

## **Chairman's Report – Annual Parish Meeting 2022**

I am pleased to be able to give this Annual Parish Meeting, my Parish Council Chairman's report - this year in a face-to-face format for the first time since 2019.

I am going to start with how I finished my report last year, I quote:

"...this has been a most difficult year and I am sure that as a community, as we emerge from this pandemic, we will maintain all the support and help for each other that we have given during these difficult times and I'd like to thank everyone for their patience, understanding and solidarity over the last year. We look forward to reconnecting in person to celebrate a return to normality over the coming months."

Thankfully, as I hoped then, we are now returning to our 'new' normal way of life, rebooting our projects, having face-to-face meetings and can look forward to some larger events, such as our Queens Platinum Jubilee party in June of this year – detail of which will follow this evening and something I hope the whole community will get behind and support as an opportunity to come together – at last!

I shall now cover Parish Matters in my report, bearing in mind that the Woore Parish Council website and social media accounts have provided updates on monthly Parish Council meetings and activities throughout the last busy year, so trying to keep it brief!

We had an uncontested election in May 2021 with 8 Councillors standing, leaving 2 seats vacant. Since then, we have welcomed Cllr Goodman to the team who brings with her a vast amount of local knowledge and experience in working within the community; with one seat remaining which we are keen to fill. To that end, I encourage residents with an interest in supporting the local community to step forward and help make a difference and bring about change where it matters.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all Councillors for the enthusiasm and hard work they have put in during the last year and our Clerk, Helen Jackson, for her commitment and professionalism in a role that is increasingly more time-consuming and complex. We are very fortunate to have such a strong team of individuals who all share the same ideology of working for our community and I am sure, are appreciated by the Parishioners as well as by myself.

Although monthly Parish Council meetings have returned to face-to-face, the reality is that ways of working across all areas of business and industry have changed permanently due to the pandemic and the Council is having to become more agile and accommodating of this change than ever before. Use of digital communication is increasing and balancing this with the needs of a rural community is sometimes tricky – but we continue to put a great deal of effort into ensuring the community has access to information and support where it's needed and look forward to enhancing these communication channels in coming months.

### **Parish Duties & Finance**

The Parish Council is committed to being prudent with public funds, however there are many activities which require regular management.

- Defibrillator repairs and maintenance (for 2 units in Woore and Pipe Gate)
- Streetlight energy supply & repairs

- Public space up-keep and essential maintenance (including health & safety audits) – areas including St. Leonards play area, Outdoor Gym to rear of Victory Hall and Audlem Road Village Green.
- Grass-cutting, weed spraying, hedge cutting in many areas in the Parish
- Spring & winter planting and regular up-keep
- Christmas tree and lights
- Remembrance wreaths

Particular thanks go to sub-contractors Tony Seabridge and Lengthsman Richard White for their efforts in maintaining the public spaces listed above and the 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 Westholme Nurseries who provided the plants again last year. This year we are excited to be embracing a red, white and blue theme in line with the Queens Platinum Jubilee celebrations! 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.

We're also delighted to be supported by three volunteers who each contribute towards the regular checks and maintenance of two parish owned defibrillators in the Parish; life saving equipment which Parishioners are, I am sure, grateful to have.

In addition to this regular Council activity, there are several strategic projects highlighted on the current Woore Place Plan (available on the Parish website) which is designed to document potential infrastructure improvements to be funded by the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), which is money paid to the Parish in accordance with the number of new houses that have been built within the last 12 months. Sadly, Woore will not receive any payments for CIL or CIL Neighbourhood Fund for this financial year – a decision it objects to due to what it believes are failings by Shropshire Council for timely billing of developers. That said, that does not detract from the importance of these projects and the Parish Council is committed to working with Shropshire Council to highlight opportunities for enhancing current infrastructure, in line with the inevitable growth of the Parish. 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.

This leads me to the Parish Council precept (the council tax rate set by the Parish Council), which has been set at £31,249 for the coming financial year. The Parish Council made the difficult decision again this year, 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.

