

Report to Marshland South Division

To May 2024

Without doubt my busiest year so far!

From the problems of obtaining places for children at the Downham Market Academy, to the efforts to bring some context to the proposed Wisbech Incinerator, to the unexpected closure of the bridge at Stowbridge, to the ongoing fight to keep the Welney Wash Road closures on the action map of all concerned.

The DMA challenge was eventually a success, all efforts re the incinerator were fruitful, however the outcome appeared somewhat inevitable (with Environment Agency licensing still to be determined), the bridge action quickly got up to speed and, although a significant issue for local business especially, working solutions were arrived at, and will be in place when it is eventually necessary to close it again. With regards the Wash Rd, I have now secured over £100k to significantly upgrade the signage and communications, and further work is being undertaken with Cambs. County Council, to ensure a seamless delivery of accurate and up-to-date information.

The issue of secondary schooling in the west of our county again came on the radar in October, and I have worked since that point to support parents affected – I must say with some excellent assistance from a group of parents. Although not now as broad an issue this year, I am now working to raise awareness of the wider problem of capacity along the border, and this work continues, very much with the support of Liz Truss.

In March we convened the initial meeting of the Marshland Community Forum, with a general brief to bring together a group of people with common aims and concerns for our area. It was well supported, with a wide range of topics discussed, and forward action agreed. Very much a work in progress concept, but one all were keen to take forwards. I'll provide more detail/updates post a second meeting.

These local challenges have been in addition to my work on the working group for Norfolk Devolution, the advisory group on the procurement contracts in respect of highways maintenance, and duties relating to the role of Member Champion for the Rural Economy – this was certainly an asset in accessing resource & attention of the Stow Bridge bridge closure matter. A wide and varied role working alongside the Cabinet Member for Growing the Economy, Cllr. Eagle. This has extended from assisting an Outwell business with their ambition to engage apprentices, to a Stow Bridge business with engagement with the NCC Business Development team, in respect of grant funding and digital upskilling, to tea & chat with a sole trader in Feltwell to a visit to the Ukrainian Embassy in London!

Throughout the last 12 months I have continued to serve on the Planning Regulatory and Infrastructure & Development Select Committees.

Along with a colleague, I am currently working on initiatives to deliver an element of the NCC budget allocated to support those facing loneliness & isolation directly to the point of need, and with fewer hoops to jump through – the great work of the team at St Mary's Church, Welney being the inspiration for this. We are being supported by the Cabinet Member for finance, Cllr. Jameison in this.

School parking – I am disappointed with the results of my approach to this; I have found it difficult to pull together and collate the information which I felt was necessary to make the best case for police action. As recently as last week there were major issues outside of Upwell Academy, and I am awaiting responses on this. I still consider that a fully documented, all body/agency approach on this is the solution – and this includes NCC officers. I should be in a stronger position to attack this again over the next couple of weeks, given my final paragraph, and will re-appraise and re-engage with the respective Parish Councils.

Recently I have reached out to our Parish Councils with an initiative to install bird and bat boxes in our area, and the response has been fantastic. Hopefully we can carry this project into a programme of installation prior to the Spring season '25. Depending on ambition I am looking to cover 50% of the costs of this.

Finally, I am proud to advise that I have been invited to assist the Norfolk County Council Cabinet, in a junior capacity. The roles will involve supporting the Cabinet Members responsible for the Highways and Environment portfolios, in addition to continuing to support the Cabinet Member for Growing the Economy – I will update Parish Councils as I attend over forthcoming weeks.

Our Villages

Marshland St James

I have advanced the ambition to replace the Trinity Rd to Fen End trod with a permanent, drained footway. Having secured an initial £10k necessary to implement the preliminary works, and a further £2k from my local funds, the Parish Council came forwards most positively to make up the £8k shortfall to commence surveying and design. We now have a NCC engineer developing this, and it is hoped that the development funds themselves will be secured shortly. A significant infrastructure project for us locally, likely to see a final cost in the region of £250+k.

At the point of writing, I do not have the requested update in respect of the pursuit of the agricultural contractors responsible for the poor post-access condition which Hope Lane is left in. This perennial problem will not be forgotten, and will continue to be high on my 'Hit List', not least due to the importance of the lane during local road closures.

A number of businesses in the Black Drove area contacted me expressing their experience of poor quality broadband connection, certainly insufficient to operate a rural business in the way we would all expect, and is the ambition of all agencies. I have looked into this in depth, and whilst there is no local government funding to support/entice the private companies to deliver, we are now high on the list for action when monies next become available. The Parish Council have been most supportive in this, and we are now looking to compile a file of business affected, in order to increase our lobbying power going forwards. Thanks to all concerned who have taken the time to write to me on this, and for the support and understanding received. I will continue to monitor funds/initiatives (or opportunities to piggyback) to generate funding.

