

Steeple Aston Parish Council
Annual Parish Meeting held on 19th May 2025 in the Sport & Rec building

Minutes

1. To receive apologies for absence
2. Present: Angharad Lloyd Jones (ALJ) Martin Lipson (ML) Peter Dammerman (PD), Charlotte Powell (CP) Greg Elphick (GEL)
3. Members of the public : There were 3 members of the public present plus Helen Wright for SAL
4. County/District Councilors: Cllr Gareth Epps , Cllr David Rogers
- 3 To receive the minutes of the last meeting held on 20th May 2024
The minutes of the meeting held on 20 May 2024 were checked for accuracy and content and agreed as a true record of the meeting and signed by the Chair.

5 Chair's report

It is time for a round-up of the activities of the Parish Council from the past year, so let's start by acknowledging the wider network of people who frankly make most of what we do possible.

Many thanks go to all the following: to Jenny Bell and her committee who keep villagers up to date through the website and social channels; to Helen White our internal auditor who diligently reviews the PC books; Nigel Prickett for grass cutting and weed-killing respectively; to Torquil McLusky and Barbara Brewer for their efforts looking after the Sports and Recreation Centre and the Village Hall respectively, and to the many other volunteers who help in looking after these assets that are so central to our village life. As she steps down, it seems only right at this point to acknowledge and thank Barbara for her many years chairing the Village Hall Committee. Her legendary ability to manage an agenda to time was much admired, and even more appreciated by her fellow committee members. At this stage no replacement has been found but we look forward to working with whoever picks up the reins. *(Note since presentation a replacement has been appointed.)*

Further thanks must go to Amanda Rodgers and the Allotments Association for keeping the allotments in such good shape and to Kay Francis and committee for being the guardians of our Community Orchard; to Carl Tomlinson for chairing the Environment & Sustainability Committee and to Graham Porcas who is back filling potholes on our roads; and to those occasional volunteers who have helped out with maintenance in the playground, village clean ups and other acts giving up time for their community.

This year also saw Steeplejack put down their pen. Fortunately they were replaced by the equally witty wordsmith Mrs Miggins who continues to report from the parish council frontline for Steeple Aston Life.

My personal thanks, to Cathy Fleet, the Parish Clerk, who runs the administration of the Parish Council, dealing with finance, correspondence, meetings, agendas, minutes, and all the councillors. I'll end with an extra large thank you to all my fellow councillors. The Parish Council is very much a collective endeavour. All councillors give up their time, and contribute in many and varied ways, with practical help, suggestions, ideas, and support. Their contribution is immeasurable.

This year we were delighted to welcome Greg Elphick as councillor. He comes with experience, much enthusiasm and an extensive garage of tools which have already been put to use on council matters. ArashFatemian, of Oxfordshire County Council, served our village for multiple years, attending, listening and supporting many of our projects. We are very grateful to him for his service. We look forward however to working with Gareth Epps as he steps into his new role as our Oxfordshire County Council rep. After many months of absence from Cherwell District Council, we were pleased to see David Rogers and Andrew McHugh attend meetings this year. As he steps down we thank Andrew for his passionate work on flood prevention and we welcome the new elected Zoe McLernon.

Onto our activities over the past twelve months. The parish council year is a healthy mix of the new and the annual. Here is a summary of both.

Our environmental impact has been a theme this year. We began 2024 surveying our local Blandford fly population in collaboration with BUG (Bournemouth University Group). This led to a proposal for population management which is now under discussion with local and national environmental groups as well as other affected councils. The ongoing discussions will review the environmental impact versus public health benefit leading us to a final recommendation and way forward.

The Environment & Sustainability Committee enter the new financial year having surveyed village opinion in order to guide their future plans. Reflecting our village's desire to protect our natural spaces, the Community Orchard was submitted for green space designation under the Neighbourhood Plan. The Parish Council then identified and requested three further spaces also be explored for designation. In addition, the council have authorized the Environment & Sustainability Committee to explore opportunities for the installation of EV charge points within Robinsons Close car park.

