

## **Stoke St Michael Parish Council**

### **Chairs Report to the Annual Parish Meeting – 25th May 2023**

#### **Introduction**

This report provides an overview of the work and activities of the Parish Council since the Annual Meeting held in May 2022.

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

Following the local elections last May, Stoke St Michael had only 5 elected councillors. During the year we have welcomed 3 new councillors by cooption. 1 vacancy remains.

In total, 10 meetings have been held during the year; 9 regular meetings at broadly 6-weekly intervals with 1 additional meeting 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 22 planning applications by the planning authority. With the assistance of a professional planning consultant, we vigorously fought the defence of the decision to refuse the development of up to 47 dwellings at Yellow Gate Field which was taken to appeal. Despite our best efforts and continued opposition from the village, the appeal was upheld by the Planning Inspectorate. We now await detailed plans from the developers for the site which will be closely scrutinised.

##### Local Plan and the housing supply

A major factor in the Yellow Gate appeal was the failure of the adopted Local Plan to demonstrate a 5-year housing supply in the district to meet the Government's latest targets. When questioned, Mendip District Council were unable to provide any reassurance that this issue would be addressed quickly leaving us open to further speculative development applications. We continue to press the new Somerset Council for detail on how and when the position will be rectified.

##### Village Design Code

Good progress was made on an initial draft of the Village Design Code last summer but, with the resignation of a key member of the project team and the focus on transition to the unitary structure, Mendip District Council took the decision to suspend all work on design codes. There has been no indication as to when this may restart.

##### Traffic and Highways

Feedback following the installation of the bollards in Mill Lane has generally been favourable, but complaints were received about parking at the Church St end. A number of options for additional road markings were discussed with the Somerset Traffic Management team but none were ideal. We continue to monitor the situation.

More drainage repairs and improvements have been completed on Stoke Hill and Mendip Road to address issues with flooding to various properties.

The long-awaited repairs to the weak bridge in the centre of the village are now expected to be completed over the summer.

Traffic speeds through the village are a frequent cause of concern. A working group is now looking at the issues and possible solutions including the potential installation of Speed Indicator Devices.

### Millennium Wood

The leasing agreement for the Millennium Wood to the Stoke St Michael Woodland Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) has now been signed. Management responsibility is expected to pass over to the CIO once suitable public liability insurance is in place. In the meantime the Parish Council has continued to support the development of the woodland, including the purchase of a bench to commemorate the late Queen's Jubilee.

### 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 continued to support their facilities with appropriate levels of grant aid.

### Village Maintenance Activities

Various work has taken place around the village including the engagement of tree surgeons to reduce the size of the trees at the Lychgate. Some remedial work is still required to the roof of the Lychgate structure itself. Work to lay the hedge alongside the cemetery in Mill Lane has been delayed to the autumn to avoid the bird nesting season.

Our thanks once again go to our Parish Footpath Liaison Officer Alun Stewart who continues to keep our footpaths clear and deal with minor issues.

### Web Site

The web site [www.stokestmichael.org.uk](http://www.stokestmichael.org.uk) continues to be the main source of information about the council, its meetings and formal minutes. In addition, Facebook page is being used to publicise meetings and important notices.

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

## **Annual Governance and Accountability Review (AGAR) – 2022/23**

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 would expect the documents to be signed at the Annual Meeting of the Parish Council 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 2023/24 increased by 5%, significantly below 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. While some anticipated expenditure from 2022/23 will carry over to the forthcoming year putting additional strain on the budget, our reserves remain in a healthy position and can be expected to cover any shortfall.

### **And Finally**

1st April saw the transition to the new unitary Somerset Council. We have yet to understand the full implications of this for the village and the Parish Council but for now it's business as usual.

I would like to thank all those who have contributed to the achievements of the Parish Council in the last year. In particular I would like to reiterate my personal thanks to Alan Townsend who provided invaluable support to us for several years as District Councillor.