Hedge incursion into the highway has been a real problem this year, and a proposal I had arranged to start at the A47 Broadend Rd junction and cut all through to Hall Rd Outwell (including the Edge Bank bends) got 'lost'. We are now in the nesting season, and so this will be top of my shopping list once the cutting window opens again in September.

It was rewarding to be able to assist residents regarding the poor & failed works by contractors installing a service connection in the area of 150 Smeeth Road, made more difficult by the fact that the company had gone into liquidation. A positive from this was that it provided me with a platform to look at improving the 'bond' process which the local authority operates with contractors. This resulted in yet more road closure inconvenience, I'm afraid, however the repair has now made good, along with additional works sought by neighbours – whom I very much thanks for their support, patience and civility in resolving the issue.

Walsoken

I have continued to work with colleagues in seeking some sense and reason relating to the incinerator proposal – currently the subject of the granting of a license is under examination, and I am unsure whether FDC or CCC will launch a Judicial Review of the permissions granted.

It's been rewarding to support Cllr. Houghton in his efforts to improve access to training and education for young adults in the area, and I believe that we are making progress. There will be more work to do this year, and I aim to ensure that we in the west are positioned to make best use of the opportunities presented.

I have continued to monitor, and engage, in respect of the proposed development adjacent to, and relying upon, the A47 Broadend Rd Junction. To ensure that every opportunity to look to deliver a roundabout junction is both identified as necessary and to ensure that the infrastructure precedes the development. In doing so I have lobbied BCKLWN, to ensure that they do not support such extensive housing delivery without these necessary infrastructure improvements. My concern is that their housing delivery strategy relies upon these housing numbers.

Downham West

The smallest Parish Council in the division, but certainly made up for with the degree of warmth and humour. Not of great deal which I was able to offer to the community this year, but continue to listen and respond to traffic concerns in Salter's Lode.

Welney

It's been my great pleasure to continue to support the cake mornings at St Mary's Church, and the great team delivering them. Recently I introduced Sam Doughty, a Community Development Worker from our Adult Services Team, who has been fantastic at providing both ideas and support, along with potential financial support streams. Long may Thursday morning continue!

The bid to the Norfolk County Council Parish Partnership scheme was fully supported, kicking off the funding target for the resurfacing of the Hurn Drove access to the William Marshall Centre. The additional funds of £6k which I secured to support this have been ring-fenced, and it is hoped that the remaining monies required can be gradually built up over this year in order to instruct contractors.

With the unwavering assistance of Cllrs. Goodger and Barker we are making slow and steady progress with 'Plan B' for the Wash Rd. The project brief was to ensure that measurement of the water depth (telemetry), roadside signage, and all other comms. were upgraded and linked in real time, and to seek this from the A47 Roundabout at Wisbech to the Cambridge Roundabout at Ely.

We now have a layout for the physical signs, and the link to the data collection & broadcast is currently being worked on. I'm looking to also get this connected to the Floodwatch Facebook page, whereas SatNav is currently proving more of a challenge.

Whilst this will do nothing to reduce the flooding of the road, it should speed up the reopening of the road, minimising closure durations, along with reducing the number of vehicles taking risks due to uncertainties, particularly HGVs, which then cause problem within the village.

In addition to this, despite being initially advised that it would not be possible, I am now more confident that we may also receive some foreign language signage, aimed at the HGVs.

In addition to the E.A. I'm very grateful to Liz Truss for continually opening doors, and her overall interest and support for any initiative to improve the situation.

Emneth

In response to resident concerns, I recently assisted the Parish Council in conducting a traffic survey along Hollycroft Rd, which I co-funded, principally to establish speeds in examining the potential for alleviation measures.

It has been fun to support the village's Over 60s Club, receiving such a warm and sincere reception from the team & all attendees, and a real pleasure to experience the joy which this initiative brings to local people. Our Sam Doughty has also been supporting the group and continues to do so.

The stone to deliver a small and an informal/unofficial passing place on Lady's Drove, at the junction with Wilkins Rd, is now with the contractor awaiting an opportunity for installation. Many thanks to Messrs. Poplar Nurseries for their support and cooperation in this.

