

# Aston, Cote, Shifford and Chimney Parish Council

## Chairman's Annual Report 2023/24 - Summary

*Redacted for editorial reasons. The full report may be found on the Council website, [www.astonoxon.com](http://www.astonoxon.com)*

**Our Parish Council** The Responsible Finance Officer (Deborah Shenton) is a new, cost-neutral post, established this year to ease the workload upon the Parish Clerk. Due to new employment and associated redeployment reasons, Alex Chapman will be standing down at the Annual Parish Meeting. We are most grateful for his sterling contribution. There will be an associated councillor vacancy for which we would be delighted to consider volunteers (residents of the Parish only) for co-option.

**Flooding and Drainage** Given the demonstrably worsening situation regarding sewage discharges in the Parish, we continue regular direct contact with Thames Water on a number of concerns. Work to rectify the misconnection of storm water to the foul water network at St Joseph's Court will commence on 20 August, for completion by end-September. However, work promised this year to upgrade Bampton Sewage Treatment Works has been postponed for at least 12 to 18 months. Given the direct causal link between housing development and sewage discharges, this may have implications for the enforcement of conditions for, amongst others, the Brier Furlong housing development. More generally, it is not the capacity (allegedly sufficient) of the sewage network to handle foul water that is the problem, but rather the deluge of rainfall-induced infiltration that rapidly overwhelms it. To address this, Thames Water have installed flow monitors north and south of the Bull Street Pumping Station as a first step to identify the source(s) of infiltration.

**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 this year) and exercises a degree of influence accordingly. Wary of inexorable development 'creep', a recurring concern for us is to highlight the sustainability requirement for all development, noting the 33% increase already in housing stock over the past 5 years in Aston, the Conservation Area status of much of the Parish, and stressing (especially) the inadequacies of the already overloaded drainage and sewerage system.

**WODC Local Plan 2041** In our response to the WODC Local Plan 2041 public consultation, we welcomed the opportunity to engage on this vital issue, stressing the need for a seamless transition, and urged evolution not revolution, there being much that is entirely fit for purpose in the current plan. We would welcome anything that would help redress the current greed/democracy imbalance in the local planning system and urged WODC to make good on its promise of 'stronger, more meaningful engagement with parish councils'.

**Terra Appeal Upheld - Greed Trumps Democracy** In July, the Planning Inspector allowed the Terra Appeal and granted planning permission for the 40-house development north of Cote Road, thereby overruling the unanimous, democratic view of the Parish and District councils. Nevertheless, we engaged with this appeal as a Rule 6 Party with realistically modest expectations of success and believe that we performed very well in our task of 'adding substantively to WODC's case'. So, not the decision we had all hoped for, but we stand ready for the next, inevitable development 'punt' and would like to thank again all those residents who offered invaluable practical, moral and financial support, for which we are most grateful.

Terra have now handed over responsibility for the site and having been asked by the developer for a proposed name, we have suggested 'Brier Furlong' - the field name in the 19th Century tithe map, an approach consistent with the naming of Marsh Furlong and Pound Field Road. Meanwhile, groundwork proceeds apace, with first occupations expected early next year and completed by Summer. The Parish Council remains firmly focused upon insisting upon absolute compliance with all planning conditions and obligations - no ifs, no buts. For example, following multiple breaches of the construction traffic management plan, we invited WODC to engage accordingly and an Enforcement Officer has been appointed. In the meantime, we would therefore be grateful for the continued assistance of residents in the prompt reporting of any alleged transgressions or issues.

**Formal Expression of No Confidence in WODC Planning Officers** Following WODC's risible handling of the Terra Appeal, compounded by serious failings since, we have written recently to the Leader of WODC, formally expressing the Parish Council's loss of confidence in WODC planning officers and seeking from them a more professional, collegiate, cooperative and transparent approach. A response is awaited.

**North Farm** After a prolonged hiatus, due in part to regime change at OCC, details have begun to emerge of a proposed layout of 9 houses plus (subject to confirmation - a probable prerequisite for WODC approval) an affordable housing unit. The Parish Council believes that this provides an acceptable basis to continue, subject to ongoing refinement and negotiation. An outline planning application is likely to be made this Summer. If approved, construction will begin late-25/early-26. We will continue its close liaison with OCC on this matter and keep residents informed accordingly.

**OCC Children's Home on Back Lane** The Children's Home is now complete and operational.

**Traffic Calming** Traffic calming rightly remains a major local concern that we continue to monitor closely. Most recently, there is ongoing public consultation on the potential for 'build-outs' on approach roads into Aston. We were most grateful for the extensive, often passionate views of residents, both for and against, on the new 20mph speed limits, introduced peremptorily by OCC in November 2022, without final consultation with the Parish Council.

**Royal Matters** Following the coronation of HM King Charles III 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 2023. Following its bold decision not to increase the Precept last year, the Council continued to exercise financial prudence and operated comfortably within its agreed budget of £31, 308. Total Section 106 potential receipts over the period 2020-30 will total some £248, 391. Financial grants, donations and projects in the financial year (totalling £3, 667) included the Day Centre, Voices magazine, grass cutting for Cote Chapel and the church of St James, Aston Community Trust, Cleanslate, Royal British Legion and Citizens Advice.

The Budget for Financial Year 2024/25 was agreed at the Parish Council meeting in December 2023. In sharp contrast to successive, inexorable Council Tax rises (at the maximum permitted level) at county and district level, we were delighted, for a remarkable **sixth** consecutive year, to be able to make no increase to the Precept at all. This, at £30,395 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.

**Testimonial - Ted Baughan** Following the recent passing of Ted Baughan, we would wish to formally record our appreciation of Ted's outstanding record of public service in our Parish, including as Chairman of the Parish Council for a remarkable 20 years, from 1983 to 2003.

Russell La Forte CBE, Chairman Aston, Cote, Shifford and Chimney Parish Council, 23 April 2024