The Orchard Committee continues to passionately care for the land bequest from Sarah Lucas. This year saw them gain their Community Action Group accreditation bringing them into a wider network of groups and organisations across Oxfordshire. They continue to enhance the diversity of the planting and have captured the attention, and hearts, of village families with their hugely successful events.

Planning is always a hot topic in the village but with delays to the Mid-Cherwell Neighbourhood Plan our focus has shifted this year towards how housing type reflects needs. Having digested the results of our 'Housing Needs' survey conducted by Community First Oxfordshire, the Parish Council proceeded to part fund set up costs for the Steeple and Middle Aston Community Land Trust. Now fully incorporated, registered with the FCA, and with a newly launched membership this Land Trust is starting its work in earnest and independent of the Parish Council. Thank you to Martin Lipson and the wider committee for all the time and energy put into this mammoth task.

As S106 funds continue to be released, we concentrate on the Millenium Park playground at Robinsons Close. After a competitive bid process, the council has appointed Kompan to undertake the following updates and repairs. The wooden boundary will be replaced by 100% recycled plastic sleepers, uneven surfacing will be updated with recycled rubber mulch where possible, with additional repairs and updates to equipment across the site where required.

Alongside these meatier issues, there will always be the day to day business of simply keeping the village running. Perhaps these actions feel less newsworthy, however they are central to parish council life.

As ever, there was ongoing maintenance at the playground: zipwire repairs, bench and table replacement as well as the annual renewal of bark and inevitable toilet maintenance. Our building inventory saw drain maintenance as well as roof and rainwater goods repairs to prevent water ingress. Even our longstanding parish noticeboard had a facelift in order to last a few more decades.

Maintenance of, and safety on, our highways is aon-going focus for the council. In early 2025 we were fortunate enough to take Oxfordshire Highways Community Engagement Officer for a half day tour of the village. The opportunity to discuss issues ranging from school crossing safety to everyday drainage and gutter clearance has given us the chance to focus and place some structure around what can often be a quite consuming element of our responsibilities.

And then there is the future for which we must plan. Following Storm Darragh's impact on the village in December, we sought advice from the Oxfordshire Community Resilience Team. The resulting revised Steeple Aston Community Emergency Plan will be released in coming weeks. There will no doubt continue to be major planning issues in which we must voice the village needs, of current note might be the Puy de Fou proposal at Bucknell or ongoing plans to expand London Oxford Airport facilities.

I look forward to reporting on these and more next year and that concludes my report.

5 Financial Report (presented by Cathy Fleet, RFO)

The accounts for the financial year are closed and have been audited by the Internal Auditor, Helen White to whom I would like to pass my thanks. Helen's audit includes ensuring that the accounts have been accurately kept and that the balances are correct, and additionally she ensures that correct processes and procedures have been followed throughout the year.

The next stage is that the accounts must be externally audited and this will take place after the Accounts, Accounting Statement and Governance Statement are approved by the parish council at its next meeting . Once approved, the accounts will be available to view on the website.

The accounts show a closing balance of £81,587.18, of which £76,519.26 is held in reserves. Reserves are held in the Unity Savings Account (£48,226.68) earning 2.25% interest and a CCLA Account (£28,292.63) with an annual average yield of 4.46%.

The parish council has responsibility for the upkeep and maintenance of various things around the village, and reserves are held for:

45% for the Village Hall

20% for the S&R

20% for the Playground & Pocket Park

10% for Bus shelters

5% for general maintenance

The precept received from CDC in the financial year 2024/25 was £36,893 and this has increased for 2025/26 to £38,662. The only other income the PC received in 24/25 was a grant towards grasscutting costs and a grant from the Councillor Priority Fund to assist with the Blandford Fly project.

Regular spending includes administrative costs such as Insurance, payroll and bank charges, training and the clerk's salary and various memberships to other organisations e.g. MCNP and OALC. Other regular costs include the cleaning of the toilet in the playground, grasscutting and weed spraying.

