

PARISH REPORT FOR THE YEAR 2022/23

The Watton-at-Stone Parish Council comprised of 9 members at its year end on 31st March 2023, namely:

Cllr. Emma Waltham	Cllr. John Meischke (Vice-
Cllr. Stephen Block	Cllr. Christine Dinnin
Cllr. Catherine Hammon	Cllr. Ian Knight
Cllr. Annabel Kirk	Cllr. Helen McCash
Cllr. Nicola White	

Another civic year comes to an end, and in reviewing the minutes from the Watton-at-Stone Parish Council meetings to prepare this report, I am reminded just how much the Parish Council achieves in 12 months. Much of this work we carry on as volunteers goes on in the background, a quiet ticking along. We know we are working well when what we do is not noticed and is taken for granted.

This has all happened in spite of unprecedented changes to our normally steady-as-she-goes Parish Council. We are going into a new era where long-standing councillors have understandably decided it is time to retire and pass the baton on. Cllr. Michael Smith resigned from the Parish Council in September, after over 19 years as a WAS parish councillor and serving as Chairman since May 2011. His competence and constant dedication meant that he passed on stewardship of a Council that was very well run and in excellent financial shape, and I thank him for that, as well as his long years of service in our community.

Other councillors to step down were Kay Jancey, Stephen Block and David Stock. The latter was a councillor for over 30 years and his many contributions included Vice-Chairman and Chairman of the Environment Sub-Committee. I wish them all well and I thank them for all their hard work and commitment. Their contributions are too long to mention in this report but they are very much appreciated and missed.

Saying goodbye also means saying hello, and the Council has enjoyed welcoming new Councillors, Nicola White and Annabel Kirk, who have already got to work helping us gain a new bus service and reviewing how we can improve the traffic issues we have along the High Street.

Our council continues to slowly progress the Neighbourhood Plan, in spite of many challenges, the most recent arising from the Environment Agency expressing concerns over the aspiration of the Plan to create a footbridge over the River Beane at the Stevenage Road end of the village. Councillors and the Steering Group have invested many hours on the Plan and, while the rate of progress will be frustrating to all residents, our efforts should soon result in a positive and worthwhile outcome, hopefully later this year, when we hope to see the Plan finally adopted. I thank all the volunteers who are helping us in many ongoing ways: Charles Clark, David Humby and Mehron Kirk, as well as our Planning Consultant Jacqueline Veater.

This year we have faced another challenge when setting our budget. While Watton-at-Stone Parish Council has always been able to manage day-to-day costs, it is becoming increasingly difficult due to the rise in inflation which has seen our bills rise and there is ongoing uncertainty regarding the energy bills for the Nigel Poulton Hall, as facilities like ours do not benefit from energy price-capping. We have also lost a litter-picking grant. When we set our budget for this coming financial year we decided to keep our contingency very low, in order to keep the precept increase to 10%. However, this means that we may have to use our limited reserves if there are

unexpected expenditures and that we will not be able to do any maintenance projects on the Nigel Poulton Community Hall and the Meadow.

I want to thank all the Trustees of the Nigel Poulton Community Hall who continue to ensure this is a well-used facility in our community. Three Trustees have stepped down as we go into the new Civic Year, Stephen Block, Christine Dinnin and David Stock. Michael Smith was appointed a Trustee in spite of leaving the Council. Cllr. Meischke continues to be the first port of call when there is a breakage, breakdown, or sadly vandalism, which has been an ongoing and severe problem this year, so much to that we are now struggling to keep the toilets open.

Cllr. Meischke also led the way in organizing the Jubilee event in June on Meadow, thank you to him for organizing a fantastic community event which commemorated 70 years of Queen Elizabeth II's reign, which poignantly would prove to be her last Jubilee.

Challenges when we have tried to leave the village have eased, thankfully, though ongoing roadworks along the A602 continue and we hope they will finally be completed this coming summer. On a more positive transportation note, the new school bus service to Ware, the 907, has been very positively received by residents. This service came about after the Council complained about the provision in place for children travelling to Presdales and Chauncy Schools and Hertfordshire County Council agreed to add in another service to address the need and shorten the long journey time for our young people.

Last but not least, thank you to Jane Allsop, our steadfast and dedicated Parish Clerk who powers and oils all our many cogs, while ensuring that we meet our obligations to the village in a timely and legally compliant manner. Her constancy and expertise continues to be an invaluable resource for the Council.

Emma Waltham, Chair