

Stoke St Michael Parish Council

Chairs Report to the Annual Parish Meeting – 21st April 2022

Introduction

It is with sadness that I present this year's report following the passing of our former chair Keith Holder. Keith relinquished the role of chair last year due to his health issues but continued to work tirelessly on behalf of the Parish Council right up to his death in January. I remain thankful to Keith for his tremendous support while I settled in to my new role. He is much missed.

This report provides an overview of the work and activities of the Parish Council since the Annual Meeting held in May 2021. At the time meetings were still being held virtually via Zoom but, with no extension to the legislation that permitted this, face to face meetings subsequently resumed in the War Memorial Hall.

On behalf of the Parish Council I would like to thank all those residents who attended the Parish council meetings and engaged in the various debates which have helped form and inform the policies subsequently adopted by the Parish Council.

In total, 12 meetings will have been held during the year; 9 regular meetings at broadly 6-weekly intervals with an additional 3 meetings held to consider specific planning applications where the response deadlines set by the planning authority were inconsistent with the timing of the regular meetings.

Principal Matters the Parish Council dealt with during the year

Planning Applications

The Parish Council were asked to comment on 18 planning applications by the planning authority. We continue to pursue our objection to the proposed development of up to 47 dwellings at Yellow Gate Field. Although refused by Mendip District Council in May, the developers have appealed against this decision and we now await details from the Planning Inspectorate as to the format and dates for the appeal. The Parish Council have engaged the services of a professional planning consultant to assist with the preparation of our case.

Local Plan Part II

December saw Mendip District Council adopt the Local Plan Part II despite it not being able to demonstrate a 5-year housing supply to meet the Government's latest targets. The Parish Council was pleased that previous comments on location for housing development formed the basis of the recommendations for the village, with land to the east of Frog Lane being identified for a minimum of 30 dwellings

Village Design Code

Building on the work of the Village Design Statement that was completed in 2016, Mendip District Council Planning team approached the Parish Council asking Stoke St Michael to participate as a pilot for the preparation of a Village Design Code. This is a requirement of National Planning Policy and as such will eventually need to be in place for all towns and parishes. A small working group has been formed to take this forward, preparing for a launch event to the wider community at the end of May.

Traffic and Highways

After almost four years of discussions over how to best address the issues with vehicles getting stuck and damaging properties in Mill Lane, the order to prohibit motor vehicles has now been made permanent by Somerset County Council and we expect to see bollards installed at either end of the lane in the next few weeks.

It's pleasing to see that drainage repairs and resurfacing work has been completed on Mendip Road. Following concerns raised by some residents, SCC Highways have agreed to some further minor remedial work at the lower end of Mendip Road. Improvements are also anticipated to the drainage on Stoke Hill later in the summer.

We welcome the return of a Community Speed Watch initiative in the village.

Millennium Wood

Following the creation of the Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) to take on the management of Millennium Wood, work is now complete on developing the leasing arrangements for the Wood. We expect the lease to be signed within the next few weeks allowing the CIO to take over full management responsibility. In the meantime the Parish Council has continued to invest in the development of the woodland, providing funding for hedging and wild flower seeds and plug-plants.

Support for local organisations

The Parish Council remains Custodian Trustee for both Stoke St Michael Community Field and Stoke St Michael War Memorial Hall, where our responsibilities are strictly limited to holding the deeds for their respective assets. We continue to support their facilities with appropriate levels of grant aid.

In addition, successful applications to the Opening Up Safely and Reconnecting Communities Fund secured further awards of £1800 to the War Memorial Hall, £500 to the Community Field towards hosting a dog show and £500 to the Stoke St Michael Community Events Group to organise a Christmas concert.

Village Maintenance Activities

The on-going impact of Covid and the storms in February combined to delay much needed maintenance around the village. Tree work in Moonshill Road is now complete but the planned work at the Lychgate has been held up awaiting the branches around the power cables to be cleared by Western Power. This work will commence shortly.

In the meantime, our Parish Footpath Liaison Officer Alun Stewart has been hard at work. The Parish Council have been able to support his valuable efforts with a successful application to the Climate and Ecological Emergency Fund to allow the purchase electrically powered brush-cutting equipment.

Single Unitary Council for Somerset

The position of the Parish Council has been to take a watching brief on the developing model for the Unitary Council. We can expect more activity over the coming year as the impact becomes clearer

Web Site

The web site www.stokestmichael.org.uk has been further developed during the year and is now the main source of information about the council, its meetings and formal minutes.

The Parish Council is keen to improve its communications with the electorate and suggestions on how this can be achieved would be welcomed.

Annual Governance and Accountability Review (AGAR) – 2021/22

The AGAR is the audit regime which was introduced for small authorities and to which the Parish Council is subject. Work to comply with the regulatory regime has been completed and we await confirmation from the internal auditor that all the legislative requirements have been met. We would expect the completed documents to be signed at the Annual Meeting of the Parish Council in May before being passed to the external auditors for validation. A public notice will be posted giving residents the opportunity to raise questions in relation to the accounts.

Finances

Income for the Parish Council comes almost entirely from the Council Tax precept levy, with burial fees from the cemetery providing a small additional income. The precept for 2022/23 increased by slightly less than the rate of inflation at the time it was set.

The Parish Council continues to examine each item of expenditure for necessity and value for money. Operating costs remained relatively stable but delays in a number of items of anticipated expenditure mean these items will carry forward into 2022/23. Together with rapidly rising inflation this puts considerable strain on the budget for the coming year.

Local Elections – 5 May 2022

The local elections to Somerset CC and Town and Parish Councils will take place on 5th May 2022. In Stoke St Michael, 5 of the previous councillors submitted nomination papers before the closing date. Those councillors are deemed to be elected and continue to serve the electorate. There remains a shortfall of 4 members and we will seek to fill those seats by co-option.

And Finally

In conclusion I would like to thank all those who have contributed to the achievements of the Parish Council in the last year and in particular to Simon Farnsworth who for personal reasons has decided not to stand for re-election.