

Countesthorpe Parish Council report for 2023 and 2024

It really does not seem 12 months since I last sat down to write the chair's Annual Report. Time does go quicker as we get older, it seems.

Thanking people for the work whether when paid or as a volunteer is to my mind always the right thing to do and I have no qualms in doing so again.

So, my thanks to our office staff, Joanne, our Manager and Clerk to the Council, Emma our deputy Manager and Helen on Admin. It is a pleasure having such a hardworking and intelligent staff at the centre of our council. To me it is important that they feel able to tell me when they feel I am wrong, as they do, but always diplomatically. Visitors will be welcomed with a helpful smile.

Thanks also to our outside staff supervised by Peter. Having to work outside through all temperatures is not my idea of fun but they do their work come rain, sun, or frost.

Sophi continues to oversee the running of the library, and it would be difficult to find anybody better. The library continues to grow, and Sophi adds innovative ideas, such as a store of jigsaws to take freely and she constantly dreams up ideas to help our young people.

I must not forget our councillors. They are all volunteers and rarely get thanked and often grumbled at. I have found in my 22 years as a Parish Councillor you can never win whatever you do, what is good for one resident is the opposite for another.

Well, done and thank you everybody. Countesthorpe is a busy village, your work ensures the council, and village, is run responsibly and efficiently.

Responsibilities

I am mindful when I talk to people in the village most do not understand the individual responsibilities of Parish, District, or County council, please see our website as a reminder. Responsibilities - Countesthorpe Parish Council . Understanding what council is responsible for what will ensure the right organisation are involved when issues arise.

Cemetery

You will have noticed the Parish Council is developing the field next to the present cemetery. This last year we installed water pipes which came from the old cemetery. All the work so far has come from S106 funding so has not impacted on the council budget. S106 funding comes from financial contributions from developers aimed at mitigating the impact of a development. But it has limitations in the areas we can spend it.

The Square

Councillors think the centre of our village needed an uplift. Our original plans were expensive, so we had to scale back our ideas, which nevertheless, has vastly improved the Square, again from S106 money.

Play areas

We had a small amount of S106 money left within the Leysland Play area, so we installed two additional items of play equipment. Sometimes, though, even the smallest play item can cost exorbitant sums for what they are.

You may have noticed the changing room on the Willoughby playing field was no longer in use. Sadly, the changing room had become dangerous, so we have had to remove it completely. A new one is not within the budget of the council, so sadly the fenced off area is securing just an empty container.

Christmas activities

In early December, to coincide with the Christmas tree lights being switched on, a team from the Parish Council arranged a Food Bank collection around the village meeting at St Andrews church for a get together and a few carols by a local choir. The street collection didn't really work out as planned but a good collection of foodstuffs was taken directly to the church. Good idea but perhaps needing a bit of thought for the coming year. It's good to try something new and then refine to make it better.

Fancy Fronts

A new idea dreamed up this year and organised by our manager and deputy. A team of six people including our County and one of our District councillors plus me and a couple of other councillors went round the village looking for the most imaginative decorated window or house frontage. Selecting the winner was difficult as they were all terrific, but we settled on Amaryllis Hair on Wigston Street with a theme of 'Magical' as winner of the commercial prize The residential winner with a stunning display is on Wheatlands Drive with a theme of 'Wonderland'. An idea well worth developing in the coming years. Thank you to those who took part.

Christmas lights

The Christmas lights in the tree outside of the Village Hall have been there untouched for years and were, string by string, failing so we have replaced them all at the same time as we tidied the trees up. Residents may remember the Christmas lights used to be on the trees at St Andrews Church. Sadly, the squirrels ate through the cables every year and finding locating the break was a very costly annual exercise.

Pride flag

A resident asked us if we would fly the Rainbow flag which made us aware we did not have a policy for the flags we flew. We found out the Rainbow flag is a one the Government have approved so we flew it as requested - at the appropriate time.