We are delighted to also record that this year a grant has been awarded to Woore Cricket Club to contribute towards cost of replacing boundary netting on the cricket pitch. The Parish Council appreciates the huge value that Woore Cricket Club and the Tennis and Bowling Clubs alike, contribute to the Parish, particularly with the provision of sporting opportunities for the youth and noting the difficult circumstances in which these Clubs have continued to operate over the last 12 months. We are pleased to welcome some of those groups this evening to provide a short report on the last 12 months and exciting plans for the year ahead.

I would like to just express thanks to Councillors Davies and Higgin for their commitment as Financial Scrutineers of quarterly accounts and to the Clerk as Responsible Finance Officer, for her commitment to balancing the needs of the Parish with the important job of ensuring the Parish Council operates within strict financial regulations and budgets. 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.

## **Planning**

Following on from my report last year, the review of the Shropshire Council Local Plan (in place until 2038) has now gone to the Planning Inspectors and this is a matter the Parish Council is monitoring closely. The Parish is in a strong position to protect and preserve the character and beauty of the Parish in years to come, as a result of the Woore Neighbourhood Plan, which will be in place until 2036. This involved creating a strategy for development in the local community as a way of helping to influence the planning of the area in which Parishioners live and/or 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. That said, the Parish Council has disputed numerous decisions made by Shropshire Council planning in recent months and continues to monitor closely its adherence to the plan on a case-by-case basis.

The significant rise in planning applications during the pandemic has begun to slow in recent weeks; although the last 12 months has seen record numbers of applications, and each requires a review based on material planning considerations and against the Woore Neighbourhood Plan. I would like to express my thanks to all Councillors for the work undertaken to ensure planning matters are always conducted with professionalism, in particular Councillors Daville and Carter who have carried the burden of planning matters, along with myself, over the last 12 months.

## **HS2**

For at least the last 5 Annual Parish Meetings, I have made reference to the amount of work undertaken by the HS2 Parish Council Working Party. Years on, and this work continues! I'd like to say it gets easier but in truth the battle intensifies with HS2 groundworks already under way and the impending commencement of construction traffic looming.

However, despite the letters H, S and 2 being the most used keys on my computer keyboard, I do acknowledge that for many residents, the topic of HS2 may only just be starting to resonate and for that reason, I would like to just provide a short summary of the work to date.

House of Lords Select Committee Hearings in Autumn of 2020 were successful in securing support for several of the mitigations the Parish Council and action group maintained were critical and were the result of months of preparation. Furthermore, following 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.

Although the primary objective has always been to secure an alternative route for the construction traffic, following Royal Assent on 12th February 2021, the focus quickly turned to the pressing challenge of securing the safety and wellbeing of residents as construction traffic is set to arrive in Autumn this year.

There have been countless meetings between the Parish Council, Shropshire Council and HS2 to discuss the long list of mitigations we are actively pursuing and disappointingly, the Parish Council is

of the belief that the residents of Woore Parish have been somewhat let down by Shropshire Council's lack of support to date. The highways are the responsibility of the Local Authority and yet the safety of Parishioners of Woore seems to be alarmingly low on the list of priorities for the Local Authority. Despite this, the Parish Council is more dedicated than ever to ensure that the safety and wellbeing of those that live and/or work in this beautiful Parish are not compromised. Gratefully, we are joined this evening by Helen Morgan MP, whom, following her recent appointment, has taken a genuine interest in the challenges this Parish is facing at the hands of HS2 and is committed to helping us to engage those individuals at Shropshire Council and HS2 who have the ability to implement the mitigations so desperately needed and to secure the safety of residents. Helen is here this evening to deliver a short presentation on her priorities since appointment and we are immensely grateful to her for making the time to be here in person and answer questions from residents.

I would also like to welcome this evening representatives from HS2 Community Engagement, whom, despite the challenges of working with a community so adversely effected by this project, do their utmost to ensure that residents have access to all the information and support they need, engaging with the Parish Council at every step of the journey and providing an essential link between the Parish and the HS2 team.

