

Chairmans Report May 2021

In preparing this annual report, I have referred back to that of my predecessor Stephen Barker. This time last year, the consequences of the developing horror of the global pandemic had started to take hold & Stephen commented on the consequences for the council, but more importantly the initial response by the Antrobus community in preparing to support all but particularly the more vulnerable residents in the village.

Meetings of the Parish Council are open to the public and Stephen referred to emergency legislation which had been passed by parliament to temporarily permit "remote" meetings. We have subsequently made extensive use of Zoom which has allowed the council to uninterruptedly continue its business on your behalf, with the option for villagers to attend using the same format. More of that in due course.

The current business year for the Parish Council began in May 2020 when Stephen Barker's 2 year term of office came to a close; with his knowledge & experience of both planning regulations & local government, his contributions to the Council have been invaluable: the community owes a debt of gratitude to Stephen for his contributions. Although subsequently Stephen also resigned from the Parish Council, he continues to be available for counsel on various matters which is greatly appreciated.

On election as the new Chairman, I have unfortunately started a precedent which hopefully will be unique in that I have yet to host a physical meeting! The on-going implications of Covid-19 continue to mean that our meetings have remained in a virtual format – a situation which has been challenging but has definitely highlighted some significant benefits.

I was delighted that Carol Bailey was able to accept the position of Vice Chair, and subsequently, additional vacancies on the Parish Council were filled by the inclusion of Steven Rigby & Helen Vanek. The council currently has a full complement of councillors, with diversity in age & gender and offering a wide range of knowledge, skills & experience.

The majority of business undertaken by the Parish Council relates to Planning, Highways, Traffic issues, the Playground, Enforcement and latterly the consequences of Climate Change (Flooding!) Additionally, responding to enquiries / concerns from villagers on a wide range of matters.

Antrobus Parish Council is extremely fortunate to have the services of a supremely competent Parish Clerk, Mr Simon Palmer, who manages much of the above behind the scenes; during the last year we have taken steps to both support & streamline the work he has to do on our behalf. Needless to say, like in all other walks of life, administrative responsibilities & expectations continue to grow, and the additional time required to fulfil these tasks has been recognised.

Following appraisal of our Clerk undertaken by myself and the Vice Chair, it was agreed to increase his paid hours, to improve on the IT (ie a new laptop) & to move to a facility of internet banking for the Parish Council accounts.

All of the above have been implemented & benefits are now being seen.

There have also been attempts to encourage individual councillors to adopt particular projects. I am grateful for their willingness to take these tasks on & it further reduces the burden on our Clerk.

PLANNING ISSUES

Although outside the Parish of Antrobus, the numerous transport hubs based at Appleton Thorn / Barley Castle Lane do have an impact locally due to errant HGVs

An application by the hauliers Stobart to massively increase the size of their depot was opposed due to a lack of strategy to mitigate the damaging effects of additional HGV movements locally. A request to the Secretary of State to reverse the planning consent by Warrington Borough Council was ultimately successful & their initial decision was overturned.

An application for an even larger development is currently in progress (Six:56) and at the time of writing this report, it is unknown how this will unfold.

More locally, after the initial application a number of years ago for a limited housing development appeared to stall (the Parish Council was not given any reason for this) you will be aware of a recent Housing Needs Survey undertaken by an agent for a new developer.

The Parish Council has no knowledge of the detail of the intended application. It has deliberately distanced itself from the process as until an actual proposal is made, it wishes to remain neutral on the matter. Parish Council has however undertaken to host a public forum (in whatever form it may be allowed at the time) once the results of the survey are known but again at the time of writing, there has been no feedback from the agent.

Local Service Centre Status

A significant factor in determining whether a development within the greenbelt is appropriate is the designation of Antrobus as a Local Service Centre (LSC).

Since the loss of the Post Office, the Parish Council has petitioned to CWAC that Antrobus's status as a LSC should be cancelled. Recent correspondence from CWAC advises that LSC status will remain until reassessment (due to take place in May2021). However, CWAC also acknowledges that the lost facility in the village does represent a material factor in terms of planning.

Neighbourhood Area

The application started by the past Chairman on behalf of the Village Shop Association, for the establishment of a Neighbourhood Area on the site of Antrobus Village Hall was completed by CWAC in December 2020. This initiative (a process not previously encountered by CWAC representing another 1st for Antrobus!!) will simplify the planning process for the development of a permanent alternative to the temporary Shop & Tea Room if and when suitable conditions arise. Importantly any such development will require a consensus by the whole village community.

Government Planning White Paper

A plan by central government to radically overhaul the planning process nationally has been put forward in a highly detailed & complicated document. At this stage the response by the Parish Council has been limited to expressing concern that both itself & villagers must continue to have a voice in local planning decisions.

HIGHWAYS

There is some overlap here with respect to errant HGVs getting stuck, causing damage & obstruction with associated danger to people & property.

The Parish Council has made repeated attempts to enter direct dialogue with hauliers with limited success. Drivers (overseas or otherwise) without knowledge of the local area, inadequate sat navs, inappropriate highways signage & occasional motorway delays all contribute.

In discussion with our Ward councillors, this is recognised as a problem not limited to this area and there are limited additional measures to be taken. As a Parish Council we will continue to respond to reports and would also encourage residents to continue to report such incidents to the Clerk.

Since the introduction of the limited 20MPH zones around the school & Old Orchard, the Parish Council have pursued the idea of extending the zone to include the immediate “crossroads” in the centre of the village.

Recent dialogue with the highways officer from CWAC has established that the 20MPH initiative has been abandoned due to lack of material evidence that it achieves any benefits.