Century Paddock

The goalposts at the Centenary Paddock had become dangerous. As they are a favourite for young people, we will put new ones up, when we can.

Notice Boards

Our notice boards are regularly damaged costing the council hundreds of pounds each time we must repair or change them. We conducted a survey of requirement recently and found Jubilee Way and Cosby Road were surplus to requirements.

Floods

Countesthorpe regularly experiences flooding cutting off Foston Road and Crow Mills. In January, this year we experienced our worst flooding completely cutting off Countesthorpe for a brief time. Flooding was due to surface water running off the fields and drains that could not

cope with the excess water, eventually flooding properties and roads which previously had not had flooding issues. Blaby District Council and Leicestershire County Council are conducting a review of how they respond to the problem of flooding and we as Parish Council have indicated we wish to be involved, but we await their findings to this complicated issue. This will for sure happen again as climate change impacts on us all.

Picnic in the Park

As I look back over the last year, things easily pop into my mind such as the Picnic on the Park which celebrated the Kings Coronation. We were extremely fortunate in having pleasant weather which then attracted over a thousand people. An ice cream van with a never-ending queue, music from various sources all come to mind. A special day for all who attended.

Arriva

In April, councillors held a meeting with Arriva's General Manager to discuss residents' concerns regarding the ongoing problem with the 85-bus-service. The services had reduced to half hourly, but the main issue was their irregularity, which of course, made planning a journey difficult. The Parish Council also highlighted this in its response to the three development planning applications.

Parking

The lack of parking is now severely affecting our shops and businesses. The Parish Council has raised this again in its planning application response and raised it with Blaby District Council and their newly appointed Business Support Manager. It is difficult to find a solution as you will realise, as land in Countesthorpe where parking could take place does not exist and where it does, is heavily monitored.

Planning

The library hosted a presentation event to listen to residents' views on the possibility of a solar farm along Foston Road. Ten thousand and three metres high and all facing south is not an appetising entry to our village. We still await further development on this though.

Our Planning Committee worked hard to produce the documents which eventually objected to the three new development applications in and around Countesthorpe, these are on our website for you to read. The main objection is primarily on the grounds of an adverse impact on the village services and infrastructure. The council feel the village is near breaking point already and I agree with that. However, we would not be surprised if more planning applications followed.

Speed signs.

Portable speed activation signs are now installed. Thank you to Leicester County Councillor Les Phillimore for covering the cost of the signs from his Highway Funds. Posts at Willoughby, Leicester Road, and Cosby Road leading to Station Road are to house them. Have they done any good? – The jury is out on that one but on a positive note if they at least stop one fatal accident, it will be worth the cost. Cameras would be better but extremely expensive.

Net Zero

The Parish Council has signed up to take part in Net Zero scheme supported by LRALC and Blaby District Council. Two councillors and our deputy manager attended the training. The Parish Council will be recording its progress to see if it can meet its targets by 2030.

Youth Workers

We continue to support financially two youth workers for two evenings each week. Do they do any good? Before we had these two youth workers the council had lots of issues about young people in the village. These days we get few, if any, complaints at all which to me speaks volumes for their effectiveness and value. However, like all things the council does occasionally we need to review how their work is justified against our budget expense.

Finance

The external audit for the parish Council's accounts for 2022/2023 gave us a particularly good report. At the beginning of this year, the Parish Council adopted its budget for the forthcoming 2024/2025 year and had to make the difficult decision to increase the precept by 6.08%. This equates to £9.43 (or two large cups of coffee) annual increase on a band D property. Unfortunately, there have been repairs to Parish Council property including the replacement of the workshop doors and removal of the dilapidated changing room facility at Willoughby Road playing fields which have impacted heavily on our finances.

