

Annual report for parish and community councils: 2013/14

For the Cottenham, Histon and Impington (CH&I) division of Cambridgeshire which also includes King's Meadows, Oakington & Westwick, Orchard Park and Rampton.

It's been a different year. It started with the elections of 2013 when Sue Gymer was not re-elected despite a first class record as a community councillor. Sue worked tirelessly and unfortunately fell victim to an anti-establishment trend which enabled an independent, Mike Mason, to take what would have been lots of Lib Dem votes and top the poll. I was fortunate to come second and that makes it three in a row. Mike and I have known each other for some time and we work well together but there's no doubt that in Sue's absence I've had more to do.

It's also been a very different year at the County Council with the tide that led to Mike being elected also delivering enough UKIP councillors in Fenland and Huntingdonshire to deprive the Tories of their majority on the council. This resulted in a 'rainbow coalition' of Lib Dems, Labour, UKIP and independents coming together and voting through changes which will see the Council moving to a committee system next month. This means that instead of decisions being made by a nine member cabinet they will be taken by six committees which will mean that all 69 councillors will participate. It's got to be good for democracy but it will be a challenge on individuals to work together and across party divisions to come up with consensus. Only time will tell.

Street lighting: new columns and lanterns good roll-out bad

It's hard to believe it but it's only this time last year that we saw Balfour Beatty on the streets for the first time as it began to replace the street lights in this division. Their activity has caused all manner of problems. Some of these are of their own doing but others are down to the contract itself and the way that Whitehall changed the rules after agreeing to allow the contract to go ahead. The net result is that Balfour Beatty is removing at least 1 in every 10 residential street lights with the resulting unsatisfactory variable lighting with multiple dark patches. The contract is rigid and unless residents and parish councils get in early to argue against Balfour Beatty's plans it's very difficult to get any changes. However Balfour Beatty's engagement has improved and recent meetings have been positive. There's more information at <http://bit.ly/1hqibsG>.

Superfast broadband: promises about to be delivered

The Connecting Cambridgeshire high speed broadband project began to roll out in May 2013 and it seemed to take for ever but at last we are looking at some imminent improvement in Orchard Park. We are expecting to see superfast broadband available there within the third quarter of 2014. There's more information about which the roll out at <http://bit.ly/1oTMkFO>.

A better environment for cyclists and pedestrians (and some bus users)

The roll out of Cambridge City's 20mph project began and King's Meadows which is an enclave of this division south of King's Hedges road (a bit like Crimea in the Ukraine I guess) is now a 20mph zone.

Good news for cyclists: the lights controlled improvements to the B1049/A14 roundabout were implemented at the end of 2013 and after a difficult first week during which the power of Facebook as a communications tool was demonstrated the system has settled down and is delivered what it set out to do viz provide protected crossing for the less confident cyclist. With good weather now we might expect to see an upsurge in people cycling into Cambridge. And in a related activity plans have been developed for Ring Fort Path and there should be a consultation in the next months.

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It was good and bad news for northbound buses. It now seems that the stay of execution secured for the 106 was just that and this service will be withdrawn shortly. It's not surprising because very few people used this bus from Rampton and Cottenham. However the 110 Freedom Bus has been saved and will now run twice a week, detouring via Rampton. That's a good result. There's more about this at <http://bit.ly/1iDTuqb>.

Big news for big projects

The really big news during the year has been the successful completion of the City Deal. This recognises the role of Cambridge as an economic driver for the country and provides a mechanism for it to be funded appropriately. There will be £500 million grant funding which specifically as a result of the deal and this 'unlocks' a billion or so more and provides the money to deliver the infrastructure improvements which the City and its surroundings need. The Deal was negotiated by a team made up from the County Council, South Cambs, the City and the University and is a good example of co-operation where there's a clear common objective.

The City Deal is essential to deliver on the needs of the Local Transport Strategy which itself is a pre-condition to the approval of the South Cambs and City local plans. The strategy sees major investment in public transport and safe cycling routes and will transform the way that people travel to and within Cambridge. It sees Cambridge as being at the centre of 7 inbound transport corridors one of which is not the B1049. I understand why it is done that way but I nonetheless use every opportunity to remind the planners that it cannot be ignored.

