

Steeple Aston Parish Council Annual Report 2019-21

Because of the Covid pandemic, it has been two years, not one, since the last annual report. By normal standards 2019-20 was a busy year for the Parish Council; 2020-21 has been even busier. I will start with the many thank yous that we owe to people throughout the village, both paid and unpaid, who have kept things running smoothly. I will then give a brief resume of Parish Council activities over the last two years.

Beginning with the thank yous. First and foremost, a big thank you and a farewell to Bob Bickley, who has decided to retire. For some years now Bob has done one of the most essential, and often least pleasant, jobs in the village, keeping the playground tidy and the public toilet clean. We owe him a huge debt of gratitude for everything he has done, and we wish him a happy and peaceful retirement. Thanks also go to Nigel Prickett and Will Pryse, who keep our village looking tidy with grass cutting and weed killing; to Helen White, our internal auditor, who keeps our books tidy; and to Jenny Bell, who does a fantastic job with the website, and who has kept the village so well informed over the last two difficult years. Big thank yous also to Barbara Brewer and Torquil McLusky for looking after the Village Hall and the Sports and Recreation Centre respectively; also to the many other volunteers who help keep these buildings up and running and, in better times, actively used by all the clubs, societies and organisations that are such a huge part of Steeple Aston life. Thanks also to Rose McCready and the Allotments Association for keeping the allotments looking so appealing. This year, possibly for the first time, the allotments are fully allocated, an excellent achievement; thank you also to Steeplejack (aka Julia Whybrew) who reports our meetings in such an idiosyncratic and entertaining fashion. And finally we owe special thanks to all the volunteers in the village and to S & J Cuisine who really stepped up to the mark when the pandemic first struck. More on them later.

There are particular thank yous from me: firstly to Cathy Fleet, who runs the Parish Council administration, dealing with correspondence, payments, agendas, meetings, minutes, day-to-day business and the eccentricities of her Chairman; thanks to all my fellow councillors – the Parish Council is a collective endeavour and I rely very much on my colleagues. Each of them, in their own way, contribute hugely valuable advice, which informs our joint decisions. They also give up their time. I owe them a great debt of thanks.

Personal thanks to the Councillors who have stepped down over the past two year. First to Amanda Rodgers, who left last year through pressure of work. Although Amanda was only on the Parish Council for about eighteen months, her contribution was huge. She still plays a very active part in village life through Sustainable Steeple, and major earth-moving at the allotments.

Thank you to Graham Porcas, who left during this year to pursue other interests. He made great contributions to the upkeep of the Highways and the filling of potholes, more on that later; and his practical skills were invaluable in sorting out a variety of maintenance issues at the playground. We are glad to say that, whilst he no longer remains a councillor, he continues to be the FixMyStreet SuperUser for Steeple Aston and plays a significant role in keeping our roads in good condition.

Finally thank you to Charlotte Bartlett, who left us earlier this year. Charlotte was actively involved in many initiatives: the emergency plan, the speed indicating device, the website, and many other things. But her greatest achievement was the provision of meals in the village at the beginning of the pandemic – an operation she set up with S & J Cuisine. It is a tribute to Charlotte's communication and organisational skills that everything ran so smoothly and efficiently.

I'd like to welcome Rebecca Lewin as a new co-opted councillor, who has already started to make a valuable contribution to the working life of the PC. And to Peter Dammermann, who has recently been co-opted to join us. We look forward to co-opting another new councillor in the not too distant future.

I will now report on our activities over the last two years.

Some of the things I mention feel like ancient history already. For example, the introduction of the white lines on South Side. It feels as if they have always been there. They seem to have been a success in encouraging better parking and driving habits along that narrow stretch of road; better looking verges; and a delay-free bus service.

Significant repairs were made to the roads along the Beeches and on Northside. Our thanks to Graham Porcas for keeping up the pressure on the Highways Department and convincing them that 'something needed to be done.' It appears that there are still teething problems in both areas but the improvements are noticeable.

The mobile Speed Indicating Device, has been introduced and can be sited at five different locations around the village. Our thanks to Oxford County Councillor, Arash Fatemian, for a generous donation from his Councillor's Fund towards this purchase. The social distancing rules during the pandemic have made the operation of the device tricky during the pandemic but we hope that it will now become more regularised.

