

Chairperson's Annual report 2023

Presented by Cllr Brentor to the 17th April 2023 Annual meeting

I am pleased to present the annual report for Downton Parish Council. As Chair of the Council, I would like to thank Cllr Dave Mace, who is vice Chair of the Council for the support he has provided throughout the year and all the councillors for the work that they have taken on during a difficult year.

Changes during the year.

This year has been very much influenced by changes to the Parish Council's staff. At the end of June 2022, we sadly received the resignations of both our long-standing Clerk Mrs Bev Cornish and our Administrative Officer Mrs Alison McGowan. Bev had worked with the Council since 2005 and her experience and commitment has been very much missed. Of course, this meant changes and periods without permanent staff. However, we were delighted to have Ms Mel Camilleri join us, initially as a locum and then, from December 2022 as our permanent Clerk. Following Alison's resignation, we have had three different Admin Officers, with two having to leave after short periods for personal reasons but we are now pleased to welcome Naomi Defriend as our Admin Officer.

Councillors Stuart Carter and Andy North joined us at the beginning of the year but sadly Cllr Jones was unable to continue as a councillor, again for personal reasons. Otherwise, our councillor contingent has been stable although the Council is still operating with six vacancies.

In September 2022 we were all affected by the death of our late Queen. The Parish Council performed the required civic duties to both recognise the loss and to greet the new King. A recent planting of a tree in memory of the late Queen will hopefully be a lasting commemoration of the Queen's reign.

Achievements during the Year

Throughout these changes, the Council has continued to maintain a good working relationship with Wiltshire Council and has also continued to benefit from the regular attendance of Cllr Richard Clewer, Leader of Wiltshire Council, to all our meetings and events. The Parish Steward has undertaken work around the Parish to attend to issues raised by the Council. In March this year, an open meeting was attended by members of

Wiltshire Council, Wessex Water and the Environment Agency which helped residents to understand the complex causes of flooding in the area. We have worked closely with The Downton Memorial Centre trust to manage the responsibilities of maintaining the fabric of the building for the benefit of the community. The use of the room we are now in has been a regular and pleasant environment for Council meetings.

The Council recognises and values the benefits of working with members of the community.

- A group of residents, ably chaired by Mr Lawrence Burr, has reviewed and re-written parts of the Downton Neighbourhood Plan. This was agreed as ready for submission by the Parish Council and we are now awaiting comments from the Wiltshire Council Neighbourhood Plan team. The work to achieve this required significant time commitment, research and consultation by the review team for which I am very grateful. Part of the research included a traffic survey funded by the Parish Council.
- The Council has also worked with the Downton Society to install 'heritage signs' to maintain the memories of some of the old names for local footpaths which will be in place shortly. We also benefit from Downton Society information when considering planning applications. A member of the Society maintains the planters on The Borough greens while the planters in Moot Lane have gained from the maintenance provided by residents of Moot Lane and Avon Dyke. This involved a lot of watering during the drought of 2022!
- We also continue to work with the primary school to understand the impacts of parking and an increased number of pupils.

It is recognised that residents have experienced some effects of crime and antisocial behaviour. The Council has maintained good working relationships with the police who now regularly use the Memorial Centre as a local contact point and have bimonthly community policing meetings. PC Jung has regularly attended council meetings and we are sad to see him go but look forward to working with PC Murphy in the future. During this year a public space protection order has come into force in this area to give police greater powers over the misuse of catapults.

I can also report progress on the Playground refurbishment project with a reviewed application for a public works loan having been submitted and the project plan and outline specification now ready for a process of advertising for playground equipment providers to submit tenders to undertake the project. I recognise that this has been a long process with the initial consultation having taken place over a year ago but I am confident that the results will make a huge difference to our playgrounds.

We are also pleased to be part of the Wiltshire Towns Programme, an initiative led by Wiltshire Council to help promote the retail environment of local large villages and towns. An action plan was created and agreed by the Council and submitted with an application for a grant of £5,000 approved. Particular thanks to Cllr North for his work on this.

Some practical achievements include work to the cemetery with more planned; progress on the installation of a picnic bench in the Charlton-All-Saints play area; a new gate to the Moot Lane recreation ground and the imminent installation of the long awaited Speed Indicator Device in The Borough.

Work is continuing on improvements to the Council's IT provision with a new contract now implemented and a new website in development. Thanks for the work on this to Cllr Mace.

Recent poor performance on bin collection and grass cutting has been a challenge. This work is now being closely managed. In this area, thanks to Cllr Hall for his work on establishing clarity on the issues with our contractor.

Working with Wiltshire Council's Housing officer, a weekly coffee morning is held with residents of Castle Meadow. This has been set up by Cllr Jalland and provides a welcome social point for people who have difficulty travelling far – thanks go to Cllr Jalland for her commitment to this provision.

Grants have been made by the Council for the following:

£300 to the Moot Preservation Trust for platinum jubilee event

£250 to fund a pop up café in Moot recreation ground last summer held for young people

£6,000 to Brian Whitehead Sports Centre Association

£400 to tennis courts

£150 to celebrate international day of older people

Ongoing and routine achievements

The Council continues to undertake its duty to comment on planning applications and to challenge where conditions do not appear to be implemented.

Maintenance and handyperson work has been provided by Mr Leigh Bush. Safe maintenance of the play equipment has been managed with fortnightly visual inspections by Cllrs Jalland, Mace and Hall.

Cllr Carter provides timely information on matters relating to Charlton-All-Saints.

Representations by Councillors are also maintained with twelve local trusts or groups – these can be seen on the Council's website.

The Council continues to monitor the defibrillators in the village and input into the Wessex Heartbeat website.

Progress is being made on updating the Council's flood plan for which thanks to Cllrs Roberts, Randall and Watts.

Budget setting

The Council understands the impact of the current cost of living problems and worked hard to limit the increase in the Parish element of the precept for the current year to just below inflation levels. Due to increases in contract prices, utility costs and other responsibilities, and even with councillors closely scrutinising several possible options, it was felt that an increase was, unfortunately, unavoidable.

Thanks

I would like to thank the following people in addition to the thanks I have already made in this report:

My thanks go to Mel Camilleri for her willingness to take on a heavy workload and her dedication to Downton Parish Council.

Thanks also to our litter pickers, Max Bush and Ellie Philps, who together maintain our village as litter free as possible and to Cllr Watts as Chair of the Amenities Committee and Cllr North as Chair of the Staffing Committee.

Thanks also to Mr Rick Ladds who has continued to monitor the defibrillator attached to the Memorial Hall entrance.

Lastly, I would like to encourage residents to consider the role of a Parish Councillor and would be happy to discuss this with anyone who would like to consider taking on this fulfilling role.