

Aston, Cote, Shifford and Chimney Parish Council

Chairman's Annual Report (FY) 2020/21

Parish Councils are required to make an annual report to residents, promulgated at the Annual Parish Meeting, normally held every April/May. With all such meetings prohibited due to the COVID pandemic, last year's report was published in 'Voices'. This year we have reverted to reporting at the Parish Meeting albeit delayed from its normal date due again to the pandemic. Please note however, that the reporting period covers the Financial Year (April 20 to April 21).

The Annual Report is available on the Parish Council website – www.astonoxon.com

Our Parish Council The Parish Council is an elected civil local authority (synonymous with town 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 (the next elections are due in May 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, nor with the Community Trust who are responsible for the Village Hall and Recreation Field.



Parish Councillors 2021

*Back (L-R): Paul Sparrowhawk, Phil West, Gill Ball, Jane West, Ben Lings
Front (L-R): John Ordish, Russell La Forte, Elaine Anstee (Clerk)*

Since our last Report (in Voices) in May 2020, the main issues for FY 20/21 are summarised below.

Impact of the Pandemic Whilst 2020 will certainly be a memorable year, mostly for all the wrong reasons, life continued nonetheless – Parish Council business included, conducted successfully throughout the year virtually on the now ubiquitous 'Zoom'. Sadly though, the Annual Parish Meeting scheduled for 27 April 20 had to be cancelled. It was heartening to see community spirit in our Parish at its best throughout 2020, with volunteers stepping forward in large numbers to assist those more at risk with shopping, collection of prescriptions and so on. Our thanks to them all and to our Parish Clerk Elaine for coordinating the overall effort.

Flooding and Drainage The Parish 'Community Emergency Plan' identifies flooding as a major (and the most likely) risk throughout the Parish, and is the Council's foremost concern in all planning applications and discussions with developers. We also sit on the Bampton Flood Prevention Group to keep pressure on the Environment Agency to maintain drainage regimes and have encouraged riparian landowners to keep drainage ditches clear. The unhelpful blend of proximity to the floodplain, an ongoing 20% increase in housing stock and the woeful state of Thames Water's sewer and drainage system in the Parish was graphically illustrated at the end of January this year, following a period of persistent, heavy rain. Whilst winter flooding in local fields is the norm, this year seemed especially widespread and we also had sewers overflowing for up to a week, including by the Village Hall and in Bull Street. Small consolation perhaps, but we were not alone in this, with similar reports widespread across the District and County. The simple lack of capacity in the Thames Water infrastructure is a long-standing matter that continues to attract the personal attention of our WODC and OCC councillors and local MP, directly with the Chief Executive. No quick fixes seem likely, but the Parish Council continues to directly inform and support this debate.

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 (23 in FY 20/21) and exercises a degree of influence accordingly. 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 and stressing (especially) the inadequacies of the already overloaded drainage and sewerage system. The Council have engaged proactively and directly with the Matthew Homes developers to provide a conduit for parish concerns and mitigate wherever practicable, the impact of the ongoing work. WODC Enforcement action was requested successfully on one occasion.

OCC Children’s Home on Back Lane Following an on-site meeting with the Council earlier in the Summer with OCC and their planning agency to discuss OCC’s feasibility study into building a new children’s home on Back Lane, a public consultation day was held in Sep 20. The Council remains in close liaison with OCC on the matter.

North Farm The Parish Council was concerned that the OCC-owned North Farm site had been empty for several years, was becoming increasingly derelict and could potentially eventually become yet another high-density development site. We believe that the community, through the Parish Council, should be involved in determining the future of the site, ideally as a community-led development that maximises the social and other benefits to the Parish. Judging that the risks of doing something were greatly outweighed by the risks of doing nothing, we consequently submitted in Nov 20 a detailed paper to OCC on our initial thoughts, in principle, to get an understanding of what might be possible on the site. In tandem with this, an initial stage of public consultation was undertaken, with a second begun towards the end of the reporting period. We remain in close, constructive liaison with OCC on the issue.

Parish Infrastructure We saw some real progress in a number of projects throughout the year in question, including the new bus shelter opposite Foxwood, the defibrillator installed in the refurbished Cote telephone box and the VE75 bench at St James Church. Grounds maintenance contracts also underwent a significant overhaul and we are pleased thus far with the quality of services provided. Probably our most significant infrastructure project though has been traffic calming measures.

Traffic Calming Traffic-related issues rightly remain a major local concern. The arrival of the first Section 106 receipts enabled the implementation of Stage 1 of the Council’s traffic calming project, informed fully by (ongoing) public consultation. This saw the automation of the school 20mph signs, as well as new village signage installed (very ably assisted by OCC) on the main access roads through Aston and Cote. Pending further funding receipts, planning for subsequent stages continued, including signage for more minor access roads and potential adjustments to speed limits and zones. We also invited OCC Highways to make formal recommendations to address the knotty issue of traffic management in The Square.

Finance The Parish remains in good financial state, as confirmed by our external auditors in November. Following its bold decision not to increase the Precept, the Council continued to exercise financial prudence and operated comfortably within its agreed budget of £37,916. Financial grants, donations and projects in the financial year (totalling £5,385) included Voices magazine, grass cutting for Cote Chapel and the churches of St James and St Mary’s, Aston minibus, Aston History Project, Aston Community Trust, Aston Community Shop, Aston Football Club, Cleanslate, Volunteer Link Up and Citizens Advice. From July 20, the first of the Section 106 money from the 2 developments on Cote Road became available for its closely-prescribed uses, enabling commencement of the Council’s traffic calming project. Total Section 106 receipts over the period 2020 to 2028 will total some £186, 000.

The Budget for Financial Year 2021/22 was agreed at the Council meeting in December 20. For the third consecutive year, the Council were delighted once again to be able to make no increase to the Precept, which at £29,319 keeps the Band D equivalent household at £49.74 (around 3.6p/month for each parish resident). As with all Council business, full details may be found on the Council website, including fully audited annual accounts.

Russell La Forte CBE, Chairman Aston, Cote, Shifford and Chimney Parish Council, 7 November 2021