For many, the most significant element of my work in the village this year has been in support of the Sweet Things Savoury cafe. After considerable effort and expense, the business was unable to secure the necessary planning permissions to continue operating, and would be forced to close. The key issue centred around the position of Norfolk County Council Highways consultee responses to the local planners at BCKLWN.

Principally in my role as Member Champion for the Rural Economy I took this up and managed to broker a compromise, resulting in NCC amending their position and removing their objection to the proposal. The allocated planning officer was satisfied that an approval would then be possible. My aim of securing a business, an important village asset, and valuable rural jobs, was achieved....or so I was led to believe. Alas, I now have to add that, despite resolving the Highways' concerns, wider considerations have meant that the owners have decided to close their business. I do hope that we see them return to the village.

An additional factor in this case being the important social space which the café provided to many in the village & surrounding area, therefore it was with sadness, frustration and a degree of anger to learn last week that the business now had further obstacles to negotiate. A number of residents have contacted Liz Truss' constituency office on this matter, and they in turn have been in regular contact with me to maintain an appreciation – I understand they too have contacted BCKLWN to express disappointment. I have to say that the new Leader at BCKLWN Cllr. Alistair Beales responded immediately to my request for a discussion last week, however it does unfortunately appear too late for the business to continue in its present form.

Nordelph

It was lovely to recently be part of a discussion to imitate the villages of Upwell and Outwell to celebrate their bridges with Christmas lighting. Feeding on the enthusiasm of members I have secured the services of a local business to assist with erecting (and I'm hoping storage) and will support with the fund raising to purchase the lights.

Was delighted to provide support to the successful Parish Partnership bid to support the funding ambitions for the improvement scheme for the Well Creek railings. I know it has been a major challenge for the PC Clerk, Kate, and have been pleased to support & encourage her efforts in driving this forwards. There are more conversations to be had on this, and a CIL application this summer, I understand. I will do all possible to seek the deliver a physical start on this over the next year.

Footpath 7. All necessary discussions have now been completed, the documentation to resolve the alignment & bridge location considerations are currently in the hands of NCC's legal advisors, and I'm pushing! In terms of the funding for the crossing, after initially having found the monies for a bridge (or so I thought) a strong financial case has been made for installing a culvert to cross – I have to agree that we can spend the savings better elsewhere. It also appears that all stakeholders prefer this option. To be honest I just want for us to be able to get the footpath joined back up with the network.

Outwell

Recently I have been engaging with both residents and the Parish Council regarding the unkempt area of land adjacent the old sluice on the infilled canal. A new pathway has been constructed as part of the new housing development, and now connects it with the bus stop on the A1101. However it is the Parish Council's ambition to improve this area, with the potential to preserve the sluice mechanisms in some way. It would be great to have an information/history board attached to this, perhaps akin to the wonderful examples provided in relation to the old tramway. I am fully supporting of this initiative and will be meeting with NCC officers on site shortly, to determine what role we can play in this, and how best to pursue funding options.

Work continues of the examination of feasibility for the A1101 & A1122 pedestrian crossings in the village. In February I was advised that 'We have the survey data back and it will be one of the next studies the Network Safety Team will get on to. The study is expected to be drafted in April for roundtable review in May.' Given my new role I shall be raising the matter with officers after my attendance at Informal Cabinet 13th May.

Throughout last year I was in discussion with the Parish Council regarding replacement & repair of the creek railings. After protracted investigation it was impossible for me to determine any responsibility (this reflected my work on Upwell in respect of bank slippage) there was no evidence that either Middle Level commissioners or Norfolk County Council could be shown to be responsible for the asset.

The debate. Investigation, arguments even could have continued for years, all this time not only would elements of the railings prove a safety risk, but a real eyesore, detracting greatly from the appearance of the village.

I proposed a solution, which I had proposed to Nordelph Parish Council, and members eventually determined to proceed; it would require the parish council accepting the railings as their asset, however. Naturally there were reservations, and extensive consideration given, prior to agreement that this was the only solution to the issue.

From this I assisted in obtaining quotations for the works along with supporting a bid to NCC for funding, under their Parish Partnership Scheme, which has been successful. Still a way to go, as there will also need to be an application to BCKLWN for CIL funding, and I am also likely to need to lobby NCC to still look to plug the gap – but we are moving in the right direction.

Thanks to the NPC Clerk, Kate, for her assistance in this.

Upwell

Apart from businesses expressing to me the challenges faced by the Wash Rd closures, the principal issue in the village has been the extreme and prolonged flooding at Townley Close.

As there had been many meetings over the years, and continued to be convened, and I had been copies of emails identifying that a resolution was on the table, I considered that there was nothing further which I could bring to the table, and it would be best for me to keep my nose out.

