**Aston, Cote, Shifford and Chimney Parish Council**

**Annual Report (FY) 2021/22**

**Our Parish Council** Our Parish Council comprises 7 unpaid councillors who are elected or co-opted to serve for 4 years and they are assisted in their duties by a salaried clerk (Elaine Anstee). Despite actively promoting this year's local elections and much-increased public interest in council proceedings over the past 12 months, there have been only 5 nominations for the required 7 seats. Regrettably therefore, the election for the Parish Council on 5 May this year will be uncontested. The 5 councillors for 2022-26 will be Alex Chapman, Gill Ball, Russell La Forte, John Ordish and Paul Sparrowhawk. Notwithstanding this, the Council does have the power to co-opt suitable volunteers for the 2 vacant seats. Anybody wishing to nominate themselves are encouraged to do so as soon as possible, ideally before the first meeting of the new council on 19 May 2022.

**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 matters. 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 lack of capacity in Thames Water's ageing infrastructure is a long-standing issue that continues to attract the personal attention of our WODC and OCC councillors and local MP, directly with the Chief Executive. For its part, the Parish Council has continued to engage directly with Thames Water, for example on examining potential measures to mitigate specific issues at St Joseph's Court as well as the Bampton Road and Bull Street pumping stations. At the Council's behest, Thames Water have also undertaken specific examination of the impact of the Hawthorns and Marsh Furlong developments. No quick or easy solutions are likely, but the problems are at least now formally identified, quantified and feature in Thames Water's long-term maintenance programmes.

**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 (18 in FY 21/22) 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, noting the Conservation Area status of much of the Parish and stressing (especially) the inadequacies of the already overloaded drainage and sewerage system.

**OCC Children’s Home on Back Lane** Following continued liaison with the Council, the design and layout of the proposed OCC children’s home on Back Lane was amended and scaled down. Nevertheless, WODC objected to OCC's subsequent planning application on the grounds of 'conflict with planning policy and harm to heritage assets', citing 2 previous refusals in the same area. A revised application with amended design details has now been submitted.

**North Farm** Very extensive public consultation culminated in a definitive third round conducted between 8 Dec 21 and 18 Feb 22 that sought the specific views of residents on the 5 illustrative options provided by OCC. With 15% of residents (20% of households) responding - very good for public consultations of this nature - the Parish Council was confident of a mandate upon which to formally respond in March to OCC on behalf of the local community. In sum, this stated that assuming the site's continued unviability as a farm, the project should proceed using the '9 houses' option as a foundation for further refinement, negotiation and continued (binding) engagement between all 3 levels of local government and the local community. The involvement of WODC as the Local Planning Authority (LPA) is considered critical to project development and is probably overdue and OCC still await the results of their pre-application process from WODC, expected at the end of March. For its part, the Parish Council will need to further develop and better define the relevant and tangible community benefits of the project for consideration by the LPA. Planning refusal by the LPA will result at best in a de facto 'do nothing' situation - not acceptable to the community - and could at worst see OCC dispose of the site at market value albeit without planning permission, very likely to a developer for 'land banking' for future intensive development - the worst outcome of all for the community.

**Marsh Furlong** The Council was as alarmed and surprised as everybody else early this year by notification of an intended 40-house development behind Marsh Furlong and Foxwood - the same site that was refused planning permission (confirmed in a subsequent appeal to the Planning Inspectorate) for a similar development in 2018/19. We were implacably opposed then and remain even more so today after a 20% increase in housing stock already over the past 18-months. The ensuing, entirely predictable and dire impacts upon already overloaded local infrastructure mean that our village simply cannot sustain another development of this size. With WODC assuring us that housing targets in Aston have been met for at least the next 5-6 years and with the land in question not appearing in the Local Plan, common sense ought to prevail, but we will monitor the situation extremely closely. Touted as an ostensibly 'affordable housing' development, this is in our view merely a cynical attempt to circumvent the Local Plan. The timing of this speculative bid (along with a large number of others across West Oxfordshire) arises from a 5-yearly review of the Local Plan currently underway by WODC but in which we understand that no changes affecting the Parish are envisaged. We have been advised of a public consultation phase in this review later in the year and will keep residents appraised accordingly.

**Hawthorns Development** The Hawthorns development nears completion in the next couple of months, somewhat delayed. All houses are now sold and all but one occupied. Once final groundworks are complete, a 2-year maintenance phase will commence whereby Matthew Homes will retain maintenance and repair responsibility.

**Traffic Calming** Traffic-related issues rightly remain a major local concern. The first Section 106 receipts enabled the implementation last year of Stage 1 of the Council’s traffic calming project. Stage 2 was completed this year with signage for more minor access roads. A further, comprehensive Stage 3 project has been submitted to OCC Highways, including potential adjustments to speed limits and zones. We still await formal recommendations from OCC regarding traffic management in The Square.

**Finance** The Parish remains in good financial state, as confirmed by our external auditors in 2021. 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, 805. Some £7,362 of Section 106 money from the 2 developments on Cote Road has been used to fund Phases 2 and 3 of the Council’s traffic calming project. Total Section 106 receipts over the period 2020-28 will total some £186, 000. Financial grants, donations and projects in the financial year (totalling £4,146) included the new Day Centre, 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.

The Budget for Financial Year 2022/23 was agreed at the Council meeting in December 21. For the fourth consecutive year, we were delighted once again to be able to make no increase to the Precept, which at £29, 715 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, Chairman Aston, Cote, Shifford and Chimney Parish Council, 25 April 2022*