

Chairman's Report – Woore Parish Council - Thursday 29th April, 2021

I am pleased to be able to provide my Parish Council Chairman's report at this Annual Parish Meeting. As many of you will be aware, it is a tradition for the Chairman to provide a report regarding the activities of the Parish Council over the past year...and what a year it has been!

I am going to start by highlighting what I believe is our strength - a team of skilled, hardworking, committed councillors and a professional clerk, who work very hard to serve their local community. Just as important, is a community that is well informed and actively supports local groups, and Woore Parish is lucky to have so many individuals among the community that do their bit - the unsung heroes. Thank you to you all and I believe we are in a strong position to jointly face the challenges that lie ahead.

At the beginning of 2020, little did we know the magnitude of challenges to come - immense and unprecedented for most of us. The Covid virus has changed all our lives and yet the communities within our parish have shown strength, great spirit and resolve - pulling together to overcome all the difficulties we have faced. I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone for the part you have played throughout the last year and in particular, to Josephine Scobble and Karla Morris who with the support of countless volunteers and staff at Woore Country Stores, set up and ran the local Volunteers of Woore scheme which remains in place today; supporting countless individuals and families each week and encouraging local people to mobilise and help. To the many local volunteers who delivered essential food and prescriptions throughout the parish and looked out for people who were isolated; to all the businesses, organisations, neighbouring parish councils and individuals who donated food and money to the local efforts, we will all be forever grateful for your contributions. What is fantastic is that many people want to continue to volunteer and thanks to the Volunteers of Woore team, they can continue to offer support to the community as we come out of the pandemic and beyond. Last month, the Parish Council were of course delighted to be able to present Karla, Josephine and their teams with a permanent reminder of this effort, by way of a plaque that will shortly be fixed to the outside of the Village Stores, thanking them for their contribution during the pandemic and serving as a reminder for years to come of the 'coming together of the community'.

The world of 'remote' meetings has taken over in the last year which has ensured that the Parish Council has been able to continue essential parish business. It is interesting how quickly we have adapted to this way of communication. However, communicating online can be tiring and for that reason I am keeping this year's report as short as possible but do welcome questions at the end or via email if that is preferred. I look forward to meeting you all in person again at next year's Annual Parish Meeting and hope by then, we will be able to enjoy an enhanced format for the meeting.

For this meeting, all reports for the evening are available on the Parish Council website and I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Woore United Charities, the Village Hall Trustees and the Old Woore School Trust for their contributions tonight.

To our Councillors, several of whom are fairly new to the Council, I thank them for being committed, hard-working and approachable and I am grateful for all the work they do in our community and particularly their loyalty over a very difficult 12 months. We are very fortunate to have such a strong team of councillors who all share the same ideology; of working for our community. The role is now more time consuming and complex and their commitment is, I am sure, appreciated by the Parishioners. I'd also like to take this opportunity to thank those Councillors who have chosen to

step down from the role since our last Parish meeting, several of whom committed years of hard work to the HS2 working party, for which we are all immensely grateful.

Parish Council Duties and Finance

The Parish Council always strives to be prudent with public funds, however there were of course unprecedented projects which were completed this year including the maintenance of the St. Leonards Way play area and the cleaning and sanitisation of equipment prior to re-opening and in line with COVID guidance. That included a complete wash down of all the equipment to remove mould and moss; the results of which were very pleasing and undoubtedly helped to extend the life of the equipment available to the young families of the Parish. Of course, this was in addition to the usual running costs of the Parish Council; including grounds maintenance, streetlighting repairs, mobile vehicle activated signs (MVAS) and defibrillator upkeep to highlight just a few.

I would like to thank Tim Stokes, a local volunteer who has provided regular maintenance and checks of two out of three defibrillators within the Parish (the third being at the school). Tim has been an invaluable source of knowledge and support in the upkeep of the defibrillators which we are incredibly fortunate to have within the Parish and has committed his time and energy for many years to ensure residents have access to this life saving equipment.

Thanks also goes to sub-contractors Tony Seabridge and Lengthsman Richard White for their efforts in maintaining public spaces within the Parish, including St Leonards Way play area, Woore Village Green on Audlem Road and many other grass verges and flower beds throughout the Parish. The Parish Council takes responsibility for the spring and summer planting, weeding and watering of the many flower beds and is grateful to the volunteers who give their time, year after year, to assist with this and to Lindops who provided the plants again last year. We always welcome volunteers to get involved with the planting and upkeep of the flower beds and encourage anyone with an interest to contact the Clerk.

A regular topic of interest is the issue of dog fouling in the Parish and for that reason, additional dog bins were purchased by the Parish Council in late 2019. The battle to encourage all dog owners to use them continues but they are positioned in line with Shropshire Council's advice and have been well received by Parishioners.

On the topic of spending, this leads me to the Parish Council precept (the council tax rate set by the Parish Council), which has been set at £30,727 for the coming financial year. The Parish Council made the difficult decision not to increase precept during the current economic climate and therefore accepts that it must work harder than ever to service and enhance the Parish within the constraints of the budget.

