

Steeple Aston Parish Council Annual Report 2021-22

Once again it is time for a round-up of the activities of the Parish Council for the year. This year has certainly been easier than that the last two; though not without its challenges.

I will start with the customary thank yous to all the people who help the Parish Council to keep the village running smoothly. Many thanks go to all the following: to Nigel Prickett and Will Pryse for grass cutting and weed-killing respectively - they keep the village looking tidy through the summer months; to Helen White for her attentive internal audit of the PC books; to Jenny Bell for her excellent work keeping the village informed through the website and Facebook; to Torquil McLusky and Barbara Brewer for their efforts looking after the Sports and Recreation Centre and the Village Hall, and to the many other volunteers who help to look after these great assets to village life; to Rose McCready and the Allotments Association for keeping the allotments in such good shape; especially to Nigel Grugeon, the Clerk to the Allotments Association, who has put in a lot of work liaising with a number of different people over the development of the site at Wincote; to Jasmine of S&J Cuisine, who, at very short notice, took up the task of providing 'meals on wheels' to a number of villagers and generously continues to do so; to Graham Porcas who with his trusty gang has been filling potholes on our roads and keeping our suspension undamaged; and to the small party of volunteers who put in an excellent weekend's hedge trimming around the play areas and lower car park. Also many thanks to PJ Penneys, the company who have taken over responsibility for cleaning the public toilet and keeping the playground tidy. They have been doing an excellent job; and to Steeplejack who I am sure attracts more readers than the official Council minutes, and thus helps to keep the village informed of what we, the Parish Council, do.

My personal thanks, as always, to Cathy Fleet, the Parish Clerk, who runs the administration of the Parish Council, dealing with finance, correspondence, meetings, agendas, minutes, and the vagaries of the Chairman. Also a big thank you to all my fellow councillors. The Parish Council is very much a collective endeavour. All my colleagues give up their time, and contribute in many and varied ways, with practical help, suggestions, ideas, and support. Their contribution to the work of the Parish Council is invaluable. While mentioning councillors, I would like to thank departing councillor Rebecca Lewin. She was not on the Parish Council for long. However, during her time with us she came forward with many valuable ideas and suggestions, and her input will be much missed. At the same time I would like to welcome Peter Dammermann and Angharad Lloyd Jones. Both have joined us during the last year; and both have already started to make their mark with practical assistance and useful ideas. And finally, not forgetting our two local councillors Arash Fatemian, of Oxfordshire County Council, and Mike Kerford-Byrnes, of Cherwell District Council. Mike is stepping down after over 10 years in the post. We thank him for all his help, advice and support over the past years, especially his successful interventions over the planning application at Hatch End; and we wish him well in his retirement.

Moving on to the activities of the Parish Council over the last year, we have had a busy time. The refurbishment of the playground, at a cost of about £15,000 was completed around this time last year with, among other things, a new fence around the toddler area. There will be more maintenance and repair work to be done in the coming year. The gate to the Multi-Use Games Area was also repaired and repainted.

As usual, maintenance and repair work has been necessary at the Village Hall and the Sports and Recreation Centre. This was mainly minor building work, but we also organised the repainting of the yellow lines and hatchings in both car parks. We should note here that the Dr Radcliffe Foundation is planning to tarmac the lower car park at Robinson's Close to provide extra parking for visitors to Village Hall, the football field and the school. We would like to thank them for undertaking this, and think it will be a great asset.

Land issues have preoccupied us this year. There is a small patch of land behind the war memorial that could best be described as 'neither use nor ornament'. The high hedge provides a scenic backdrop to the memorial itself, but the land behind the hedge is a mass of brambles and weeds. The Parish Council are in the process of deciding how best, and most cost effectively, to deal with this.

Last year we were also offered a small parcel of land on Water Lane, as a gift from a former village resident. It seemed sensible to take up this generous offer. Not only to stop the land being built on, but also to provide the village with a 'community orchard'. The legalities of the transfer of ownership are still ongoing, as are decisions about how a community orchard might function.

There is a piece of land known as the Pocket Park at the bottom of Nizewell Head, which was originally leased to the Parish Council by Cherwell District Council. However, the lease expired a few years ago. We are currently in negotiation with CDC as to how we might pick up the lease once more, and what steps they might take to improve the park. We are also aiming in the long run to upgrade the facilities there.

For the first time during my time in the village, the Parish Council had a stall at the autumn flower show. There were display boards outlining some of the achievements of the Parish Council over the years; and some of our current activities. Councillors were in attendance during the day and were able to answer questions from visitors to the stall. We hope to put up a similar stall again this year. Do call in and ask about what we do, and share any thoughts, suggestions or ideas.

We recently established two new committees. One was to co-ordinate events in the village to celebrate the Queen's Platinum Jubilee. We will shortly be seeing the fruits of their labours. A more permanent fixture is a Village Environment and Sustainability Committee, chaired initially by Carl Tomlinson. This committee will look at ways in which we can enhance the village environment, making it a sustainable and healthy place to live. The meetings of this committee are open to the public and, if any residents have ideas or suggestions to put forward, we would encourage you to go along to their meetings.

On the planning front, there has been the usual trickle of minor home improvements, and a handful of more major ones, applied for within the village. Regarding more major developments, work has started on the Rectory Homes site along Sixtyfoot and some of the new houses there might be completed in the spring to summer of next year. The application for the development of the Old Poultry Farm at Hatch End met with considerable resistance from the village and, swayed possibly by an impassioned intervention from our local councillor Mike Kerford-Byrnes, Cherwell District Council decided to refuse the application.

One sad event this year was the death of Margaret Mason. Margaret was Chair of the Parish Council for a remarkable 20 years. She achieved and facilitated many of the wonderful

village assets that we enjoy today, and the village owes her an enormous debt of thanks. She will be commemorated with a plaque on the wall of the village hall.

Looking ahead, life is beginning to return to normal after the pandemic: meetings are held face-to-face; pubs and restaurants are open – and we hope the Red Lion will be up and running again soon; whilst some people are still working from home, many are back in their places of work. I will look forward to a continued return to ‘normality’ and reporting next year on the healthy progress of the projects mentioned in this report.

Richard MacAndrew