



Stanford in the Vale Annual Parish Meeting

Wednesday 17 May 2023

This has been another busy year for the parish council. We have three main responsibilities to our community – representing the whole electorate within the parish, delivering services to meet local needs and striving to improve quality of life in the parish – and I've structured my report to reflect our work in each of these areas in turn.

Representing the whole electorate within the parish

One of our main activities this year, as ever, was responding to planning applications. In the last year we scrutinised over 30 applications. This included responses to major applications such as the River Meadow site, where we made representations to the district council about our concerns over the housing mix. We were unsuccessful on that occasion but we did successfully challenge some instances of speculative development outside the current built area of the village. However, we have been supportive of appropriate development, such as the redevelopment of the Cottage Farm site, along with many other smaller applications, where we have offered constructive comments with the aim of obtaining the best result for the whole community.

We have continued to raise local concerns with our district and county councillors. Examples include the removal of the disused oil tank on Glebe Road, facilitated by our district councillor, the road works on the A417/Ware Rd junction, where we were obtained improvements to the traffic management scheme, and Thames Water's multiple attempts to fix drainage problems in Bow Road.

We have been actively engaging with schemes in the village for fibre broadband, bringing our local knowledge to bear on the proposals and suggesting changes that respond to local needs and sensitivities.

Delivering services to meet local needs

We've continued to manage and maintain the village greens and other spaces in the village and have reacted promptly to deal with potential health and safety issues, such as fallen trees on footpaths and roads. My thanks go to Darren Rolls for much of this, particularly for responding quickly when needed.

We adopted new standing orders, a much needed update to our working procedures that helps fulfil our responsibilities to parishioners and ensures that our work is transparent and accountable.

We have responded to a multitude of concerns and queries from residents throughout the year on issues that affect their day-to-day lives, signposting them to the appropriate parts of local government or advocating for local needs ourselves with the district and county councils. Most of this has been through our clerk, who has been an extremely professional, efficient and approachable public face of the council.

In addition, we have supported the provision of defibrillator pads and are in the process of procuring new signs for the Speedwatch team.

We did all this while running the council on a sound financial footing and my thanks to Cllr Lewis for again acting as RFO this year.

Striving to improve quality of life in the parish

We have been progressing many projects, both large and small, to improve quality of life. At the smaller end, after a lot of delays and perseverance, we managed to get 'keep clear' lines marked outside the school to go some way towards alleviating parking problems there.

On larger projects, we were successful in getting a grant from the VWHDC Climate Action fund to regenerate the area of garden in the play area – a project now in progress in collaboration with the school gardening club and assisted by Cllr Dabek.

We've continued to collect data from the speed indicator devices, which we can feed into our potential application for a 20mph zone, and my thanks go to Cllr Dixon for overseeing operations. On that subject, we are currently rolling out a questionnaire to parishioners to gauge local opinion on 20mph, which Cllr Brooks is taking on.

We also organised a number of repair activities on countryside access and footpaths. There are some considerable frustrations here around county council enforcement for persistent problems, but we have made some progress, including repairing the footbridge on the Hatford footpath, and we also now have a team of footpath wardens installed to monitor and report on the state of our paths.

Through an application to S106 funding we have replaced the fencing at the edge of the football field. This has enhanced the visual appearance of the area as well as improving safety and the environment for users of the field and neighbours, and thanks are due to Cllr Isaacs for organising the project and overseeing its installation. As a further investment in the football club site, we replaced several floodlight bulbs.

We also installed new noticeboards in the village hall and Hunter's Field, again funded by S106.

The most significant ongoing project has been the QEII recreation field. This has been a frustrating year as, despite arranging an extensive archaeological review and making an emphatic case for the need and viability of the project, we are still awaiting the planning permission needed to unlock the S106 funding we have earmarked for the project. I very much hope that we will see active support from the new administration at the district council for this vital local facility, for which there is a demonstrable need and which the parish council has been championing as a strategic long-term project. We are acutely aware of the lack of community and recreation space in the village to support its increased size, and are looking to both district and county council to support us in overcoming the many challenges a parish council faces in a planning system set up for commercial developers.

The parish council supported the celebrations for the Queen's Platinum Jubilee, funded by a generous grant from the Public Purposes Charity and organised primarily by Cllr Warren. We also played our part in marking the Queen's passing and supported local celebrations for the coronation, which Cllr Boyle helped to coordinate alongside Cllr Warren. Any occasion that enables friends and neighbours to come together is to be seized as an opportunity to build stronger, more cohesive communities.

As well as carrying out essential maintenance on the equipment in the play area, we also installed a new basket swing. I'm hoping that, in the coming year, we can prioritise further improvements and upgrades to the play area via our recreation and leisure committee. Additionally, we're aware that there is a need to get the skate park operational again. This has not been a simple task and locating a suitable supplier has been challenging, but it's a priority that the committee will be looking to progress.

The environment committee has also been active this year, and it was pleasing to see a new batch of fruit trees planted in the community orchard. My thanks to Cllr Dabek for chairing this committee.

There have recently been some significant improvements to the Millennium Green (for which the council is the corporate trustee) including new picnic benches, funded by a grant from the Public Purposes Charity. Again, thanks go to Cllr Isaacs for taking this on and making it happen.

Nicky Middleton has continued to carry out weekly litter picking on behalf of the parish council – a job that is easily overlooked but which makes a material difference to the quality of our local environment.

We are also looking at an application for the local pub as an asset of community value, which Cllr Howes is undertaking.

This year has also seen the departure of Cllrs Jenkins and Bailey and their replacement by co-option with Cllrs Boyle and Brooks. My thanks to Tina Jenkins and Amanda Bailey for their contributions to many areas of our work.

I would also like to thank Cllrs Williams-Cuss and Warren, who chose not to stand for re-election. I'd particularly like to acknowledge Cllr Warren's longstanding contribution to all aspects of village life, not limited to the parish council.

Finally, I'd like to thank Claire Lewis, our clerk, without whose organisational skills, advice and support to councillors none of this would have been possible.