In addition to the precept, Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) is money paid to the Parish in accordance with the number of new houses that have been built within the last 12 months. This money is only available for spending in line with infrastructure improvements and as such, a review of the Parish Place Plan will take place to document some of the recommendations for how these funds could be spent, in line with the requirements of the Parish. For the previous financial year, (2020-2021), the Parish Council will receive £5,662 in May 2021, as CIL Neighbourhood Fund. As always, residents and community organisations are encouraged to inform the Parish Council of any suggestions they may have, large or small, and the Parish Council welcomes their contributions.

Of course, in addition to spend on upkeep and improvement of the Parish, the Parish Council is also delighted to have been able to approve a grant request for Woore Primary School in early 2021, for the purchase of additional laptops to support home learning. We can all appreciate the need for the community to respond to the restrictions placed on us all during lockdown and of course, in the case of the children of the Parish this meant a move to remote lessons and study. We can report that the donation of £750 was put towards additional anonymous donations and helped to purchase 5 new laptops which were provided to children who would otherwise not have been able to access their learning from home. Furthermore, the school received donations of numerous devices that have since been refurbished and are now being utilised by the school in their return to the classroom environment. A remarkable response from the community that was worthy of the recent coverage in the Shropshire Star.

A more in-depth financial report is available from the Clerk later in the evening and will also be available via the Woore Parish Council website in due course.

Newcastle Road Land

The land on Newcastle Road now officially belongs to the Parish Council as was reported at the 2019 meeting, thanks to £32k of funding received from the Candle Lane development. Following the successful application for part funding from Shropshire Council, drainage and entrance/driveway works have now been completed and the Parish Council can now begin the process of reviewing the future use of the land. This will of course involve Parishioners and we look forward to being able to provide more information on how this process will look over the coming months. The work involved in taking this project to the point that the land is secured has been exceptionally time consuming and big thank you to those involved. We anticipate that a steering group for the Newcastle Road land will be set up and we look forward to putting plans in place in the near future.

Planning

The Parish Council have continued their commitment to planning during the lockdown and can report a significant rise in planning applications over the last 12 months. Whilst the Parish Council are only consultees - not decision makers, its views are taken into consideration by the Planning officers and more importantly, with the Neighbourhood Plan in place until 2036, the Parish is in a strong position to protect and preserve the character and beauty of the Parish in years to come. For those who may be new to the Parish, the Woore Parish Neighbourhood plan was overwhelmingly supported by residents, following referendum in May 2019, and at Shropshire Council's meeting on 25th July 2019 the decision to 'make' the Woore Neighbourhood Plan was agreed unanimously. The Neighbourhood plan involved creating a strategy for development in the local community and is a way of helping local communities to influence the planning of the area in which they live and work. It is a community-led process to create a shared vision for our neighbourhood and carries a great deal of weight when determining the outcome of a planning application.

The Parish Council review all applications based on material planning considerations but are very aware that planning can be an emotive and stressful time for those concerned and I am sure you will join me in expressing thanks to Councillors for the work undertaken to ensure planning reviews are conducted with professionalism at all times.

Working in partnership

The success of what we as a parish council can achieve relies on us working in partnership with residents, businesses, and other local and regional organisations. I would like to give you a flavour of some of these partnerships.

The Parish Council have been working with Shropshire Council Highways department, looking at the condition of roads and pavements within the Parish. We have always identified Parishioner safety as a priority and are committed to ensuring that Shropshire Council take our concerns and those of residents seriously. Specifically, in more recent months, focus has been given to the increasing number of potholes and road surfacing issues, the deterioration of manhole covers & gullies and general condition of pavements throughout the Parish. Only this month, an audit of the pavements in particular was completed and work scheduled to take place in the coming weeks.

We have also been working with Shropshire Council Highways and Flooding Officers to identify and prioritise concerns around increasing flooding issues within the Parish; some of which were the cause of great devastation to a small number of residents in the Winter months.

The Parish Council is also lucky to have dedicated Footpath and Tree Wardens, Sally Tyson and Carol Bedson, who together, have faced an increase in reported incidents and enquiries relating to public footpaths and rights of way, as the residents of the community understandably turned to the beautiful countryside around us as their retreat from the monotony of 'lockdown life'! Again, a report will follow Sally and Carol but would like to thank them both for their hard work, particularly over the past year. There have been significant improvements made to some of the most frequently used pathways and we hope to continue these improvements in the year ahead.

I would like to refer also to the kind efforts of volunteers who over to last year have given their time to clearing litter from the streets and footpaths within the Parish, which has made such a positive difference to those who enjoy the many walks the Parish has to offer and is appreciated by Councillors and the wider community.

The partnership with our local Police team continues. We are fortunate to have an excellent relationship with PC Alan Ambrose and his colleagues at West Mercia Police, who continue to take an active role within our community and are always available to discuss local issues and work with our Shropshire councillors and the Parish Council. We would like to thank the whole team for all their hard work in maintaining the low levels of crime that we enjoy locally and for their commitment to monthly visits from the Mobile Police van, dates for which can be found on the Parish website and in the noticeboard in the centre of Woore.

