



## Annual Parish Meeting

Thursday 15th June 2023

### Report of the Chair, Barton Parish Council

Firstly, may I welcome you to this evening's Annual Parish Meeting. Ideally, we should have held this meeting before the end of May, but logistical issues required us to delay until mid-June. The last Annual Meeting was in late April 2022 and the period of focus for this Meeting is the Parish Council year of April 2022 to March 2023.

Prior to the end of March 2022, the Parish Council had been operating for some time with a maximum of 6 Councillors, causing the previous Chair, Sarah Pitchford, to comment at last year's Annual Meeting on the burden of work being shared by the very few. May 2022 brought an election for a new Parish Council, and, despite limited initial response to the request for residents to come forward to join the Council, there were eventually 3 new candidates proposed to join the remaining 5 Councillors, allowing the Council to be reconstituted without an election in the absence of more than 9 candidates standing. One further candidate was put forward to the July 2022 Parish Council meeting and was coopted accordingly, taking the membership up to the maximum 9 councillors for the first time in several years.

Sarah Pitchford did not put herself forward for re-election in May 2022 and therefore also stepped down as Chair, much to our sadness. Sarah had been a most energetic Chair and was involved in all aspects of village life, so I would like to thank her wholeheartedly on behalf of the village and her fellow councillors for all her sterling work. I am happy to say that she is still very much involved in village events and special initiatives from outside the Parish Council and I hope she will continue to be so.

Also stepping down at the end of the 2021/2022 year was our Clerk and RFO Ian Minto, who had committed to the job for the 4-year life of the last Council and always planned to retire at that point. Our enormous thanks go to Ian for all his organisation and efficiency as Clerk, his successful efforts to upgrade our finance records with the help of new software and for his diligent balancing of the books throughout his time. Ian did, however, agree to remain as RFO for the time being on the appointment of Danielle Stretch who joined us as our new Clerk from April 2022, and that arrangement has continued to the present time.

We were most happy to welcome Danielle to the role of Clerk and she has carried out her duties in exemplary fashion. Unfortunately for us, however, she is a lady of many talents one of which is being an artist, and she has recently been approached to take up an artistic commission which is incompatible with the time commitment of being our Clerk. Danielle will therefore be giving up the Clerk's role after the July Parish Council meeting

and we want to thank her for her efforts over the last year and wish her very well. That said, the good news is that Ian Minto's retirement as Clerk (but not RFO) has turned out to be a sabbatical and I am delighted to welcome him back as our Clerk for the remaining duration of the current Council (ie. until 2026).

The Parish Council has operated throughout the 2022/2023 year with 9 councillors, one of whom was required to step down from continuing as a councillor towards the end of the year under the terms of the Local Government Act on the grounds of non-attendance at Parish Council meetings for more than 6 months. The Council subsequently advertised the vacancy, and one suitable candidate has come forward who can be coopted at the July meeting, thereby restoring our membership to 9 councillors.

It is a matter of some pride and satisfaction that the Parish Council has attracted new blood from all walks of life, has a majority of female participants, has lowered its average age quite dramatically, and is truly diverse. Another feature of this Council is that almost all members are in full-time work so they are really busy at all times. I would like to thank all of them for their enormous commitment to the village and to acknowledge that they are all volunteers giving of their precious spare time freely. Sometimes I wish that various interest groups in the village would remember that before being too quick to criticise the things they do not like.

We have been operating the Parish Council for the last year on our established pattern of full Council meetings every second month and regular Working Groups meeting in the intervening weeks, sometimes as many as 2 or 3 times. The purpose of this is to allow smaller groups to look at specific issues which need decisions, who can then return to the full Council with considered recommendations, which we find a more effective manner of operation than putting every issue to the full Council from the outset which too often results in decisions being deferred. We currently have 5 Working Groups - Finance & Governance, Amenities & Open Spaces, Traffic & Transport, Communication & Community Engagement, and Planning. Each of these Working Groups either report on their activities in writing to the full Council meetings or report verbally, whichever is appropriate.

At today's meeting we will have a report from the RFO on the Council's finances, which continue to be in a healthy state. We have successfully held the annual precept for the village flat for the last 3 years despite the cost inflation experienced over the year in particular. The RFO will not report on the Finance & Governance Working Group as such (which I chair) but I can tell you that as well as overseeing our village finances the Working Group has been working its way through all the policies of the Parish Council, some of which had not been reviewed for too long, with a view to updating them in accordance with changes in NALC guidance or other requirements as appropriate. We have not yet finished this task but will continue the process until the job is completed. Talking of policies, however, I would just like to mention that the Parish Council has recently signed, in collaboration with NALC, the Civility and Respect Pledge which commits us to treat all councillors, employees, members of the public and partners with civility and respect, and to call out all incidents of bullying or harassment. During the course of the current Council year all councillors will participate in a training programme to back up the Pledge.

We will also have reports from Councillor Langford on Amenities & Open Spaces and Councillor Martin on Traffic and Transport, which will cover most of the significant events and initiatives of the 2022/2023 year.

During the last year we have held 2 extraordinary Parish Council meetings in connection with key issues faced in the village. The first last August was in connection with the state of the village pond which I am sure will be covered by Councillor Langford in her report. The second was in January of this year regarding the planning application for an equestrian facility in the field adjoining Roman Hill, which was objected to both by residents of Roman Hill and the Parish Council itself following a site visit to review the plan. The application was subsequently withdrawn and has not yet reappeared. I mention it here as we do not have a Planning Working Group report this evening, yet it was perhaps one of the most noteworthy and contentious events of the year.

John Howland-Jackson

Chair Barton Parish Council