

REACH VILLAGE

Minutes of Annual Reach Parish Meeting held on; Wednesday 3rd June 2009

Attendance

Michael Aves	Vice Chairman	Present
Ross Clark	Chairman	Present
Rita Dunnett	Councillor	Present
Hilary Fielding	Councillor	Present
Joyce Harrison	Councillor	Present
Angela King	Councillor	Not Present
Helen Platt	Councillor	Present
David Parr	Clerk	Present
Allen Alderson	District Councillor	Present
Hazel Williams	County Councillor	Present

plus members of the Reach public.

Chairman's Report

Finances

One of the priorities this year has been to get the finances on a sustainable footing, so that we don't keep running out of money. The Clerk will explain more about that in a moment. Unfortunately this has led to a one-off increase in parish precept of 19 per cent this year. As David will explain, this is not due to greater expenditure on fripperies, floating duck houses or anything else but simply in order to build up a reserve to allow us to meet contingencies. Even after the increase the precept paid by Reach council tax-payers is only average for villages in East Cambridgeshire – in spite of the fact that, house for house, we are lucky to have an above-average quantity of open spaces and other facilities.

Amenity Fund

On that note, the parish council has made steps this year to publicise more effectively the existence of the Amenity Fund – which is enriched every year by a share of the takings from the Fair but which in recent years has been a little overlooked. Villagers are warmly invited to make applications to the fund for any amenity or activity which could benefit residents. We are currently considering an application for a cricket net on the recreation ground.

Mowing

As part of our commitment to achieving value for taxpayers' money we have this year opted to contract-out the mowing – due to the rising costs of maintaining our decrepit old mower, which cost us £1,500 in repairs alone last year. This season, the grass is being cut by a contractor on a one-year contract which is costing us approximately £1,800. The council decided that the costs of this arrangement would be cheaper and more certain than buying a new mower. This decision has provoked a certain amount of controversy in some quarters. I feel the arguments have been sufficiently aired in the current issue of Out of Reach as to require no further explanation here – unless someone wants to raise any issue. I would just add that the current contracting arrangement seems to be working very well and that its success will be reviewed at the end of this season. Until then, we have decided to retain the old mower just in case we are let down at any stage.

Willow Trees

A major headache this year was the dangerous condition of the willow trees on the Hythe. This was complicated by the fact that no-one seems to claim ownership of the land on which they sit. However, this spring the parish council, sharing the cost with the county council, did take action. Thanks to the uncertainty of ownership the parish council is now investigating the possibility of claiming ownership of this piece of land, together with the Drying Green off the Hythe so that there is an authority clearly responsible for the maintenance of these public open spaces. This is a far from straightforward process and progress continues.

Allotments

A demand has been identified for allotments. Eight villagers have so far expressed an interest in keeping an allotment. One possible site has been identified and the council will continue to investigate others.

A Few Other Highlights

The parish council, along with East Cambridgeshire District Council, has worked on a solution to the problem of old bin bags emerging from the site of the former waste tip on Reach Hill. The affected area is to be grassed.

Buses – lobbying by the parish council, together with others, has helped preserve some evening and weekend buses from cuts.

We have also procured an extra salt bin for the Ditchfield area, and helped establish better waiting conditions for bus passengers in the same area.

Finance Report

The following comments are based on our 2008-2009 unaudited accounts.

During the year, the Parish Council spent approximately £1,000 more than its income (which is mainly the Precept but there is also income from the cemetery).

Exceptional items during the year included £734 for the repair of the cemetery gates, £1,550 spent on repairing and fuelling the village mower and a net amount of £475 for sorting out the willow trees on the Hythe.

The Parish Council, at the end of the last financial year, had approximately £2,400 in its bank account which is around 30% of annual spend.

In order to stabilise the situation, the Precept for financial year 2009-2010 has been increased to £6,900 (from £5,800 the previous year). It is expected that by the end of this financial year the Parish Council reserves will have increased by at least £200 to £2,600, 35% of annual spend.

As at the end of the last financial year, there was £3,500 in the Amenity Fund. The 2009 Reach Fair will add a further £1,450 giving a total amount just short of £5,000. The Parish Council and the Village Hall Committee are very keen to distribute this money to worthy causes.

