

# ALVINGTON PARISH COUNCIL

**Minutes of the Annual Parish Meeting held at 7pm on Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> April 2024 at Alvington Memorial Hall, Knapp Lane, Alvington, Glos GL15 6BJ.**

**Present:** Parish Councillors: Richards Heys – Chairman, Nathan Burlton, Rachel Macharg, Nick Powell and Gail Thompson.

Also Present: Mrs Carol Hinton – Parish Clerk, Chris McFarling – District and County Councillor.

Alec Davies, Ali Collins, Chris Shill.

**1. Apologies** - had been received from Keith Haylock.

**2. Welcome**

The Chairman welcomed all present.

**3. Minutes of Annual Parish Meeting held on 6th April 2023:**

The minutes were approved as presented and signed by the Chairman.

**4. Matters arising from those minutes:**

There were none.

**5. Parish Council Chairman's Annual Report:**

The year ending in March 2024 was one of change balanced with stability in Alvington's Parish Council. I want to start with re-iterating my and the Council's thanks to Alan Haslem, who served as Chair for many years and who stood down in May at the elections. Alan's time as chair saw significant improvements in the village and the running of the council, including the launch of the pavilion project and the erection of new play equipment and a defibrillator. I know Alan is enjoying being able to focus on other things, but also how important he was in laying down the structures within which we operate.

We also saw the departure of our long-serving clerk, Meg Humphries at Christmas. Meg has been a real servant to the council, often in ways those outside may not have seen or expected. It was with a mixture of sadness and delight we heard Meg was going; sadness to lose her but delight that she had won a significant new contract in her main job and that success beckoned.

It was with just as much delight that we were able to welcome our new clerk, Carol Hinton, one of Alvington's own, into role, at the start of 2024. Carol brings a wealth of experience as a clerk and knows Alvington inside-out, and has already made telling contributions to the working of the parish. I very much hope to be working with Carol for a long time to come.

May 2023 saw elections to the Parish Council. I want to pause on these for a moment. Whilst we have a full panel of Councillors before you tonight, Nathan, Gail, Nick and I were returned uncontested and Rachel was co-opted following the election. This is a pattern which was sadly repeated across the Forest where a bare handful of parish council roles were contested. Democracy lives and dies by people standing up and being willing to fill these roles. One of the things Alan successfully did was ensure Alvington maintained a full panel of councillors, and whilst none of our current panel would wish to step down (I hope!), I for one find the role enjoyable and not onerous and would encourage people to consider standing in the future. It was a pleasure in this regard to have two fine candidates for our casual vacancy. Whilst we would have been pleased to expand to six councillors to accommodate an extra pair of helping hands, we do not see much in the way of momentum on this enquiry to the district council.

I will linger on this theme for a moment. With absolute respect for our hard-working, diligent and extremely helpful District and County Councillor, Chris McFarling, no public body operates in isolation and we are no different. As a Parish we rely on the District and County Councils to deliver for our residents, and it is no exaggeration to say that Gloucestershire in general and the Forest in detail suffer from exceedingly weak service provision in multiple areas. Whether your issue of concern is planning, schools, children's services, highways or environment, local services have been mercilessly denuded of the necessary funds by central government over the past fourteen years to the point that even areas as affluent as Gloucestershire struggle to make ends meet. We live in a country where change is desperately required and a General Election cannot come quickly enough.

Areas where I know residents have voiced particular concerns include roads and road safety, pot-holes, Japanese knotweed, the at times almost impassable nature of some pavements and paths, planning decisions and the lack of meaningful enforcement. However not all is bleak and we should recognise achievements. Anyone who relies on the bus network for travel will have seen material improvements, we have seen new kissing gates on many paths in the parish, and gigaclear has brought fibre optic broadband to many (but not all) of our residents. Our local primary school also made the vital improvements to secure a Good Ofsted rating compared to its previous Requires Improvement judgement. I would stress this was achieved despite very real funding constraints.

