

**MINUTES OF ASTON, COTE, SHIFFORD & CHIMNEY
ANNUAL PARISH MEETING
HELD ON TUESDAY 23rd APRIL 2024
IN THE VILLAGE HALL, ASTON 7.30PM**

- 1. Present:** Parish Councillors:
Russell La Forte (Parish Council Chairman)
John Ordish
Paul Sparrowhawk
Ben Lings
Gill Ball
Alex Chapman
Robert Anstee
- Deborah Shenton (Parish RFO)
Lysette Nicholls, WODC Councillor
Charlie Maynard WODC Councillor
Ian Dunstan, Chair of Aston & Cote Community Trust
23 members of the public

- 2. Apologies:** Elaine Anstee (Parish Clerk)
Dan Levy, Oxfordshire County Councillor

- 3. Welcome:** Russell La Forte, Meeting Chairman, welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced the members of the Parish Council and the newly appointed RFO (Responsible Finance Officer). There is also a resignation from the Council as Alex Chapman is resigning from the council due to work/relocation. The Chairman thanked Alex for everything that he has done for the community during his two years in post. There is now a vacancy on the Parish Council.

- 4. Minutes of Annual Parish Meeting on 18th April 23.**
These were accepted as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

5. Parish Council Report – Russell La Forte

Our Parish Council Our Parish Council comprises a full complement of 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) and Responsible Financial Officer (RFO) (Deborah Shenton). The RFO is a new, cost-neutral post, established this year to ease the workload upon the Parish Clerk (through whom, she works).

Due to new employment and associated redeployment reasons, Alex Chapman will be standing down at the Annual Parish Meeting (today). We are most grateful for his sterling contribution to the Council. There will be an associated councillor vacancy for which the Council would be delighted to consider volunteers (residents of the Parish only) for co-option.

The Parish is scheduled for local elections on 2 May. Residents are reminded that those voting in person (including proxy voters) at UK elections are now required to provide photographic ID (a wide range of documents are acceptable). 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 the major 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. 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 sewerage 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. Initial results are expected shortly.

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 22/23) 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'. Regarding WODC's proposed future pattern of development, we have in principle supported the current 'hierarchical approach', potentially supported by new settlement and improved public transport, but are firmly against 'dispersed growth' and 'village clusters'. We were grateful for public feedback on the issue, including at our public meeting on 20 September, and there will be a further round of public consultation by WODC in due course.

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. We struggle to find any positives in this deeply disappointing decision, neither with its main findings, nor the absence of the mitigating conditions that we had sought. 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'. Furthermore, we retain the moral high ground, having done the right thing in defending the overwhelming opposition in the Parish to this cynical, unscrupulously speculative housing development. We learned vital lessons for the future, made Terra work (and pay) for it and honourably 'went down fighting'. However, the speed and definitive nature of the decision would seem to indicate that the Inspector did not find this a difficult decision, one that reflects in our view, 3 features of the appeal process. Firstly, the grossly uneven playing field in legal, policy and financial terms. Secondly, the failure by WODC to demonstrate a 5-year housing supply and finally, a weak case, very poorly presented by WODC. 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 (Living Space) for a proposed name, we have consulted with the Aston History Group and have suggested 'Brier Furlong' - the field name in the 19th Century tithe map and is 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, whilst the developers have shown themselves sensitive to local concerns and continue to communicate well with the public (including the Marsh Furlong Residents Association), there have nevertheless been multiple breaches of the construction traffic management plan. We have therefore 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 Residents will recall the exhaustive rounds of public consultation conducted nearly 2 years ago regarding the North Farm site as a potential community-led development opportunity. Of OCC's illustrative options, the most favoured by residents was a development of 9 houses that maximised the available open space (to be gifted to the community) and represented least impact upon the Conservation Area. 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 to liaise closely 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. Whilst we subsequently voted by a majority to accept the new speed limits, we have written to OCC registering our displeasure at the high-handed and disingenuous manner, in which the limits were imposed.

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.

