress.

I am also acutely aware of the problem of excessive surface water on the Dereham road bends after persistent heavy rainfall and the effect it has on the state of the road surface. I have recently attended two site meetings with representatives from Norfolk County Council, Vattenfall's contractor, Murphy and the owners of Walnut Tree Farm. After much discussion I believe that there are now two possible drainage improvement options being considered. It is hoped that this work will be carried out before scheduled resurfacing work takes place later in the year.

It has also been reported in the press that Norfolk County Council has now received funding to replace the old concrete footpaths in Thompson Close. We have been advised by NCC that work will take place later this year.

Responding to resident's concerns about speeding traffic, the Parish Council set up a community speed watch scheme in conjunction with Norfolk Constabulary. We currently have seven volunteers for this. Sessions are run successfully with Norfolk Constabulary, sending letters to over forty motorists so far. We are required to have three trained volunteers present at each session. The training takes a short amount of time and Speedwatch sessions are 1 hour duration. If you think you could help us with this, we would love to hear from you. The statistics provided from this scheme, combined with the data provided from our SAM speed signs, provide valuable data for Norfolk Constabulary. On the back of this they have set up two mobile speed enforcement camera sites in the village in recent weeks.

Last year we were advised by some residents that they felt unsafe crossing the road on Town Street from the church towards the Old Papermakers. Norfolk County Council were not prepared to make any improvements to the crossing so we asked local company, Westcotec if they could suggest a solution. They suggested a pedestrian activated warning sign for motorists approaching from Bawdeswell. This technology will detect any pedestrians on the crossing point and activate a warning sign for motorists approaching the crossing. The total cost of the scheme is £9,682.00 of which we have successfully obtained 50% grant funding from Norfolk County Council's Parish Partnership scheme.

GROUNDS MAINTENANCE

I have previously written in the Mardler about the changes to the Norfolk County Council grasscutting contract affecting many of our estate roads. These areas were previously cut under contract by Breckland Council using their contractor, Serco. Norfolk County Council decided to end this contract and we were faced with them only cutting these areas twice a year. In 2022 we entered into an agreement with Norfolk County Council whereby they provide us with a sum of money and we cut these areas instead. The Parish Council now have these areas cut by Breckland Council at the same time as they cut other pieces of land which they own in the village. Breckland Council will also cut the hedges for us once a year along the frontage of Thompson Close and Hannah Road. We have had to allow additional money in our precept to cover the cost of sufficient grass cuts, and the hedge cutting needed, to keep these areas tidy. We have also included money in our precept for a separate qualified contractor to carry out verge cutting, which in our view is not done often enough along Rectory Road, Manns Lane, Gooseberry Hill and the Dereham Road bends. We now have a dedicated contractor who cuts the grass in the churchyard and Hoe Road East burial ground and another contractor who carries out the cutting to all other areas such as the village green, village hall, Davidson Park and playing fields.

In the coming year we anticipate that the ownership of open spaces and the children's play area on the new Swanton Vale development will be transferred to the Parish Council. When this happens, we will seek to add this work to the schedule of one of our contractors.

In summary we now have four separate contractors carrying out grounds maintenance work for us in the village.

OPEN SPACES

Over the past year there have been ongoing inspections carried out on the open spaces and any repair work deemed necessary has been carried out. Having successfully obtained grant funding for 100% of the money needed to have an ability swing and access surfacing installed in the Gooseberry Hill Playing Field, last summer this was successfully installed. The opening ceremony took place shortly after with some local wheelchair users and their families in attendance. There is now a national drive to make play areas more accessible and we are currently talking to designers and installers to see what might be possible to further improve the Gooseberry Hill site. We will also need to raise a substantial amount of grant money to do any of this work. If you are interested in helping us with this project please do get in touch with either myself or our Clerk.

In relation to the Village Green, in the last year we have planted two new trees on the site. These are a cherry tree and an acer tree, the latter was planted to commemorate the late Queen's platinum Jubilee. We have also had work carried out to prune our existing trees. In the coming months we will also be having new rubber safety surfacing installed under the swings.