I will conclude with a focus on our three key projects in the parish as a council. I will start with trees and management of our local environment. It is a mark of the progress we have made that grass-cutting is no longer a topic of routine debate, but trees present a material risk to our budget. The parish owns, particularly in the churchyard a number of mature and exceedingly large trees. Each of these is in effect a four-figure liability as and when they require significant maintenance or removal, and they are joined by a flotilla of smaller trees, each of which is a three-figure liability of a similar nature. Last year we undertook essential maintenance on the largest of our trees, including bracing. The simple fact is this has more than drained the funds we set aside for this work, including all the funds we planned to put aside for works this year. Whilst we have worked hard to keep precept increases as low as possible, residents should consider they have put on notice that we will need to assume our next precept discussions will need to accommodate the cost of outstanding works in this field.

Secondly, roads. We continue to hold a small reserve to fund necessary works to improve road safety, where we had a short period of positive engagement from Gloucester Highways which has been followed by several months of radio silence. The proposals which Gloucester Highways shared with us appear sensible and positive, but they need to progress to actual work to be of any real value. The absence of any progress in this regard is obvious and dis-spiriting. I want to thank Nathan Burlton for his efforts in this space, but it takes two to tango and we feel the absence of our dance-partner in this regard.

Thirdly and finally, the sports field pavilion. I am pleased to report progress here, although I recognise some residents feel this is slow. This year we sourced quotes for the work and the reality of those was stark: we have been forced to reconsider our build design to reflect the costs before us. In parallel we have progressed necessary legal work and getting water and power to the site, alongside active fund-raising. The quiz night last November was absolutely packed and the Fun Day was another solid success. However, the organising committee have noted the return of neighbouring events also scheduled for July so this year we are going to hold our event on Sunday, 1st September. I hope to see you all there.

One element of the pavilion project which is particularly positive is it has raised awareness of the field and increased demand. We are delighted to see not one but two youth football teams using the field, alongside the cricket and dog-training, but in addition the parish has been approached by a group eager to resurrect the village football team, Alvington Star. This is a vital development to evidence our case of there being a need for the new pavilion. I would commend anyone with a young (or not so young) footballer to touch base with Stuart / the council, so we can get a line of sight on potential players.

One result of this is that leasing arrangements for the sports field need to develop. At the moment we generally lease the field in its totality. In the future, we will lease individual pitches or areas. We will be marking three football pitches on the field, one in the current location to the west of the cricket square, with two further youth-sized pitches being located to the north and east of the square. Ellwood Youth FC have signed an agreement with us to exclusively use the two new pitches which should secure revenue of c£400-500 a year. Alvington Star, and any other interested football teams will continue to have access to the full-sized pitch. The cricket team will continue to rent the whole field at the current rate. This arrangement better matches arrangements at similar facilities and gives greater flexibility and the potential to increase revenue. Our continued thanks to the cricket team who maintain the field, in particular Nick Powell, Terry Nixon and Roger Wakefield.

I want to conclude my report by thanking my fellow councillors: Gail Thompson, Rachel Macharg, Nathan Burlton and Nick Powell who make this role a pleasure to perform. They dig deep, are always willing to take on challenges and the small jobs being a councillor involves. I would also like to thank all our volunteers, without whom we wouldn't be able to do the wide range of things our community benefits from. Thank you all and that concludes my report.

Councillor Thompson thanked the Chairman for all his hard work during the year.

## **6. Reports from Local Organisations:**

**Alvington and Woolaston Cricket Club** – Councillor Powell gave an overview of the 2023 season which had not been the best, the team having been relegated on run rates despite having 122 points from the 18 matches played. There will be no charge for members this year, the money will be made up through fund raising. Three of this year's team are the minimum age so the youth representation is good. The field was pretty good for the season with dog mess not having been such an issue.

**Walking Group** – Alec Davis reported that the average walk is 4-5 miles and some of the footpaths are currently very muddy. Four of the proposed kissing gates have still to be installed which is a shame for those who find stiles difficult, one or two of which have barbed wire on top of them. The main priority gate is for the bottom of Spout Hill. It had been noted that 24 gates had been installed on the daffodil walks in the Forest. There should be a push to make the river bank walk from Woolaston to Lydney a public footpath.

