

Annual Report 2015

Some changes

This year we have unlocked some key projects and reduced the precept for 2015/6.

A rare event in Cottenham, last May - a contested election to the Parish Council with fresh blood joining the Council and some older hands standing down or losing out. We thank James Rowley and Richard Brown and especially Rick Bristow, a veteran Councillor, for serving you, the residents.

The refreshed Council has tackled some long-standing and many new issues. We have attended training sessions on our duties and responsibilities when acting on your behalf and also on grant funding and planning, especially related to heritage and development.

We are applying a more business-like, open and transparent approach to agendas, meetings and minutes which are all now published promptly on our website. The changes do cost Councillor time and, more importantly, increase demands on our staff who were already working hard.

Our Committees

We now have five Committees meeting regularly in public:

- Planning Committee meets twice a month to advise South Cambridgeshire District Council on recently-submitted plans and wider consultations and makes representations alongside residents at Planning Committee meetings or Inquiries. Apart from the major planning challenges at Millfield and Smithy Fen, we are concerned about residents who fail to pre-notify tree work or apply for development permission in the Conservation area.
- Community & Leisure Facilities Committee, which includes a number of co-opted representatives of Sports Clubs or key users, meets once a month to review maintenance issues and development projects related to our Open Spaces, Memorials, Play, Recreation and Sports facilities and the Village Hall. The Festival and Vision Plan survey gave us a better insight into the facilities wanted by residents and, while the Swimming Pool may be too big a challenge for the moment, we have absorbed the ideas into our 4-year wish-list and some of them into our budget for next year.
- Finance Legal & Administration Committee typically meets once a month to review our financial position and administration matters. Closer attention to our finances, including restructuring of our reserves and obtaining more grants, has allowed us to finance the Changing Rooms and SkatePark without any loans and reduce the annual precept charged as part of your Council tax. Draft accounts are included later in this report.
- Highways Committee meets every other month to consider issues related to bridleways, cycle-paths, drains, highways and pavements; mostly trying to persuade our County Council or their contractors to do things they have a legal duty to do. Occasionally we pay for something that others cannot or will not provide like an additional footway lamp in Lyles Road and SpeedWatch signs on Rampton Road. We hope we will soon begin some improvement work on our pavements and additional signage to remind motorists to be more careful passing through our village's streets, so close to many of our older houses.
- Standards meet occasionally to consider the fortunately rare complaints against the Council and issues related to Councillor behaviour.

It's not all about Committees

We also have several smaller, issue-focused Working Groups who meet informally - Burial Grounds, Changing Rooms, Human Resources, Neighbourhood Plan, Pedestrian Safety, Skate Park, Street Signs and Village Hall. We should also mention our Play Area Inspectors and Trees Officer who provide specialist advice to us and our Groundsman who keeps all our Open Spaces in order and helps us save money.

They all work alongside our Clerk, Responsible Financial Officer and several contractors.

Some Councillors represent us on local charities, the Village College and Sustainable Cottenham.

We also appreciate the contribution of our partners – Cottenham United Sports & Social Club, KidsOnly, Ladybirds, Cottenham Day Centre, aerobics etc. who all provide a social service and a contribution to our finances.

We have some vacancies. Following Graham Beckford's recent resignation after making significant contributions, we need another Councillor; and we need an Assistant Clerk. Either could be you.

And we do try to help you enjoy yourselves through communal events we support like our Festival, the Road Run, the Feast and Carol Concert last year and the upcoming Fen Edge Family Festival.

During the year, we have provided small grants to the Brownies, Traveller Literacy, Hockey, Mobile Wardens and the Fen Edge Family Festival.

Key Projects

Later this year we expect both the new Skate Park and Changing Rooms to be in operation thanks to the persistence of a number of past and present Councillors, the generosity of those who have provided grants and the expertise of our contractors. Look out for news of opening events.

The New Changing Rooms are being built under the supervision of our architects Wilby & Burnett, by Durman Stearn, based here in the village, and C J Murfitt from Soham after a new tendering round using a simplified specification than attempted before. Many people and organisations were key to unlocking this project, not least the substantial grants from the Football Foundation, Sport England and South Cambridgeshire District Council.

The Wheeled Sports Facility – Skatepark to most of us – is being built by Bristol-based Wheelscape, who come with a remarkable track record of building world-class skateparks. Key to this project, apart from the enthusiasm and patience of the skaters, was a generous grant from WREN, making the occasional whiff from the Milton recycling site almost worthwhile; other grants came from a Third Party Contributor and South Cambridgeshire District Council.

Apart from their value to sports people and skaters, these two projects alone create assets worth some £750,000 for the village by investing less than £300,000 of your money.

Our finances are still strong enough that we can consider upgrading our Village Hall. If we design it well, we could increase our income and reduce our costs so that it could be self-financing, albeit with capital help to get it off the ground. Maybe we can also harness the generosity of our community through donations, whether in cash or kind? Grants have a place too as will some help from our cash reserves. A Working Group is now developing the Business Plan, based on improving facilities to improve usage and revenue while reducing costs.