The other good and significant infrastructure news is the new station at Chesterton. I'm not really sure about the sense of having two stations so close together but this one is really good for this division and, ironically, could make us love the Guided Bus. The new station will be ready in 2016 and will provide easy connections to London by bus and train. It's good for people who live here now but it will also make this division more attractive to people who wish to move here and to businesses who need to be able to travel more easily to London and beyond.

Déjà vu spot: proposed improvements to the A14 are now in the public domain and there is a consultation which runs until 15 Jun 14 (<http://bit.ly/PF9hwB>). I guess it's something we must have and it's a little pared back from the original scheme. With the separation of local roads from the A14 and access to it being moved up to the Swavesey junction it might just reduce rat running through Oakington and Histon & Impington. There's also good news for residents of Lone Tree Avenue who might just get their noise barrier and for residents of Impington in general as the reflective barrier that protects Orchard Park might be replaced by an absorptive one.

Northstowe wakes up and work has started

The Northstowe joint Development Control Committee met again, at last, and made decisions. It approved phase 1 but not before a disappointing reduction from £70 to £40 and then to £33 million in section 106 funding due from developers Gallagher. And £3million of the agreed sum is still due to be funded by South Cambs and the County Council. Work on phase 2 is now well advanced. There's more about the phase 1 decision at <http://bit.ly/1kR4FNI>.

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The Guided Bus stays in the news

The Guided Bus in some respects is the gift that keeps on giving. There is little doubt that it is an operational success. It carries lots of passengers, commuters into Cambridge and bus pass holder out to St Ives, but it does shoot itself in the foot and provides opportunities for those who wish to be critical of it:

- The first of these came last year when it was announced that parking charges would be introduced at the P&R sites. It was atrociously handled and called in by scrutiny (one of two which I led during the year; go to <http://bit.ly/1gonKu2> for that story) which asked Cabinet to do it properly. However there's no stopping the change and charges are imminent; and
- Just this month we hear that there are lots of defects along the guideway and there's a confidential Cabinet meeting to discuss them this month. There is to be a review of the early decisions relating to the Guided Bus and once again we will ask was the choice of technology wise and was the process to choose the contractor run well?

Positive developments in policing

There was a worry during the year that we might lose our PCSOs as the Police Commissioner looked at opportunities to cut costs. Fortunately this is not to be the case and I'll claim that input from this division to the consultation process made a significant contribution to the wise decision which was taken. Certainly we have two first class PCSOs and the fact that both of them have been in post for some time means that they are having a significant input to crime prevention and to residents' confidence in and trust of the police.

Reasonable success for local highways projects and repair

During the year the County Council revisited and changed the rules regarding the funding for the jointly funded Minor Highways projects. Until this year each district got the same money and there was an extra pot for 'market towns'. Now the same pot is spread to districts in proportion to the number of councillors. I'd like to think that I had some influence in that change because the result has been doubly positive for South Cambs and Oakington and Histon & Impington were both successful in securing £10000 each for well-presented applications.

Money for road and other repairs and improvements has been hard to come by so it's been good to see the recent work at the top of Lamb's Lane to sort out local flooding issues, the long overdue patching in Smithy Fen, the work on Cottenham Road, Glebe Road and Bridge Road along the B1049 in Histon, and the repairs to residential streets across the division. To some extent we are in squeaky wheel territory here and if there's a need for repair the more people that log it the better. That means going to www.fixmystreet.co.uk where you can now submit a photo from your smartphone so that highways can be in no doubt about where the problems is!

And 'thank the Lord' that we had a mild winter so demand on gritting was low and (a) we were hardly inconvenienced by the weather, and (b) CCC saved a little money. There's more information about the way that gritting is going to change at <http://bit.ly/1grjDq>.

So that's it: another busy year. Thanks to Parish Councils and residents for their support, to Mike for doing his bit and to the County's officers for generally responding well in difficult circumstances.