

Aston, Cote, Shifford and Chimney Parish Council

Chairman's Annual Report (FY) 2022/23

Parish Councils are required to make an annual report to residents, promulgated at the Annual Parish Meeting, which this year will be held on 18 April. The Report will be promulgated subsequently on the Parish Council website (www.astonoxon.com) and in the next edition of Voices.

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). Following a shortfall of 2 councillors following last years (uncontested) election, we were delighted to co-opt Ben Lings and Rob Anstee onto the Council, thereby bringing us back to a full complement of 7.



Parish Councillors 2022-23

*Back (L-R): Ben Lings, Alex Chapman, Rob Anstee, Paul Sparrowhawk
Front (L-R): Elaine Anstee (Clerk), Russell La Forte (Chairman), Gill Ball,
John Ordish*

Whilst this Parish is not scheduled for elections this year, residents should note that from May 23, those wishing to vote in person (including nominated proxy voters)

at UK elections will now be required to provide photographic ID (a wide range of documents are acceptable that need not be current so long as the photo is accurate). Those on the electoral register who do not have an approved version of such ID can apply, free of charge, for a 'Voter Authority Certificate'. Applications can be made online at <https://voter-authority-certificate.service.gov.uk/>, via a paper form from WODC, or calling in person at their offices (more information available on 01993 861410, or email to elections@westoxon.gov.uk). Postal voters are not affected, having already provided signature and date of birth ID.

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. This year we have also established closer links with lobbying groups Windrush Against Sewage Pollution (WASP) and Cotswolds Rivers Trust. The lack of capacity in Thames Water's ageing infrastructure is a long-standing issue that continues to attract our ongoing personal attention, as well as that of our WODC and OCC councillors. Whilst we are pleased to see a planned, long-overdue upgrade to Bampton Sewage Treatment Works that will increase its capacity by 31% by the end of 2024, the principal cause of sewage outages in the Parish - widespread water ingress into ageing pipes - still remains unaddressed. Indeed, the situation has in fact deteriorated following a 23% increase in housing stock in Aston in the past 2-3 years.

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 (21 in FY 22/23) and exercises a degree of influence accordingly. Wary of inexorable 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. The bombshell admission last Summer from WODC that it cannot meet its statutory 5-Year Housing Supply, despite previous repeated reassurances to the contrary, was met with dismay by communities across the District with the removal of a crucial curb to speculative housing development such as that proposed by Terra behind Marsh Furlong.

Terra Development Without doubt, the main parish news at the end of 2022 was the refusal on 5 December by the WODC Lowlands Planning Committee (LPC) of the planning application by Terra for 40 new houses behind Marsh Furlong. This was despite the initial application having been revised following criticism by WODC over the proposed affordable housing mix. After many, many months of community uncertainty and impassioned preparation by the Parish Council and the Aston Action Group, this success has met with acclaim by Aston residents. Particularly satisfying for those of us present at the meeting and who were expecting a much tougher fight, was the fact that the application was refused firmly and unanimously by all members of the LPC, all of whom had taken the trouble to conduct a site visit prior to the meeting to see for themselves the impact of the proposal on our community. However, whilst this battle was won, the war is not over, with the wholly predictable submission of an appeal by Terra made on 22 March. The Public Inquiry by the Planning Inspectorate is scheduled for 20 Jun in Witney and is expected to last up to 5 days; the appeal decision is expected around 25 August. Given the community's implacable opposition to the proposed development and major concerns over the robustness of WODC's grounds for refusal, the Council has successfully applied for Rule 6 Status, whereby it will play an active, major role as a third party to the Inquiry. This will entail an extremely significant and complex amount of work, aided, as far as limited financial resources allow, by planning counsel (a specialist barrister) and expert witnesses. Fortunately, the Council is able to call gratefully upon pro bono legal assistance from a retired solicitor in the Parish. Members of the public are also able to make online representations to the Planning Inspector, as well as speak at the Inquiry if they wish.

Hawthorns Development With the access road now recently completed at long last, completion of the Hawthorns development seems imminent after much delay. Once handover to the relevant authorities is complete, a 2-year maintenance phase will commence whereby Matthew Homes will retain maintenance and repair responsibility. Two issues of concern remain. Firstly, the precise arrangements for contracted grounds maintenance, including the governance role of Hawthorns residents, have yet to be determined. Secondly, after objecting vehemently to the retrospective planning application by Matthew Homes to retain their ugly, incongruous, and unnecessary wooden fencing at the southern end of the site by Bull Street, we were delighted to see the application's refusal by WODC in November. Without prior consultation with the Council, WODC have recently agreed a variation to planning conditions that will see the current 2m-high fence replaced with a 1m-high fence, together with new perimeter hedging and the replacement of removed hedging alongside the public footpath to the west.

North Farm Frustratingly, after a promising initial response to our extensively researched Community Development Proposal made to OCC (the landowner), all has gone extremely quiet regarding North Farm. We understand that OCC and WODC (the planning authority) are now currently discussing the matter in detail, and we have been promised greater clarity in the next month or so. We shall see.

OCC Children's Home on Back Lane Following a fascinating archaeological dig on the site, work is now well underway with ground floor construction completed and roof trusses erected. The project is on schedule, with completion expected on 27 October. The Site Manager, Kevin Carter, is available on 07970 529997 and is happy to talk with any resident who may have questions.

Traffic Calming Traffic-related issues rightly remain a major local concern. Last year, the first Section 106 receipts enabled the implementation of Stages 1 and 2 of the Council's traffic calming project. This year, a further, comprehensive Stage 3 project was submitted to OCC Highways, including potential adjustments to speed limits and zones. Following mandatory public consultation, OCC considered the matter in October, and after approving the proposals, should have referred them back to the Parish Council to agree their precise implementation, in accordance with OCC policy and repeated assurances by OCC officers. Instead, the measures were peremptorily introduced with neither consultation nor notice in November. Whilst we are broadly content with the new measures, opinions vary on particular elements. We have therefore asked for further feedback from residents (culminating in the Annual Parish Meeting) before raising the matter formally with OCC shortly thereafter.

Royal Matters The past year has been a momentous one for our Monarchy, one that saw HM The Queen celebrate her Platinum Jubilee in February as our nation's longest-serving monarch, followed by her passing in September. Following her death, the Parish Council forwarded written condolences on behalf of our community to HM The King and opened a Book of Condolence in St James Church. In November, following a joint

initiative with the Community Trust, a number of new trees were planted in the southwest corner of the Recreation Ground as part of the Platinum Jubilee 'Queen's Green Canopy' national initiative, a fitting memorial to our late Queen. With the Coronation of HM King Charles III approaching on 6 May, we plan a permanent memorial to this historic event through the procurement of a commemorative side access gate from Church Lane to St James' Church, complementing the existing front gate that commemorates the Silver Jubilee of 1937.

Finance The Parish remains in very good financial state, as confirmed by our external auditors in 2022. 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. Total Section 106 receipts over the period 2020-28 will total some £186, 000. Financial grants, donations and projects in the financial year (totalling £4,441) included the new Day Centre, Voices magazine, grass cutting for Cote Chapel and the church of St James, Aston Community Trust, Aston Youth Football Club, Cleanslate, Volunteer Link Up and Citizens Advice.

The Budget for Financial Year 2023/24 was agreed at the Parish Council meeting in December 22. In sharp contrast to successive, inexorable Council Tax rises at county and district level, we were delighted, for a remarkable fifth consecutive year, to be able to make no increase to the Precept. This, at £30,166 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, 18 April 2023