Chair

Some people have misconceptions about the role and responsibilities of the Council chairperson. By law the chair cannot direct policy only facilitate the full councils wishes, they must remain impartial. They are to ensure efficient and effective council working. Working with the council manager and Clerk to the Council formulating the meeting agenda. They are to chair the monthly meetings and ensure they run correctly. The chair must not direct the council towards their wishes but make sure the policies and procedures of the council are adhered to. They are to represent the council as and when necessary. There are of course lots of other responsibilities of the chair, but these are the main ones.

I have now been chairing the Parish Council for 12 years and it has been a privilege to serve the village in this capacity. Huge changes have in that time taken place and will no doubt continue improving our village as much as we are able with the constraints imposed on us.

Revd. Mick Gillespie, Current chair of the Parish Council.

Planning Committee Report 2023/2024

This year, the Planning Committee has considered 30 domestic applications and 15 commercial applications.

Commercial applications included new illuminated signage at both the Co-op and Tesco stores, both of which are in the Conservation area. Planning permission was granted but with amendments to their original designs to make them more acceptable to the area.

An application was granted to convert the old butchers shop on Church Street into a residential dwelling, also in the Conservation area.

Permission was granted for the removal of existing floodlights and columns and erection of new floodlights and 10m columns at the Meadows Sports Ground on Leicester Road

In August 2023, a public consultation was held in the Village Hall for residents to view proposals for an 86.1 hectare solar farm at Soars Lodge Farm on land South of Foston Road and East of South Leicestershire Crematorium. To date, no formal planning application has been submitted, although Blaby District Council previously determined that an Environmental Impact Assessment Screening Opinion was not required.

There is considerable concern about proposals for three housing developments, which would have a significant impact on Countesthorpe if all were granted planning permission. Totalling up to 426 new dwellings, they comprise a full application for 51 dwellings on land off Gillam Butts, an outline application for up to 170 dwellings on land by Leicester Road/Foston Road and an outline application for up to 205 dwellings on land East of Willoughby Road.

Such was the unprecedented nature of these applications being submitted simultaneously, that the Parish Council arranged two public events to listen to public opinion and enable residents to view the plans. The Parish Council included the concerns raised in our response as a Consultee and made robust objections to all three applications.

A representative of the Parish Council will also attend the Blaby District Council Planning Committee meetings when each of these applications are decided and reiterate our objections to the proposals.

We have recently been advised of a fourth proposal for approximately 100 dwellings on land South of Cosby Road. Currently, no formal application has been submitted, but a public consultation has been arranged by the developer and will be held on 16th April 2024 at Countesthorpe Village Hall.

We have previously reported about the Whetstone Pastures development on the edge of Countesthorpe. A planning application has not been submitted for the site and the Planning Committee have received no further information with regard to the proposals. However, we will continue to respond to any new information as it becomes available.

In addition to commenting on planning applications, this year the Planning Committee have also reviewed correspondence from the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) regarding the infrastructure levy and responded on items relevant to Countesthorpe. We have also considered the District Council Statement of Licensing Policy 2023-2028 and the Leicestershire County Council Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan for Loughborough and South Leicestershire, responding where applicable. We are currently considering the Blaby

Planning Obligations and Developer Contributions Supplementary Planning Document
Consultation and will make our comments in due course.

I would like to extend the Committee's appreciation to Parishioners who attend our meetings to share concerns about applications affecting them. As always, my personal thanks go to my fellow Committee members, the Parish Council Manger, her deputy and assistant for their valued support this year.

Village Hall Committee Report 2023/2024

The Parish Council was forced to make the difficult decision to increase its hire fees in 2023, however, this was met with understanding from regular hirers who all continued with their bookings, with some even hiring for additional sessions.

The Village Hall is becoming busier all the time with little remaining availability for regular hirings, we have however succeeded in welcoming some new groups over the past year, supporting more local businesses looking to stay closer to home for their events but also those further afield looking to broaden their intake.

The Village Hall also continues to be full on many weekends with private hirings, with bookings already being taken for 2025. In particular, the festive period remained as busy as ever and it was great to see so many familiar faces return for their various events and concerts which have become so well-known to the village over the years. Additionally, we have seen a dramatic increase in the space being used to celebrate people's big days with bookings for wedding receptions and engagement ceremonies.