In this financial year the PC was able to draw upon S106 funding held by CDC and this money is strictly allocated to various projects to benefit the village's community buildings, indoor sports provisions, outdoor sports provision and childrens' play areas. Some projects are already underway and the next financial year will see improvements to the playground commence.

The parish council was pleased to be able to support local organisations, and in 2024/25 provided grants to The Baby & Toddler Group, SAVA, the PCC, SART, SAL, the Preschool, Friends of Heyford Station and The PC also provided funding to assist with the setting up of the Community Land Trust.

If there are any questions, I will be happy to answer

Reports from village organisations

Website Committee Annual Report 2025 (presented by Jenny Bell)

Believe it or not, the village website is 19 years old this year. I'm pleased to report that it is still going strong. This is thanks to all those who have contributed over the years. I would particularly like to say thank you to Jenny Taylor and Julia Whybrew who have been members of the committee since the beginning.

It has changed quite a lot in this time but the original design by Francis Coleman of Paines Hill has stayed much the same. We moved to the current WordPress platform in 2015 thanks to a lot of hard work by Bridget Lewis. That design has worked well but is becoming increasingly outdated, so we are looking at another update.

Fortunately, since Bridget retired and subsequently left the village, we are very pleased that James Lewin has stepped forward to provide us with technical expertise. He is looking into alternative designs still within the WordPress platform, with a particular emphasis on making the site easier to navigate on a mobile phone.

While he's doing that, we suggest that people who want to explore the site on their mobiles turn their phones horizontally!

We have also been lucky that the site has been hosted since the beginning by Granary Publications in Deddington. We paid a small annual fee for this to start with but now that has been waived, so we have a free and very efficient service from Martin Reed. James reports that the service and performance we get matches any of the leading vendors,

We continue to post village news stories and publicise future events. There is an archive of news stories on the site going back to 2007. We welcome contributions from villagers and indeed wish there were more!

News can also be found in the digitised edition of Steeple Aston Life which is put on the website once the paper copies have been delivered. People say they like to see the front cover and photos in colour. We also know people with an interest in the village, for example former residents, like to read the magazine online.

We post lots more photos of local events on the website, most recently the VE Day celebrations in the village. We have photo archives on the site going back to 2019. Our photo archive from before that - 2006 to 2018 - was held on a separate platform. We've taken it off the site and are hoping to give it to SAVA. Maybe they should have the news archive too.

There is also much more on the website in sections such as Leisure and Local Directory. Members of the Committee regularly check these sections to ensure they're up to date. We're currently checking the Our Village, Clubs and Societies and Useful Information sections.

In addition to the website, the committee is responsible for our social media presence. We have a Facebook page which consists of public information, often linked stories on the website and village events. This is a good way of letting people know about new content on the website.

But by far the busiest platform is the Steeple Aston Village Facebook group, which continues to grow and currently has more than 1,300 members. Obviously, these aren't all residents of Steeple and Middle Aston. But we do try to ensure that members have some connection to the village – often they live nearby or have children at the school or pre-school.

The group is pretty active – often when I check in the morning there are two or three posts waiting to be approved. There is a real mixture of posts – lost dogs, parcels, requests for recommendations, advertising local events.

All posts are moderated, and I'm very grateful to the other administrators who help with this. They are Abigail Boisot, Charlotte Powell and James Lewin. If there's a post we're not sure should be approved, it is very useful to be able to consult them as to what to do. This doesn't happen often, but we have had to tweak our rules recently to state explicitly that political posts aren't allowed. Most of our local district and county councillors belong to the group and they can often provide useful information for villagers. But we do refuse their posts if they become overtly political.

And finally, we now have an Instagram account which is gaining more viewers. I post some photos up there with a link to more on the website but mostly it's posters for village events. We see this as a way of reaching more people, as we are only too aware that there are quite a few people in the village who don't use Facebook.

