

Moulsford Parish Council

Chair's report for the year ending April 2020

Joanne Baker & Andrew Bryan, May 2020

The month of May usually brings the Annual Parish Meeting of Electors, where the electorate of Moulsford are invited to come together at the Pavilion to discuss matters of the village and to hear the Parish Council and other parish groups present their reviews of the past year.

Sadly, these are not usual times and we are not be able to hold the APM, so instead we are presenting our reports to you here in Moulsford News. As we write this, the government are in the early stages of trying to ease the lockdown. Hopefully, we will be back together in the Pavilion next May to review the months that now lie ahead of us with the remaining challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Council

This year was the first year of a four year term for an entirely new Parish Council, after the former councillors decided not to stand for reelection. The community responded strongly to the prospect of Moulsford parish business potentially being subsumed into an adjacent Parish Council with six people standing for the five places and thus securing our own Parish Council. The new councillors were Joanne Baker, Andrew Bryan, Sarah Elvy, Bernadette Sachse and Julie Twibell, ably supported by Geoff Twibell continuing in the role of Parish Clerk and ensuring a smooth continuation of parish business. We would like to recognise the the contribution of the outgoing councillors, Miles Powell (Chair), Richard Hayward (Vice-chair), Carol Bemis, Ann Stickings and Deb Wilkins for their many years of support and service for the parish and to also thank them for the time and support they continued to offer to the new councillors as we established in our roles.

The initial line-up has changed during the year. Joanne originally took on the role of Chair, with Andrew as Vice-chair; in March this altered with Andrew taking up the Chair, and Sarah as Vice-chair. In April, Ben Partridge was formally co-opted after Julie Twibell tendered her resignation. Both are to be thanked for their contribution to helping ensure that Moulsford maintains its own Parish Council and for supporting our community with their service.

In the wider context of South Oxfordshire District Council, Anne-Marie Simpson of this parish was elected in May 2019 as a district councillor for Cholsey Ward. The PC has liaised closely with Anne-Marie and also Jane Murphy at SODC on matters affecting the parish, and has also maintained regular contact with Mark Gray at Oxfordshire County Council, in particular over highways, education and planning issues.

Meetings

Regular PC meetings have been held in the Pavilion throughout the past year, ten council meetings and the Annual Parish Meeting. With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the national implementation of extensive social distancing and other isolating measures, the PC held a socially-distanced meeting at the Pavilion in March; subsequent meetings have been held on-line using Zoom.

Dates of council meetings and agendas continued to be displayed through the year on the village notice board, with dates also included in Moulsford News. Copies of minutes have been displayed on the village notice board, at the Pavilion and have also been posted on the PC's pages on village website <http://www.moulsford-pc.org.uk>. The Annual Meeting of the Parish Council was held on 8th May 2019, duly electing the Chair and Vice-chair and transferring PC duties to the new councillors. The Annual Parish Meeting of Electors was held on 15th May 2019.

Council procedures

The Parish Council has continued to operate in accordance with its powers and duties, using the Standing Orders and Financial Regulations updated in 2015 and aligned to legislation and best practice guidance from the National Association of Local Councils (NALC). Following the Covid-19 outbreak, the PC and Clerk have monitored guidance from Oxfordshire County Council and South Oxfordshire District Council to ensure that meetings and other procedures, such as planning, continue to operate within the parish as required.

In accordance with the requirements of central government the Clerk is required to maintain a register of Councillor interests. This register was updated with the appointment of new councillors and is available to be viewed by the public and is also accessible through a link on the village website. A risk register is similarly required and maintained, which is kept by the Clerk and is reviewed during the year by the PC.

Finance

A detailed report of village finances is provided in the Registered Financial Officer's report, but key points are summarised here.

We are now nine years into the 40 year government loan provided for the Pavilion build completion in 2011. Repayments on this £70,000 fixed rate loan constitute approximately 30% of the precept. Additionally, a modest sum is set aside annually to make provision for capital expenditure works if required.