**Dog Training** – Ali Collins reported that there had been a few complaints from locals during the first few weeks at the field, due to a misunderstanding that the field was closed during the training sessions but it was good to be back. The parking issues at the recent Saturday training had been awful for her clients. The Chairman apologized for the parking issues. There were also concerns regarding the mixing of football and dog training and the location on the field for each activity needs to be addressed.

**Church** – Sue Rickards had emailed thanking the Parish Council and volunteers for their work keeping the churchyard in good condition. She also wanted to flag up that there is a church service in Alvington on the third Sunday of each month.

**Alvington Star Football Club** – Councillor Heys reported that the Club is trying to resurrect a team and with 14 – 15 players may soon be able to do so.

**Bell Ringers** – Councillor Heys reported that the band is going well and is the youngest and largest band in the Forest.

**Woolaston School** – Councillor Heys reported that the School had now achieved 'Good' status and should be congratulated for their hard work over the last few years. The new houses in Woolaston

village will not adversely affect the School as it is not currently full, with plenty of spaces for new people moving into the village.

## **7. Financial Report for 2023/24:**

The Chairman gave a broad picture of the Parish Council finances. Ringfenced funds were drawn down for tree work and the VAT has still to be reclaimed. The Pavilion funds continue to grow and the money will soon start to be spent as work commences. There is still around £4k available for road projects and the PC continues to work with Gloucestershire Highways. The core account has broadly broken even with a net surplus of around £30. The precept amount was increased by just under 5% for the next year and the Council continues to look at efficiencies. The total precept is around £10,500 for which the Council achieves a lot and provides value for the funds provided.

## **8. Public Forum:**

Ali Collins – the car parking and storage at the playing field needs to be addressed. Some of her training sessions were postponed due to the wet field. She will need to know other field bookings in advance in order to plan her sessions.

Chris Shill – what has happened regarding the felling of the limbs of the tree in the hall car park, an offer to undertake the work was made at the December meeting? The hall committee has been in touch and consulted a tree surgeon. Felling of some limbs may create a balance issue. Also – when will the churchyard and play area grass cutting commence? It is still only 11<sup>th</sup> April and may have been delayed by the wet conditions. The contract is still in place.

Alec Davis – Aylburton speed camera – understands that 177 drivers have been picked up during last year. Could Alvington have one and a Speedwatch group is required. Bloomery Court – what is happening with the planning issues there? – Councillor McFarling state that Tony Pope is working on the application and will come to a decision shortly. Pedestrian crossing – what is happening about this? – The Chairman confirmed that the Council is continuing to work with Glos. Highways but has not heard from them in some time. He will be writing again after complaining to the Chief Executive. Councillor McFarling confirmed that there are massive staff shortages and the County Council is behind with processing TROs.

Councillor Burlton would like to see plans for the new road markings – Councillor McFarling will forward these.

The Chairman has spoken with The Globe owners and it is no longer for sale. They are keen to sort the pavement issues as well. An extra 3 inches of land is required for a crossing. Councillor McFarling to arrange a meeting with himself, Councillors Heys and Burlton and Nathan Choat.

Alec Davis / Councillor Burlton – Potholes and drains. There have been sightings of potholes being filled and patted with shovels and drains in the road appear to be sinking and breaking up all over the area. On many occasions repairs last less than a couple of days. It seems the whole of the drain structure requires repair not just filling. Councillor Burlton has reported to Fix My Street and agreed to send photographs of the numerous failed drain repairs outside of The Blacksmiths pub to Councillor McFarling. Councillor McFarling will put the question regarding the number of failed repairs to a full County Council meeting. He confirmed that the persistent rain has caused issues and a 'bad' batch of tarmac was used before it was realised it was not suitable. Alec Davis suggested the County should stop all pothole repairs and properly re-surface roads instead.

**The meeting closed at 20.10hrs**