County Council Report

Bus Cuts

One of the biggest issues during the last year for this area was the consultation on whether buses between Cambridge, Burwell and Newmarket should be cut in the evenings and weekends. After a lot of hard work by many people, two petitions and provision of detailed information to the County Council it was agreed that the buses would remain. The evening routes have been changed slightly and there will be a further look at the Sunday usage in the summer to see if those buses should continue.

Waste

The County Council has signed a 28 years contract for waste disposal with Donarbon. This will include an educational centre, which will hopefully encourage future recycling and waste minimisation.

Transport Commission

The original consultation on congestion in Cambridge was inconclusive. Unfortunately congestion charging became the main issue and very little else was discussed although there was general agreement that traffic problems in the city needed to be addressed. An independent Transport Commission has therefore been set up to look at the problems. Sir Brian Briscoe and Professor Tony Travers are not only looking at the Transport Innovation Fund proposals but are able to make suggestions if they find other ways of helping to improve the transport problems in Cambridgeshire. A number of consultation sessions have been held across the county to obtain views from local people.

Central Library

The contract with the builders responsible for the Central Library has been terminated and Coulson Building Group has taken on the project. Completion date is now likely to be September 2009, over 18 months later than expected.

Credit Crunch

The council has looked at the pros and cons of the credit crunch on its finances. In 2008/9 the position will be roughly neutral but in 2009/10 there is a potential revenue cost of £6 million.

Park and Ride

Last year journeys on Park and Ride exceeded 4 million. The new Milton Road Park and Ride is located south of Butt Lane just off the A10. The new site provides customers with improved facilities including over 500 car parking spaces with room to expand to 1,000 at a later date. The Cowley Road site is now closed. The buses will depart every 10 minutes on weekdays. For all route and timetable information for Milton Road Park and Ride call 01223 845561 or log onto www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/parkride.

Guided Bus

This project will now not be ready before the late summer although it is being tested and members of the public and press have had the opportunity to ride on a short section. There is no indication yet of when the southern part of the project will be ready.

Staff Restructuring

The Corporate Leadership team at the County Council is being restructured to better deal with the challenges facing the council. A new director Rod Craig has been appointed as Executive Director for Communities and Adult Services. Mike Davey (who has been attending our Neighbourhood Panel meetings) has been promoted to Service Director for Community Engagement. Three directors will be retiring.

Local Area Agreement

Cambridgeshire Together (LAA) has been given a £9 million Local Public Sector Agreement (LPSA) reward grant, for hitting key targets agreed with central government. The funding, stretched over two years, is split 50% revenue and 50% capital. Most of the LPSA reward grant is evenly distributed to the five Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) including East Cambs.

Council Tax

The County Council average council tax increase for 2009/10 is 3.9% (for a band D property) or £38 per year.

Home to School Transport Charges

These are due to go up on September 1st. Parents and students will be advised of the eligibility criteria when making choices about post 16 transport. This is because Stagecoach has put up its charges by 10% so the current rate won't cover the Authority's costs for 2009/10.

Children's Centre

The Children's Centre is running from Bottisham with activities across the area, including the Swaffhams, Burwell and Reach, for families with under 5's. Activities include dads groups, health clinics, young parents support and messy play.

New Station

Funding has been secured from the Regional Funding Allocation for a new station at Chesterton, as well as funding for the guided bus to continue to the station from Milton Road. At present 70% of travellers from the present railway station come from the north of the city.

District Council Report

East Cambs Budget and the Credit Crunch

Falling interest rates and reductions in fees and charges have hit the council hard, taking almost £1M out of the council coffers.

Also we were hit by the low level of Government Grant for this next year, which was less than a 1% increase over the previous year. This equates to just over one penny more per resident per week.

We looked closely at savings in back office costs to ensure money is focused on front line services. This will generate about £300,000 in savings.

In addition, a further £350,000 of savings as a one-off budget was agreed.

In setting this year's budget we have attempted to give help to the most vulnerable. For example we have allocated £5,000 to carry out a detailed review of community transport in a bid to ensure those who live in the most rural areas are not left isolated.

Also, because of the enormous pressures the Citizens Advice Bureaus are under in providing advice and support to those hit by the recession, we are providing £10,000 to Newmarket CAB, plus £89,000 to Ely CAB over the next three years.

Affordable Housing

When the final figures are in for year 2008/9, we should have completed 135 units. The programme for this year is looking a bit thin, mainly because everything has stopped due to the credit crunch. At present we are looking at 78 units, of which 14 will be in Bottisham.