Options to reduce traffic speed would therefore be limited to calming measures such as “sleeping policemen”, painted chevrons on the road surface, creation of chicanes & additional signage. CWAC’s own evidence demonstrates that the average speed along Knutsford Rd is only marginally above the permitted limit of 30MPH so the cost of any of the above initiatives would need to be met by the local community. There would also be several undesirable consequences for any of the above solutions.

In the light of the above it has been agreed by the Parish Council to abandon the “Home Zone” concept, but to proceed with appropriate “Welcome” signage at the margins of what we consider to be the centre of the village. A working group is currently looking to action this & the results will hopefully be seen in the coming months.

A persistent complaint has been the quality of the pavement surface on either side of Knutsford Rd in the region of St Mark’s Church. After an unsatisfactory delay in anything being done, remedial work was undertaken by contractors for CWAC. Faults were identified almost immediately & dissatisfaction has been expressed repeatedly in correspondence to the department. Limited problems have been acknowledged & we await further action.

Unsurprisingly, a combination of financial restraints & Covid are among the excuses given for further delay.

PLAYGROUND

Although the playground is located on the land owned by Antrobus Village Hall, the Parish Council is responsible for its provision, maintenance, insurance & all associated matters.

A routine inspection identified a crack in a wooden swing support, deemed to be a hazard carrying sufficient risk to require repair or replacement of that component.

The formal process of establishing the correct solution began immediately but with inevitable delays.

The subsequent period when the Covid implications of sanitation / social distancing etc also became relevant caused frustration from some of the playground user groups and unfortunately failure of compliance necessitated temporary closure.

What proved very interesting during this period was the importance of the facility to that group of people that I certainly had not appreciated.

The swing unit was subsequently completely replaced at a cost of £3900 with additional repair to the adjacent multi-play equipment & toddler swing.

CLIMATE CHANGE / FLOODING

The Chairman’s report last year made reference to work undertaken by Highways to address road drainage issues at the junction of Barbers Lane / Knutsford Rd.

In late January of this year the effects of Storm Christoph once again caused misery & damage in the same area & in particular to residents in the former Post Office Cottage.

With the typical Antrobus spirit, several villagers attended to offer what little help they could in getting floodwater to disperse.

Apparent at that time was that once in the drains, water was able to escape, but at times of deluge the capacity simply couldn’t cope with the volume trying to access the system.

Residents & members of the Parish Council subsequently met with the CWAC officer with responsibility for flooding. It was possible to present all our concerns, largely positively received. Antrobus will be

designated as an area of high flood risk in anticipation of future events. This will hopefully enable proactive rather than reactive action to the benefit of all.

Additionally, CWAC will appoint a consultant to formally perform a flood risk assessment which will hopefully lead to a plan of action. We await further information on this.

The point was also made as forcefully as possible, that in the absence of significant enhancements to drainage facilities in this area of the village, proposals for additional significant building development are unlikely to be supported.

OTHER BUSINESS / PROJECTS

The Antrobus Heritage Book, with permission from the WI has been digitised & will be published on the Parish Council website in due course.

The re-gilding of the war memorial inside St Mark's, funded by the Parish Council was completed in May 2020.

May 2020 also saw the successful completion of the rollout of fibre broadband to areas of the village not previously supplied. Although not an initiative from the Parish Council, formal thanks to co-ordinating villager Mr Richard Betts & his team of assistants were recorded.

Councillor Helen Vanek has undertaken to co-ordinate a "Plastic Free Village" initiative.

Like several other projects, Helen's efforts have been curtailed to date as a consequence of the Covid-19 epidemic but will hopefully resume when possible.

A villager, Sam Dodgshon has undertaken to research & action information to ensure that existing public footpaths remain identified after a review of OS mapping due to take place in the near future. Our thanks are due to Sam for his efforts.

Concern raised about an apparent change in the quality of the water supply to Antrobus have been raised with United Utilities. Their subsequent analysis confirmed that whilst the hardness value has increased, it remains within acceptable limits. The change is due to an altered supply, previously from reservoirs in North Wales but now from bore holes elsewhere. Unfortunately there is no prospect of this change being reversed in the immediate future.

The Parish Council has created its own Facebook presence co-ordinated by Councillor Helen Metcalfe. This will be used to publicise appropriate information for the community. However questions or queries which arise should still be directed to the Clerk as responses via FB cannot be guaranteed.

ZOOM

Like furlough, Zoom is a word that few of us will have recognised little over 12 months ago.

As mentioned at the start of this report, the Parish Council has conducted all of its meetings on this platform since April 2020.

Whilst not without its limitations, it has enabled councillors to meet regularly & safely. Villagers wishing to attend the Open Forum element of our meetings have been able to gain access via publicised links.

Our council members include both parents of young families & frontline healthcare workers for whom the last year has been challenging beyond belief. There are also members who for one reason or another have been vulnerable & chosen to isolate robustly. Within our small group of councillors / friends (fortunately no need for the services of Jackie Weaver at our meetings!) the concept of remote meetings has enabled more flexibility and almost certainly a better attendance than would otherwise be possible.

At the time of writing this report, the emergency legislation allowing remote meetings has expired. Our previous primary venue of the Village Hall remains closed at & other hosts such as St Mark's Church or the Chapel also have limitations for the immediate future.

We do have a contingency for our meeting in May, but it remains to be seen how our June meeting will proceed.

Finally I wish to record my thanks to Simon Palmer for his continued exceptional services as Parish Clerk, to my Vice Chair Carol Bailey for her support & regular wise counsel & to the rest of the council members – looking forward to meeting some of them non-remotely!!

Simon Batey

Chairman of Antrobus Parish Council