Further late planning information On land behind St James Court on North Street, there has been activity that might indicate further development. The land proposed is a linear strip behind St James Court and Brier Furlong. Information was requested from WODC Planning Department - confirmation that a pre-application had been made to WODC, but no details could be provided. The Parish Council put in a "Freedom of Information Request", but it was refused, so a formal review of that decision was requested, a response is awaited. In the meantime the Parish Council was approached by the developer for a meeting and on Monday 22 April three Parish Councillors met with the developer. There has been a pre-application to WODC for 16 houses to be erected. They will be custom-build houses. Planning Officers for WODC have been generally supportive of the pre-application, but made some suggestions of changes that the developers have taken into account, and now the developers are awaiting further statutory responses. If it all goes through there will be outline planning permission applied for by the developer for the site in the summer. However, because it's custom-build, following outline planning permission for the development then each individual house will also require planning permission. The Councillors made it clear to the developer that that the PC felt that there is already over-development in the Parish with an increase in housing of 35% and that there would be local opposition. The development company is Lonestar Development Partners.

6. WODC Councillor Lysette Nichols

Recent issues in the Parish are issues with Marsh Furlong/Briar Furlong and have had meetings with site manager regarding issues and escalated to Planning Department, resulting in additional conditions, including banksmen to stop lorries going through village. Have also been involved with other issues for residents, including planning and planning process. The five year land supply has failed twice in last five years and tilted balance leaves Aston getting the brunt of planning to help fill the gap in housing. Have also been working on the Local Plan consultation with the PC as it is critical that it must be right. Second stage for Local Plan will happen in June.

7. WODC Councillor Charlie Maynard (Executive Member Responsible for Planning)

Trying to address Problems in Planning Dept, and address that the team could work better. Affordable housing is an issue, as house prices are very high in Oxfordshire. The Local Plan is from 2018 and has many problems there is a requirement for houses of 186 a year in 2011 that rises to 1360 houses a year in 2031 and this is not achievable. Thames Water is another issue, have been meeting with them every six weeks over last two years. They will go into administration. Although flow monitors have been installed in Aston to monitor infiltration, the money that is required to increase capacity at Bampton Treatment Works and to increase the capacity of the flow isn't available. Formerly Chairman of Oxford Transport Group, and we published a feasibility study of rebuilding the rail link between Oxford/Eynsham/Witney/Carterton and this is on the OCC website.

8. Aston & Cote Community Trust (CT) – Ian Dunstan, Chairperson

The CT is a committee that is responsible for the day-to-day running and improvements to the Village Hall and Playing Field. Maintenance work undertaken over the last year has included the replacement of the fascia and soffits on the building, new toilets in the changing rooms, work to the car park including parking bays line painting and a new bin store. The organisation relies on income from hall hire and field rental, along with fundraising and grants. The maintenance list is, as usual long. The cost relating to the pump in the drainage system was expensive. Utility and maintenance costs have hit the CT finances hard. CT is aware of parking concerns when there are multiple hirers using the facilities and are working with the football club to improve this. The project to install a Multi-Use Games Area is underway and a planning application about to be submitted. There is a 15 minute slot before each monthly meeting that the public can attend to air their concerns regarding the hall and field directly to the Trustees. Also, if there is anyone willing to join the Committee, we are looking for someone with fundraising focus.

9. Open Questions – A Summary

- Residents from St Joseph’s Court voiced their concern regarding work to be carried out by Thames Water which appeared to mean there would be no vehicular access to their properties for the duration of this work.
 - The Chairman confirmed that the Parish Council had written to Thames Water and was awaiting a response. However, it was thought that Thames Water would have to ensure that there was vehicular access through the works. A work plan for this does exist
- Potholes – do we still have a “Superuser”
 - No, we no longer have a Superuser, so residents must report potholes via www.fixmystreet.com and supplying photos and dimensions helps.
 - Potholes are the responsibility of the Highways Department at County Council.
- Buildouts
 - These have been suggested by Oxfordshire Highways Department on the main approaches to Aston. Currently under review and residents’ opinions sought via a questionnaire in Voices. These will be part-funded by OCC.
- Light-up speed signs
 - Replacement and new signs are on order.
 - These are being part-funded by OCC.
- Flooding – A new resident asked if the recent water levels and flooding in the Parish were normal for the area.
 - Yes, we are on a flood plain, however, there is a risk that new building will extend the flood plain and this is one of the reasons why the PC are opposed to new building developments.
 - There is a normal cycle, but the flooding must be kept where it is supposed to be.
- Reason for lack of housing supply
 - A decision was made in 2018 to concentrate the majority of the housing supply in five sites, Witney North, Witney West, Witney East, and Eynsham West and South. But for various reasons, these have not materialised.

10. Close of Meeting

Russell La Forte thanked the speakers for their presentations and the members of the public who can, for attending and participating in the meeting.

The meeting closed at 20.37pm.

Signed.....

Dated.....

