

Aston, Cote, Shifford and Chimney Parish Council - Chairman's Annual Report 2019/20

Parish Councils are required to make an annual report to residents, normally promulgated at the annual parish meeting (also a statutory requirement). With all such meetings prohibited in the current COVID-19 situation, the Annual Report is published below, and is also available on the Parish Council website –

www.astonoxon.com

Our Parish Council The Parish Council is an elected civil local authority (synonymous with 'town' and 'community' councils) and is the first tier of local government, responsible for representing the local community, delivering services to meet local needs, and improving community quality of life and wellbeing. Parish councils are funded by levying a 'precept' collected from within the Council Tax paid to WODC by parish residents. Our Parish Council comprises 7 unpaid councillors who are elected or co-opted to serve for 4 years (our next elections are due in 2022) and they are assisted in their duties by a salaried clerk (Elaine Anstee). The Parish Council should not be confused with the Parochial Council that deals purely with St James Church and Shifford Chapel. Since our last Report at the Parish Meeting in May 2019, the main issues are summarised below.

Finance The Budget for Financial Year 2020/21 was agreed at the Council meeting in December. The Council were delighted to be able to make no increase to the Precept, which at £28,988 keeps the Band D equivalent household at £49.74 (around 3.6p/month for each parish resident) the same as 2019/20. Financial grants, donations and projects in the last year (totalling £3,283) have included Voices magazine, grass cutting for the churches of St James and St Mary's Shifford, Aston minibus, Aston History Project, Cleanslate, Volunteer Link Up and Citizens Advice. As with all Council business, full details may be found on the Council website.

Housing Development and Planning Issues Whilst it is WODC that determines all planning matters, the Parish Council is a statutory consultee on all planning applications in the Parish and exercises a degree of influence accordingly. The consideration of planning applications consumes much of the Council's attention every month as development continues steadily - an increase of around 20% of housing stock in the past 18 months. Wary of development 'creep', a recurring concern for the Council is to highlight the sustainability requirement for all development, including: respect for the Conservation Area status of much of the Parish, addressing the risk of flooding, and stressing (especially) the inadequacies of the already overloaded drainage and sewerage system. Addressing lessons identified with the Mears/ Sovereign site, the Council have engaged more proactively and directly with the Matthew Homes developers in order to provide a conduit for parish concerns and mitigate wherever practicable, the impact of the ongoing work.

Emergency Planning Whilst not mandatory, Parish Councils are recommended to have a 'Community Emergency Plan' (CEP) to support the emergency services and local authorities in responding to a major emergency in the parish or neighbouring parishes. A CEP has now been produced for the Parish and the Chairman attended a CEP exercise organised in Bampton by OCC. The next steps are to conduct a similar (low-key) exercise here, but this has been put on hold with OCC focussed on the current COVID-19 situation.

COVID-19 This issue has come to dominate all our lives in recent weeks, and is set to continue. In accordance with Government direction, there have been no parish council meetings since Feb; this includes the Annual Parish Meeting scheduled for 27 Apr. Business continues through remote working and delegated powers to the Chairman, Deputy Chairman and Clerk. The External Audit of the Council finances has been postponed until Sep. The Council have distributed information leaflets to all residents and are coordinating the Parish Volunteer Scheme to assist those residents most affected by the situation. Volunteers, or requests for assistance should be made through the Parish Clerk (07368 466413) or by email at astonpc@live.co.uk.

Flooding The risk of flooding remains a major concern throughout the Parish, with the prolonged Autumn/Winter rains providing a salutary reminder. The Council is mindful of this in all planning applications and discussions with developers, sits on the Bampton Flood Prevention Group to keep pressure on the

Environment Agency to maintain drainage regimes, and has encouraged riparian landowners to keep drainage ditches clear. Flooding is also identified as a major risk in the new CEP.

Parish Infrastructure Projects completed this year include the long-awaited bus shelter on Cote Road and the new dog bin on Brook Road. Similar projects for the forthcoming year include a bench at St James Church to commemorate the 75th Anniversary of VE Day ('VE75') and a defibrillator in Cote. Utilising, in part, the Section 106 money from the major housing developments in the Parish, traffic calming measures are also planned, with public consultation on the matter ongoing.

High Sheriff's Award Finally, the Council were delighted to note that John Ordish is to receive (when COVID-19 allows) a High Sheriff's Award for contribution to community life in Oxfordshire. This is richly-deserved formal recognition of John's 38-year embodiment of selfless service in our Parish since 1982, the unprecedented breadth and depth of which has been truly staggering. Thank you John – and congratulations!

Russell La Forte, Chairman Aston, Cote, Shifford and Chimney Parish Council