Cllr Blake has continued his dedication to the issue of speeding and specifically the MVAS. As well as two VAS's within the Parish, the Parish Council is responsible for two mobile vehicle activated signs; the data for which is extracted and published via the Parish Council website fortnightly. Recent figures for prosecutions in relation to speeding within the Parish reported an increase from 41 prosecutions in 2019 to 94 in 2020, which is an increase from 2-3 prosecutions (average) per hour.

Cllr Blake will himself be providing a report later this evening but there is no denying that the data from the MVAS indicates that the issue of speeding remains of paramount concern. We are working with the police on tackling speeding issues in the Parish and we are pleased to see that the

community speed watch scheme, although in the very early stages, has attracted the support of many volunteers. We are grateful to Cllr Hamilton for leading this and are hopeful that progress will be made in the year ahead. We have raised our support for reduced speed limits through the Parish with Shropshire Council and are working hard to find a solution to the inevitable dangers of increasing traffic.

HS2

Which leads me to HS2...!

At our last Annual Parish Meeting, I made reference to the amount of work undertaken by both the Parish Council Working Party and the Woore Parish Action Group. Two years on and this work continues! The House of Lords Select Committee Hearings in Autumn of last year were successful in securing support for several of the mitigations the Parish Council and action group have maintained are critical and were the result of many months of preparation. Thanks goes to then Councillor, Althea Allison and all WPAG volunteers for their input and support.

Furthermore, following the inclusion in the HS2 Phase 2a Hybrid Bill of amendments proposed in the House of Lords, HS2 started a new consultation with the affected residents of Staffordshire, South Cheshire and North Shropshire; to which the Woore Parish response was remarkable, with 80 out of 499 responses mentioning Woore. The report on the consultation is expected before 1st May and we look forward to sharing that with residents.

Although the primary objective has always been to secure an alternative route for the construction traffic, following Royal Assent on 12th February this year, the focus now returns to the pressing challenge of securing the safety and wellbeing of residents as construction traffic will begin to flow imminently. There have been countless meetings between the Parish Council, Shropshire Council and HS2 to discuss the long list of mitigations we are actively pursuing; culminating in a meeting with Andrew Stephenson, HS2 Minister earlier this month, at which, with the support of Rt Hon Owen Patterson, we were able to put forward our reasoning for the mitigations for which we are yet to gain assurances. As the only MP to be granted this meeting, we were very grateful to Mr Patterson for his support and pleased to be afforded the opportunity. We now await a letter of response to that meeting and maintain our position that the beauty of this rural Parish and safety of all those that live and work within it must not be compromised.

I will say little more at this point for fear of talking about HS2 all night, but I would like to take the opportunity to remind residents that all documents relating to HS2 can be accessed on the Woore Parish Council website, under the HS2 tab and that we are working to include more regular updates via social media channels too, when possible.

Shropshire Councillor, Roy Aldcroft, who has himself been present and in support of the mitigations at all meetings with Shropshire Council and HS2, did request that in his absence this evening the following comment be read;

"I do congratulate the Parish and HS2 group on the extraordinary efforts they have made to ensure the best outcome for the parish in your dealings with HS2 and Shropshire Council over the last year. I would also formerly thank Mike Cowey for making me welcome and keeping me on track throughout my first term as a Shropshire Councillor for your parish."

Communications

The last 12 months has undoubtedly affected the usual communication streams and we look forward to being able to re-launch a Parish newsletter, both in electronic and print format, in the coming months. However, I am grateful to our Clerk for the vast improvements made to our social media and website content and to her commitment to improving communications with Parishioners. Passing on vital information and updates along with more generic information of interest is an important role of the Parish Council and providing a mix of online and print versions is essential moving forward.

Elections

Woore Parish elections 2021 were uncontested with 8 persons nominated, leaving 2 vacancies remaining for which the Parish Council hopes to fill through co-option in due course. Unitary and Police and Crime Commissioner Elections will take place on Thursday 6th May and as always, we encourage the residents of the Parish to vote. Please do remember that this year there will be COVID restrictions in place and your patience and understanding will be appreciated at polling stations throughout the district.

I would like to thank Councillors who will not be standing or have already stepped down, for the work they have put in during the last four years and hope they wish to continue supporting our Parish in other ways. May I take this opportunity to thank also, Vice-Chair Cllr Irwin for her support, in particular as a key member of the HS2 Working Party, as she retires from the position next month.

I am sure you will all want to join me in thanking our clerk, Helen Jackson, for her commitment during the Covid pandemic. Helen has worked tirelessly and has been instrumental in ensuring that through this most difficult time our community has received support at all levels.

Finally, if I have missed out anyone or not reported a matter, please accept my apologies. I welcome questions, although request your understanding that some matters may require a response post meeting.

This has been a most difficult year and I am sure that as we emerge from this pandemic, our community will maintain the wonderful spirit it has demonstrated thus far. A huge thank you to everyone over the last year; we look forward to re-connecting in person to celebrate a return to normality over the coming months.