On to Planning.

There has been the usual trickle of applications for minor refurbishments and extensions. There have also been applications for larger developments. At the site on Sixtyfoot, Rectory Homes received the go-ahead from Cherwell District Council

for a small development of new homes. We continue to keep in touch with CDC and Rectory Homes regarding S106 money that will be forthcoming from this development, and which will in due course benefit the village.

The site at The Beeches has twice been refused permission by Cherwell and has now gone to appeal. We await the result of that. A proposal for redevelopment of the old chicken sheds at Hatch End led to considerable opposition from villagers in both Steeple Aston and Middle Aston. The initial proposal was withdrawn to take account of villagers' objections, and developers have recently submitted new plans. These will be discussed at a meeting in a couple of weeks' time.

The Village Hall has undergone considerable work over the past two years. The inside of the hall was redecorated last summer, and before that the outside was repainted and a new kitchen fitted. Thanks to Richard Preston for his fund raising efforts for the kitchen.

The Sports and Recreation Trust has made valuable savings over the last two years, employing new contractors to look after the football pitch; and they will be delighted to see football soon starting up once again at Robinson's Close. Thanks as always to both the Village Hall Management Committee and The Sports and Recreation Trust for their work throughout the year.

Another new development was the siting of a defibrillator by the entrance to the Sports and Recreation Building. This is accessible 24/7. An older, but still functioning model, is inside the Red Lion. This became unavailable when the pub was closed, but we hope will soon be up and running again. An awareness seminar demonstrating the use of the defibrillator unfortunately had to be cancelled just before lockdown in March 2020. However, it will be rescheduled as soon as possible.

The Parish Council also conducted a survey of mobile phone coverage in the village, which concluded that reception is appalling almost everywhere in the village. Our approaches to various providers did not yield the kind of results we might have hoped for. However, we took the decision to postpone further action whilst the pandemic is ongoing.

One other event worthy of mention was the richly deserved bestowal of an award from the High Sherriff of Oxfordshire on Martin Lipson for his work on the Mid-Cherwell Neighbourhood Plan. Our congratulations to him and our thanks for all the work he put in drawing up the plan and getting it "made" (approved) by local referendum.

Moving on to more recent events.

The overriding issue of the past year has, of course, been the Covid pandemic. We owe special thanks to Charlotte Bartlett and S & J Cuisine for their sterling efforts over the whole period of the crisis. They have been providing a remarkable food delivery service to villagers and for that we are extremely grateful.

We'd also like to thank Raj, Pari and their families for keeping the shop open – a lifeline for many people in the village; and Mike Kerford-Byrnes, our Cherwell District Councillor, for a grant which helped us to keep the playground and toilet open.

Above all we extend a huge thank you to everyone who volunteered at the beginning of the year. They have helped out with shopping, deliveries of medicine, and countless other errands to help out those villagers who were shielding or who unable to leave their homes for whatever reason. The number of people who volunteered and the willingness with which they went about their tasks was truly humbling. Thank you so much. Special thanks in particular go to Anna Thatcher and Katie Crawshay who ran weekly deliveries of medication from Deddington Health Centre direct to people's doors.

In spite of the pandemic, progress has been made in other areas. The MUGA underwent a big clean-up while the playgrounds were closed. I never realised that it was such a brightly coloured facility. A new electronic metal door has been fitted to the public toilet. As we speak, the playground is closed and undergoing a major refurbishment. We commissioned a huge tidying-up, pruning and replanting to the ancient hedge at Lawrence Fields and hope that within a few years' time, it will have grown into something substantial and worthy of note. We are still working on negotiating subleases for the Village Hall and the Sports and Recreation Centre to make it easier for them to access maintenance and development grants; and finally, we are currently undertaking a review of all our policy documents.

Looking forward, we hope that as the current crisis starts to ease, normal village life will resume. We hope that we will once again be able to go into the pub; that activities will restart in the Village Hall and the Sports and Rec; that we can socialise in our homes; and that Steeple Aston will return to being the lively and vibrant community that we know it can be.