In September/October last year I was concerned that nothing appeared to be progressed, and we were rapidly approaching the wet weather, and so decided to investigate.

Given this was a longstanding issue, with many parties involved, and possibly nearly as many stories attached to it it took some unravelling. Unfortunately for the residents this all trundled along thru' the winter, and I visited a number of times to check on the dire situation some found themselves in, actually cut-off from their homes.

By this time I had some answers for them, and it wasn't pretty – it appeared to me that the agencies were going around in circles as none wanted to pick up the cost. Understandably, a body could not be expected to fund something for which it was not responsible, however none was accepting responsibility.

I declined offer to attend yet further meetings, and put forwards an NCC position – which was to push whoever was responsible to keep the highway clear – this IS NCC's responsibility. The issue being the local drainage system. At the end of April there was a further officer level multi-agency meeting.

It has been confirmed to me that the ditch from the Health Centre car park to number 37 New Road has been cleared out and the drains running from the health centre car park have been cleaned. The outfall under number 37 is now free flowing; the outfall adjacent to number 37 behind the railings had been dug out, but I see this as temporary and will likely fill back up with detritus and silt, and get blocked again over time. I am advised that landowners adjacent are not accepting riparian responsibility, again this being something for those responsible for drainage to pursue.

With regards to the fracture in the culvert area adjacent to the GP surgery car park, NCC has raised an order for Norse to investigate and repair, whilst the excavation is open, we will be investigating to determine whether the developer caused the break, in which case I shall press for cost recovery. This order is out with the contractor for delivery at their earliest opportunity.

Lakesend

The positive moves to by the Parish Council to improve the bus shelter and footway were most welcome, and it was pleasing to assist in this, an excellent outcome.

It was also lovely to visit the sewing group, making excellent use of the village hall. Not only was I made most welcome, but it was great to hear of the determination of members in accessing the group, despite real challenges.

Three Holes

In supporting the Parish Council when facing an invoice for the new footway adjacent Townsend Rd, it was pleasing to work with them to achieve a nil cost outcome for the residents.

Stow Bridge

It was something of a relief to get works undertaken along West Head Road, and combine this with some much needed hedge trimming – much credit to our West Area Highways Team for working with me to have this issue raised up the priorities list

After many exchanges we finally arrived at a working solution for the bridge closure, with considerable assistance from locals. Their understanding and patience was beyond commendable, given the unexpected and erratic nature of the diversion roll-out. Positives to come from this were to raise the profile of the significant impact of the seemingly continuous road closures on the businesses in the locality, and to ensure that when the bridge is closed for scheduled repair it will be delivered in consultation with the community and signposted to the optimum degree possible.

In addition to the bridge diversion issue, I am currently working with the Parish Council to raise to voice of the businesses badly affected by the management of diversions generally in County Hall.

Barroway Drove

Post delivery of the new Trod in Barroway Drove the parish was left with an unexpected additional cost for the works. This matter had been running for some time, and I'm relieved to report that I managed to secure an 80% reduction in this invoice, just in time for this report!

It was my pleasure to be invited to the opening of a new support facility in Barroway Drove, for people who would benefit from short-term respite. This is a fantastic resource for our area, and it was most insightful of Norfolk & Waveney Mind to locate in this area of great need. With the additional kind sponsorship of Fountain Fresh, I was delighted to present the team with a framed landscape photograph by a Norfolk artist to brighten up the new-build.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank all Parish Councils once again for always providing a warm welcome and for approaching matters with good humour. I always feel that I'm afforded both time to explain matters, and time to attend to them, which makes life both easier and more pleasant! Working directly with the Chairs is always a pleasure, and we really do have a sound working group. Again, always with reason and good humour, thank you.

If I may, particular thanks to our Parish Council clerks, for their accessibility and keenness to work to deliver solutions, along with engagement on matters not only in their own parishes, but in support of other clerks within Marshland South Division. Thank you all so much.

My final thanks go to our residents. We have had so many diverse challenges in the division this year, and I never cease to appreciate the kind consideration given to me when engaging in these matters. I really do feel that the cordial way I'm addressed on some very emotive matters reflects well on us all, and not how we often imagine our country to generally be today. Of course, civility and patience cost nothing, however it is sometimes difficult to contain emotions, particularly when answers are sought, and quickly, however without exception this has been my experience. Personally, this is most refreshing, and I will continue to be grateful. Thank you.

Best,

Chris Dawson.
May 2024.