

PARISH REPORT FOR THE YEAR 2018/19

The Watton-at-Stone Parish Council comprised of 10 members in the year 2018/19, namely:

Mr. Mike Smith (Chairman)	Mr. John Meischke (Vice-Chairman)
Dr. Emma Waltham	Mrs. Christine Dinnin
Mr. Denis Filer	Mrs. Catherine Hammon
Mr. Ian Knight	Mrs. Helen McCash
Mrs. Margaret Stanley	Mr. David Stock

On the 1st of July last year Michael Freeman, both District and Parish Councillor, sadly died after an intense and debilitating illness. Rarely has a loss meant so much to me as it will do to the community. His ability to reconcile disparate opinion has seen the Village through some challenging times. A plaque to acknowledge both his and Nigel Poulton's contribution to the village has been sited at the Community Hall.

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So many of our years deliberations revolve around issues that have been ongoing often for years and usually involve our District and County Councils. The upshot is that this report becomes a series of updates. The Gatekeeper development, completed in 2014 left us with a disastrous road layout to which 'wait and see' seemed to be the preferred tactic of HCC Highways. Eventually and against the odds, the scheme we have now evolved and the official HCC report concluded overall, and for the most part the Parish Council agrees, that "the changes improved traffic flow and pedestrian safety". Speed checks by the police also confirm that 'traffic speed has reduced overall' We will now remove this from our agenda! Changes to the High Street are still very much on our agenda.

As with holidays, choosing a destination is far more exciting than arranging the journey and so it is with the Neighbourhood Plan. Its longevity, although frustrating, has allowed opinion to accept that housing, affordable or otherwise, is in short supply and that we do have to accept that some green belt will need to be sacrificed. How to do this with minimal impact on the village has been the centre of focus for the Neighbourhood Plan steering group. They have seen members fall by the wayside but those left are committed to the cause. As this report is about the Parish Council, I sincerely thank Catherine Hammon and Emma Waltham for their commitment and professionalism without which it would surely have foundered. I am not proposing to quantify progress here except to say that a consultation is proposed for the 20th. May. More detail can be found at <http://www.was-np.org>

Similarly, much of the Parish Council's efforts are centred around the Nigel Poulton Community Hall and 'The Meadow'. On a rainy day in January we worry about its use but as soon as the sun comes out such as on Monday evening, the 29th of April, there was junior football practice taking place, the tennis courts were all in use, the cricketers were in the nets and all was well. This facility is run on behalf of the Parish Council by the Hall Trustees who have bent their minds in recent years to improving the uptake of the facilities available. Whilst thanking them all I must thank John Meischke, its Chairman and Parish Council Vice-Chairman. His commitment and dedication to the smooth running of the hall is above and beyond the call of duty. Long may it last, and hopefully it will not be me who has to find a replacement. In an depth report on the Hall will be available soon on at <https://watton-pc.org.uk/trustees-and-records/>

Now would be a good time to introduce you to Mr. Steve Block. He was co-opted onto the Parish Council last June following the retirement of Mr. Dennis Filer. You will have noticed that many of the litter bins in the village have been changed for lidded bins and new larger bins have been installed by the Hall and School. This is down to Steve! He intends furthermore to replace the remaining litter bins. We hope very much that he will accept the position of Chairman of Budget and Finance before this reckless expenditure gets out of hand.

I would at this point like very much to thank Margaret Stanley for her much-appreciated time with the Parish Council. I know that she wished to continue with us, but circumstances have conspired against her. Our thoughts are with Margaret and her family at these difficult times.

You will also have noticed that many of our lamp posts have been upgraded to LED. This was at a cost to the Parish Council of some £7500. Part of that deal is that their ownership should be transferred to HCC (Herts County Council) thus saving us upkeep, insurance and electricity costs. We should see a saving over five years.

We continue to look at planning applications but can only offer an opinion, the decision being that of the District Council. One thing we have agreed is that inappropriate development is to be resisted where it unduly affects neighbouring properties. We have dropped our policy of resisting the development of garages, which we saw as increasing street parking, because the District Council rarely concurs. We encourage all those concerned about planning issues to contact us and more importantly East Herts Planning Portal below. <https://publicaccess.eastherts.gov.uk/online-applications/>

This would be a good time to welcome Councillor Sophie Bell as our district Councillor. She gained huge popular support when she was elected to the District Council following the sad loss of Michael Freeman. Sophie has now been elected in the recent Local Government elections to represent us at East Herts council. She attends our meetings and has agreed to take on board Michael's particular interest in the state of play concerning the Railway and the Station. She will also be your first point of contact if you have housing issues.

We have just had our sixth consecutive Parish Council election that has been uncontested. As a result we will be looking to Co-opt interested parties. That vacancy will soon be advertised and interested parties should contact our faithful servant, Jane Alsop, Clerk to the Parish Council.

We are now fully compliant with privacy requirements so please contact us in confidence on any issue and if we can't help we'll direct you to someone can.

Mike Smith (Chairman)