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.

### **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 has been particularly vocal over the last 12 months regarding the condition of roads and pavements within the Parish. Thanks go to Councillor Daville, who works tirelessly to ensure highways issues are reported and monitored as a priority within Shropshire Council. Having a background in highways engineering, his knowledge and experience have been most welcomed by the Parish Council and the HS2 working party, which I will come to later in my report. Further, the Clerk now also sits on the Shropshire Clerks Highways Working Party – providing direct access to the individuals within Shropshire Council with responsibility for Highways matters. We have welcomed the introduction of 'Fix My Street' which is an online portal used by Shropshire Council for reporting issues including flooding, potholes, signage, streetlights and general highways deterioration matters, to name a few. This is being actively used by the Parish Council and residents are encouraged to also use the system which enables you to upload photos and exact locations of issues – as well as importantly, tracking any related works.

With the support of Councillor Aldcroft, we continue to engage 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 again this year. However, more needs to be done to address drainage issues impacting residents as new developments continue to put a strain on the existing infrastructure and in fact the Parish Council has written to Shropshire Council demanding this be addressed as a priority. Councillor Aldcroft is also here this evening to provide a report and I thank him on behalf of the Parish Council for his support this past year.

The Parish Council is also lucky to have dedicated Footpath and Tree Wardens, Sally Tyson and Carol Bedson, who together, have continued their commitment to responding to incidents and enquiries relating to public footpaths and rights of way and more recently to storm damage caused to many protected trees that we as a Parish, are lucky to have. I would like to thank Sally and Carol for their hard work and support.

The partnership with our local Police team continues. We are fortunate to have an excellent relationship with Inspector Claire Greenaway, PC Alan Ambrose and their 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 Shropshire Councillors and the Parish Council. Thankfully, we enjoy a low level of crime within the Parish of Woore, yet regular visits from the Mobile Police van help to maintain this relationship and ensure residents have access to advice and support when it's needed. Inspector Greenaway has provided a report for this evening which will be read by the Clerk later in proceedings.

Another highly valued initiative that has been supported by the Police, specifically the Safer Roads Team, is the Community Speed Watch which was introduced in the Summer of 2021. With the commitment of Councillor Hamilton, the Parish Council has engaged with the Police to train volunteers and introduce regular monitoring sessions at several set locations in the Parish where speeding is of particular concern. We are grateful to those who give their time to the CSW and will continue to support their efforts to deter drivers who regularly ignore the speed limit and put other drivers and pedestrians in danger. Councillor Hamilton will be providing a report later with more information on this.

Alongside this initiative, Councillor Blake has continued his dedication to regularly reporting of speeding data gathered by the MVAS (Mobile Vehicle Activated Sign) in the Parish and sharing this information with the local authority and police to highlight concerns for safety. We also have quarterly reports from the two VAS's owned by Shropshire Council, data for which is uploaded onto the PC's website.

Well documented is the Parish Council's campaign for reduced speed limits through the Parish, which sadly, to date, is not being supported by Shropshire Council. We will continue our efforts to highlight the dangers, as traffic volumes and speeds increase and HS2 traffic looms.

As mentioned briefly earlier in my report, the Queens Platinum Jubilee Working Group is already hard at work organising celebrations for the weekend of 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> June and a big thank you to Cllrs Beeston and Higgin for their work on this. Cllr Higgin will provide a short summary later this evening of the plans for this celebration and the Parish Council is proud to be funding a truly memorable event that will include a parade through the Parish.

Before I close, I would like to thank representatives from the Village Hall, WI and Woore United Charities for their attendance this evening or alternatively their provision of a report and to everyone else present for taking the time to listen to this news. If I have missed 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.

Finally, despite the turbulence we have experienced with COVID and troubling times we find the world is in, I am sure we are all proud to be part of our wonderful Parish of Woore and I thank everyone who has helped their fellow residents over the past couple of years. The strong community spirit will enable us to bounce back an ever greater and more resilient community.