Steeple Aston Community Orchard Group (presented by Annie Bayley)
Summary of activities and unaudited accounts for the year to 31st March 2025

The SACOG is an unincorporated association and its aims are to:-

1. Care for the Steeple Aston Community Orchard ('the Orchard') to make it an inclusive, contemplative space accessible to all in the village community
2. Manage the Orchard as necessary in order to maintain it as a wildlife habitat and community space.

The Orchard is situated in Water Lane, Steeple Aston, and was gifted to the Parish Council in 2022 by Sarah Lucas.

During the year ended 31st March 2025 the SACOG received a generous grant of £400 from CAG Oxfordshire and undertook various fund-raising activities. It sold bottled apple juice made from apples donated by members of the local village community, and organised tea and cake sales at a Family Fun Day in the summer and an Apple Day in the early autumn. At the Apple Day SACOG became the custodian of the Community Apple Press and the Apple Press Kitty amounting to £278.55.

SACOG organised significant voluntary work to maintain and enhance the Orchard during the year, planting and tending a new hedge at the boundary and installing a dead hedge. It also arranged scything of the grass.

An estimated 100 or so people attended SACOG events and volunteering sessions during the year and the Friends of SACOG group grew to 35 members. The Orchard is used frequently as a valued amenity by local people and the Brownies sometimes meet there too.

The accounts for the year, which are not audited, are as follows:-

Receipts	£	£
CAG Oxfordshire Grant	400.00	
Family Fun Day tea, cakes and donations	78.60	
Apple Day tea, cakes and donations	102.70	
Tiddly Pommès apple juice sales	991.10	
Total receipts		<u>1,572.40</u>
Payments		
Marquee and accessories	337.68	
Orchard maintenance	125.55	
Apple Day costs	50.00	
Tiddly Pommès costs	752.99	

Scything	125.00	
		<u>(1,391.22)</u>
Surplus		<u>181.18</u>
Apple press kitty		278.55
Cash		
Bank balance brought forward	£513.37	
Total receipts less total payments	£459.73	
Bank balance carried forward	£973.10	
of which Apple Press Kitty	£278.55	

As at 31st March 2025 SACOG held stock of 103 bottles of Tiddly Pommes apple juice. The cost of making this stock is included above in Tiddly Pommes costs and its expected sale value is approximately £400.

SACOG's current account cash balance with Metro Bank is £973.10, which includes the Apple Press Kitty of £278.55.

Steeple Aston Community Allotments Association (sent by email)

SACAA had a successful year. Key points being:

- Full or nearly full allocation throughout the year with regular expressions of interest.
- Allotment finances, once exceptional items removed, balanced income against expenditure. Overall finances remain healthy and are more than the minimum levels agreed by the committee. Plot holder's deposits remain secured.
- We finally saw the completion of the "Wincote" works and the return of the "borrow" strip that had been required for scaffold and building works.
- Very good attendance during the National Gardens Scheme open day in May and many positive comments received. The SACAA stall was also successful.
- The rent charged to allotmenters (which covers rent to PC and water charges) remained unchanged during 2024/25.
- SACAA AGM held in April 2025. No changes to committee or officers.
- Working parties throughout the year enabled larger projects within the communal areas to be addressed. This included construction of two "dead hedges" to encourage wildlife. Working parties also assist in keeping the pathways and verges adjacent to the allotments clear of overgrown vegetation.
- Greatly enhanced composting facilities constructed for communal use.
- A new inspection regime was proposed and voted for unanimously at AGM. This is to remove the difficult and time consuming process used historically. A photographic record of use over the previous season will be used to determine compliance with T&C's

instead. If this shows that T&C's have not been met, then the "automatic" invitation to reapply for the next year will not be used and the plot will be offered instead to those on the waiting list.

- The SACAA run cut flower bed provided several people with bouquets throughout the year. This is run on an entirely voluntary and no cost basis by several of the SACAA committee. (Beneficiaries through illness or bereavement for example).

Village Hall

A report on the activities of the village hall had been submitted by Barbara Brewer.

Public Participation

One member of the public announced that the VHMC now has a new Chair in Vicky Clifton. Thanks were passed to Barbara Brewer who has been chair for over 20 years.