Because of all of this, income from both the Village Hall and bar takings from parties etc, the Village Hall is now covering its expenses. This is thanks to the hard work of the Assistant Manager, and the bar and cleaning staff, who keep the facilities operating and a welcoming place for hirers to use.

The Village Hall was also bustling with activity in May 2023 when so many of you turned out to vote in the local elections.

As mentioned in the Chairman's report, the Parish Council has signed up to take part in a pilot scheme to become Net Zero Carbon Emissions by 2030. Over the coming years, it is hoped that the Parish Council can make improvements to the village hall to help progress this target.

My thank you to councillors and residents who sit on this committee for all the voluntary work they do during the year, it really is appreciated.

Revd Mick Gillespie

Chair of the Village Hall Committee.

Chair of the Library Committee Report 2023-2024

Countesthorpe Parish Council is now in its eighth year of running the Countesthorpe Library service and it continues to go from strength to strength. This is not only down to the hard work of Sophi, our librarian, but also the dedication of the volunteers, all of which have been with us since taking over the library service.

The weekly Rhyme Time sessions have continuously exceeded 25 children. We have been fortunate to have access to a remaining sum of developer funding via the County Council Library Services which has enabled us to purchase a larger stock of items for the group including puppets and books.

Developer funding has also enabled the purchase of a wall fan in the children's area, the running of two Relax Kids sessions in the summer holidays, children's jigsaw and large print children's books. Previously, 20% of these funds were required to be spent on general book stock by the County Council, but this is no longer mandatory so it has enabled the Countesthorpe Library to purchase items specifically for our library.

Thanks to the work of Sophi in making the library a welcoming community hub, the facility also hosts police beat surgeries, visits from Birkett House students, home schooling students, two book club groups per month, and a safe open space for local tutors who use the facility for out-of-school students, and the Local Area Co-ordinator to meet with clients.

Since last year there has been a 16% increase with 193 new joiners. Thank you to the Countesthorpe Beavers who will have contributed to this by running an event in the summer to promote the library service to children. This also resulted in an increase in take-up to the Summer Reading Challenge. For the forthcoming financial year we have allocated a sum of £500 to contribute to the purchase of prizes for the challenge. Though the promotion of the event increased the number of children starting the challenge, not all completed the challenge, therefore we are hoping to give them more of an incentive.

In terms of the number of books issued, these figures have also increased with a 18% increase in Junior books issued, and a 9% increase in adult books. Overall the Countesthorpe Library is consistently in the top 5 active borrowers out of the 34 community run libraries.

Councillor Martin Smith

Chair of the Library Committee

Strategy Planning and Policy Committee and HR Committee 2023 – 2024

Strategy Committee

The Strategy Planning and Policy Committee continues to routinely review and compile new policies or risk assessment as necessary, whether due to changes in internal procedures resulting from changes in legislation.

This year three new policies were adopted; a Flags Policy, an Investment Policy and a Safeguarding Policy specifically for the Parish Council and will run in addition to the existing Safeguarding Policy for the Library service. This Policy is being followed up with safeguarding training for the relevant staff and volunteers.

The outcome from the Investment Policy is that the Parish Council has reviewed its distribution of financial assets across different bank accounts, so that its funds are not entirely held with one banking provider and also to take the opportunity to earn higher interest rates.

The staff handbook and contracts were forwarded to our HR Advisors who have the relevant experience to ensure that they comply with the latest employment laws and the Health & Safety Policy is now reviewed by an external advisor.

Working is currently ongoing to formulate a Biodiversity Policy which is now by law the duty of a parish council.

Further potential changes in legislation, the Committee continues to monitor the latest situation with regard to the introduction of Martyn's Law which could impact on the Parish Council as an employer as it has responsibility for a venue that can accommodate up to 100 persons.