There are also some smaller projects that we hope to tackle in the coming months and years as we work through the information we gained from our consultations on community facilities and highways improvements. Look out for fitness kit and picnic benches on some of our open spaces and more accessible walks around the village.

Although not much to do with the Parish Council, we have also seen BT and Virgin upgrade their broadband service with Vodafone and O2 promising mobile upgrades in the coming months.

Our Finances

Our income increased last year as a result of the increased precept and some asset sales following our groundsman becoming a contractor with his own equipment rather than being our employee.

Our costs fell due to delayed starts on some projects, more grant income and avoidance of the long term loan previously thought necessary to finance the new Changing Rooms.

Our cash reserves increased and, following a review, we have now restructured these to allow more flexibility when financing our capital projects like the new Changing Rooms and the SkatePark.

The budget we have agreed for 2015/6 has allowed us to reduce the annual precept by some 17%.

We are now constructing assets worth some £750,000 for the village.

Cottenham Parish Council - Simplified Extract from Unaudited Preliminary 2014-2015 Accounts

Income	2014/5		2013/4	
Precept	£237,745	74%	£196,200	74%
Recreation Ground Income	£35,075	11%	£32,835	12%
Donations & Grants	£19,058	6%	£12,502	5%
Disposals & Insurance Claims	£22,638	7%	23,143	9%
Other income	£5,278	2%	£1,319	0%
Total Income	£319,794		£265,998	

Expense	2014/5		2013/4	
Office & admin	£79,017	50%	£72,658	35%
Professional services	£6,926	4%	£4,011	2%
Maintenance services	£20,405	13%	£31,627	15%
Facilities costs	£27,499	17%	£29,143	14%
Donations & Grants	£19,497	12%	£12,061	6%
Project costs ¹	£0	0%	£50,307	24%
Finance charges	£6,285	4%	£6,301	3%
Total Expense	£159,629		£206,108	

Cash	2014/5	2013/4
Current year Surplus (Deficit)	£160,165	£59,890
Previous Surplus plus reserves	£359,490	£299,600
2015 surplus plus reserves²	£519,655	£359,490

Net Short-term assets	31st March 2015	31st March 2014
Current cash assets	£547,172	£378,462
Assets under construction (AUC)	£78,525	£0
Grants received for AUC	-£72,000	£0
Amounts owing to creditors	-£11,542	-£18,972
Grant Advances on projects	-£22,500	£0
Net short-term assets^{2,3}	£519,655	£359,490

¹ Capital projects funded in 2014/5 from reserves and grants

² Excludes £308,000 commitment in 2015 for costs of New Changing Rooms and Skatepark with asset values of £750,000

³ Excludes £555,650 land, property and other assets and a long-term loan liability of £21,300

Some disappointments

Not everything goes the way we would like.

Graham Beckford, one of our most energetic Councillors; architect, project manager and chief gofer of the successful Festival last May, has had to step down for career reasons. We will miss him but have the legacy of the results from the Vision Plan survey to work on.

We lost some prized trees in the Conservation Area. Lessons have been learned to minimise the risk of a similar loss and, while they cannot be replaced, we are looking forward to increasing the number of trees around the village as soon as feasible.

We failed in our attempt to gain extra highways funding from Cambridgeshire County Council and that distraction contributed to our achieving less progress in making improvements in this area.

Some of our heritage buildings are suffering from neglect with the state of the listed Gothic House at one extreme, and ill-advised modernisations of some Conservation Area properties at the other.

Taking Control

Without modest growth, our village will die. Our youth would soon live and work elsewhere. Keeping a village vibrant and a place where our youngsters aspire to have their own families later in life requires a balance between conservation and development.

New affordable housing will be required as will new or improved facilities, not just for sport but also for small business, not just for the old and less mobile but also for the young. Development could provide better facilities for pre-school children, a Medical Centre combined with Day Centre for the elderly, or new units for small businesses; and we need to be aware of pressure on our schools.

An area for extensive consultation is a Neighbourhood Plan which, if we are prepared to have a modest amount of further development, brings the benefit of more control over how and where development takes place, more Community facilities and a greater share of any related financial settlements, possibly through use of a Community Land Trust. The Working Group will shortly be outlining a way forward, including engaging representative business, community and education groups as we extend our research and consultation.

Conclusion

120 years since the first meeting of Cottenham Parish Council, it is good to see Cottenham residents – young and old - contributing to the community in so many ways, whether through the Parish Council, one or other of many community groups or individually in some way; with no better example than Alex Collier, recently voted SCDC Parish Councillor of the year.

To finish, thanks to our staff and contractors for helping us to do our job, keeping us in touch with your problems so we can perhaps help in any way we are able. And thanks to you for trusting us.