PLANNING

Breckland Council is currently reviewing its local development plan which will determine how the district grows over the next 20 years. The Parish Council has engaged in this process. I am pleased that the draft local plan, due to go out for public consultation in early June does not allocate any additional sites for development in the village. This is because as part of our Swanton Morley Neighbourhood Plan, we allocated additional land opposite the school on Manns Lane which can accommodate 120 additional homes. At the time this was consulted on widely and was ratified by a village referendum in 2019. In effect, the village has determined where it wants to see development happen. Having had a site meeting with the landowners and a prospective developer, we can expect to see a planning application for this site in the months ahead. When completed it is anticipated that as part of this work the remainder of Hoe Road East will be widened and additional car parking will be provided in front of the school.

Some local residents have expressed a desire to have a dog exercise field in the village. I am pleased that a private landowner has successfully applied for planning permission to construct such a facility on the Elsing Road. This is being entirely financed by them and when it opens it will be a fee paying facility. We look forward to seeing this come to fruition. Another possible development for the village could see a large privately owned grocery shop unit built. I attended an initial site visit earlier this year with the landowner, their agent and Breckland Council's Director of Planning. Plans for this are at an early stage but it is hoped that if planning permission is applied for and granted it will be a welcome addition to our village amenities. As the Swanton Vale site is nearing completion, our solicitors have been instructed to engage with the solicitors acting on behalf of Hopkins Homes to begin the legal process of transferring ownership to the Parish Council of the agreed open spaces and play area. Along with ownership of this land Hopkins will be transferring funds of approximately £50,000 to the Parish Council towards the future maintenance of these additional assets. Having learnt from our experience with the Davidson Park site, we have also successfully negotiated an additional sum of £15,634 towards the future maintenance of the streetlights on the site (The Parish Council owns and maintains all of the LED streetlights in the village). The Parish Council is currently seeking grant funding to carry

out a five year review of its Neighbourhood Plan. The funding will enable us to employ the services of a specialist planning consultant. We will engage with the community as and when this work commences.

THE FUTURE OF ROBERTSON BARRACKS

At the beginning of the year Defence Infrastructure Organisation (DIO) made contact with me to discuss the future of this site and their ideas for community engagement. At this early stage I am encouraged by what I have heard from them about ensuring residents are informed of progress and that there will be opportunities along the way for consultation with the community. To start with, in the months ahead, they will have a dedicated website up and running to share information and there will be opportunity for local consultation meetings with residents.

On 30th April myself and Vice-Chairman, Brenda O'Dowd were invited to attend a site visit at the Barracks along with representatives from DIO, Norfolk County Council, Breckland Council and Hoe & Worthing Parish Meeting. This was informative and an opportunity to discuss the potential housing, employment and community uses for the site. Breckland Council realises that a tremendous amount of technical work is required from DIO before this can proceed further. DIO will have to provide an overall master plan for the site with particular emphasis on technical assessments for strategic transport infrastructure, utilities and the environment. Only then will we truly know what planning constraints there might be. The site is not due for closure until the end of this decade. Realistically, if the whole site is considered acceptable in terms of development it will take several years before work commences and probably 10-20 years to complete construction work depending on the overall size of the proposed development. This is a project which needs careful planning to ensure we leave a positive legacy for future generations.

OTHER NEWS

On Thursday 6th June at 9.15pm we will be lighting a beacon on the village green to commemorate the 80th Anniversary of D Day. This will be followed on Saturday 8th June starting at 2pm with an afternoon of crafts, games for the children, displays of WW2 memorabilia and afternoon tea at the village hall. Commencing at 6pm our guest singer will sing a medley of 1940s songs. The bar will be open throughout. We hope you will join us.

Last Christmas we once again put on our display of Christmas trees around the village and added an extra one located at Thompson Close. I would like to thank Bernie Marsham for his kind donation of the trees. It was once again my pleasure to install the lights. Thank you to everyone who stopped and had a chat, and in some cases provided me with hot drinks. It was appreciated. We have yet to plan what we will do this year in terms of the Christmas lights or Carol concert. Further information will follow later in the year.

AND FINALLY...

The Annual Parish Meeting will this year be held on Monday 20th May commencing at 7.00pm. For those residents who are unable to attend this meeting but would like to ask a question or raise a concern, I am happy for you to contact myself or our Clerk directly and we will do our best to help you.

ROGER ATTERWILL BEM

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8th May 2024