If the Government kick-start scheme helps us to start a larger scheme in Littleport, these figures could be boosted by another 120.

Because of the downturn in the construction industry I asked officers if a part solution to our housing shortage might be to purchase selected sites of completed unsold private housing but apparently nearly all private housing developments fail to reach the standards required for affordable housing.

Tourism

Admissions figures for Oliver Cromwell House are holding their own despite the recession. Figures are only slightly down from previous years. The gift shop has shown a profit and spend per head has increased. Our tourist website hits have continued to grow from 40,000 in 2007/2008 to 55,000 in 2008/2009.

The Ely markets are very much holding their own with all markets close to capacity. Some new traders have signed up so by summer the markets should be full.

Ely has recently had its Eel Day and in the autumn we will be having our annual Apple Day.

Waste and Recycling Services

There are no plans to move to a fortnightly collection of waste. We are reviewing the new waste collection contract launched just over a year ago to make it consistently good across the district. The District Council has set up a Helpline for residents who have a complaint or query about the service. This is helping us to monitor the situation and quickly deal with any problems. All calls now come to us, not Viola.

Neighbourhood Panels

Neighbourhood Panels are now a year old and the number of the public attending has been steadily increasing.

Some people have queried the cost and effectiveness of the panels. Over the last five years the five panels have cost £2,500 to run which is £500 per panel.

The officer in charge of the panels is Alan Williams – his post is externally funded by the local Strategic Partnership. When I was first elected people often said there should be more involvement between the parishes, police and the district council. I attempted to get a police officer to attend Parish Council meetings on a three monthly basis but their hierarchy vetoed the idea. Now we have about six police officers attending a panel meeting where members of the public are able to voice their concerns and the police are duty bound to respond.

At panel meetings there is discussion about local concerns such as crime, health, housing, young people and environmental issues.

The South Area Panel has been involved in anti-social issues in Burwell, the fight to save the 10 and 10a bus service and the National Air Traffic's plans to stack aircraft over our area, particularly affecting the Newmarket area. These plans have been put on hold pending further consultation.

Swim for Free

ECDC has signed up to a Government initiative to provide free swimming to the under 16's and over 60's at Paradise Pool Ely and Bottisham Village College.

Committees

This last year I have served on the Personal, Licensing and Overhead and Scrutiny Committees. I was also Vice Chairman of the South Area Neighbourhood Panel.

Swaffham Prior Parochial Charities Report

Swaffham Prior Parochial Charities was formed as a result of an amalgamation of small charities in the parish.

Some people don't realise that Reach was not a parish until 1957. The west side of the green was still in Swaffham Prior up to that date and the east side was in Burwell – so the charities only served the west side. Now, of course, the whole village can benefit. There are five members on the SPPC committee (with one person being the Reach representative) plus the vicar of Swaffham Prior.

The Charities' aim originally was to help the poor of the parish. Today it gives to individuals and organisations at times when a little extra financial help can make a difference to those concerned. Last year £6,129 was allocated in the two villages. Last year the Christmas grants were larger than ever before.

The financial help given is the result of interest on investments and also the rents of land such as the allotments.

Village Hall Committee Report

For those of you who are not aware, the Village Hall Committee are responsible for the day to day running of the Village Hall, which is leased from the diocese, as well as organising Reach Fair.

The bulk of the annual costs are covered by money raised during the Fair and we have no precept on the rate, unlike many other villages of our size. We also contribute all the funding to the Amenity Fund.

The hall is rented out to regular users like the playgroup and occasional users such as birthday parties, weddings etc. We have a range of items for hire, including marquees, barbeques and games.

This year our main capital expenditure was on the replacement of the hall curtains at a cost of over £5,000, a portion of which came from the Amenity Fund (£1,500 not the £4,000 as claimed in Out of Reach Magazine). Other minor maintenance issues have been addressed, including repairs to the heating system. We have also, by the hard work of the Vice Chair, been in receipt of a grant for additional upholstered chairs for use in the hall, bringing the total to 74.

Over the next 12 months we aim to have the woodwork at the rear of the hall painted and some further decoration carried out in the bar area.

Any suggestions for improvements to the amenities will be gratefully received.

I would also like to take this opportunity to give my thanks to all the committee members who give a great deal of time to organising the Fair, for not much reward and also to those who volunteered to help on the day itself. Again, if any ideas for improving the Fair are out there please let us know.

Report collated by David Parr

12th June 2009