We maintain a reserve against unexpected expenditure and with continuing careful management of expenditure, the PC finances continue to be in a healthy state. This reporting year, the Parish Council increased the precept from £14,000 to £14,250, which reflected inflation and the increase in costs of services provided by the council. We also successfully applied for and were awarded two grants for village projects: £2000 towards resurfacing Ferry Lane from Mark Gray's Councillor Priority Fund and £1000 towards the playground and recreation ground project from Anne-Marie Simpson's Councillor Fund.

With the arrival of the Covid-19 lockdown towards the end of the financial year, it was too early to report on financial impacts in this reporting year, however significant effects will be felt and from the Pavilion in particular and an anticipated decline in financial support from District and County Councils. We will be carefully monitoring and responding to impacts on village finances as the year progresses.

Pavilion & Events

The Pavilion Management Committee (PMC) and Moulsoford Events Committee (MEC) have continued to make key contributions to village life, as described in more detail in their own reports. The PC works closely with both committees, with a member of the PC on each as liaison. The PMC was reconstituted in 2011 to manage the operation of the Pavilion on behalf of the Parish Council and the MEC is a sub-committee of the PC.

The PMC aims to ensure that the Pavilion's running costs are met solely from the revenue generated by the hire of this special village facility, and works to keep the Pavilion in outstanding condition, manage its not insignificant administration burden, secure bookings and market the facility. After welcoming hundreds of guests, visitors and indeed voters during the year, the Pavilion had to close its doors in late March as lockdown measures took hold. The PC will be working closely with the PMC to manage the impact of the closure on the Pavilions finances.

The MEC orchestrates a diverse range of community social occasions during year to give villagers a chance to get together across the seasons and also has a remit to raise funds on behalf of the PC for village projects. We are grateful to the MEC for all their efforts to foster community spirit

and their fundraising over winter to support the restoration of the playground, which had raised over £500 by January. The new Friday social season was being keenly anticipated in April, but regrettably fell victim to Covid-19 measures.

Moulsford News

The Moulsford community benefits from the regular, informative and free village newsletter delivered to every household ten times a year. Bernadette Sachse has continued to manage Moulsford News during the past year, ensuring we have a quality newsletter produced on time ready for distribution by a volunteer network. Adverts are managed by Emma Reynolds and generate a modest revenue which contributes to the PC contingency funds. The PC has continued to contribute a monthly update article to keep readers updated on PC activities, a job which has been shared by all councillors.

Planning

Planning applications have been a recurrent theme over the past year. Of particular note have been the review of applications for a new 'pre-prep' school facility at Moulsford Preparatory School and a farm shop, linked to playing fields for Cranford House School, both significant developments located in the north of the village. The PC has given very careful consideration and scrutiny to all planning applications, but we recognise that our decisions may not be universally agreed with. We have sought to establish constructive relations with both Cranford House and Moulsford Prep Schools so that any future developments will be able to be discussed thoroughly in light of implications for the wider village community and existing plans continue to be reviewed, particularly with regard to traffic issues.

Since October 2019, the PC has also been involved with the public consultation process instigated by the Friends of the Elderly regarding their proposed development at the Old Vicarage care home in the heart of the village. This development, we believe the largest single housing development ever proposed for Moulsford and formally classed as a 'major development' by SODC, proposes the building of 34 apartments in a spread of two-storey buildings with associated parking and facilities in the grounds of the present care home overlooking the Recreation Ground and other neighbouring properties. The PC facilitated public discussion of the plans with Friends of the Elderly representatives at the PC meeting in February, which was well attended by residents wishing to register their concerns. The planning application was submitted in mid-April and is underway at time of writing and the PC anticipates devoting significant time to representing the views of the village in its strong objecting response and to any subsequent revisions or appeals. As with any planning application, the PC continues to urge parishioners to use their right to comment on applications as an essential and valuable part in the planning process.

Other activities

- Issues with rotten wood discovered in some of the playground equipment led to the removal of some of the equipment for safety reasons. This was a great disappointment given the equipment had only been installed in 2014. In response, the PC has been investigating with manufacturers the best ways to protect and extend the life of the remaining equipment. We have also launched a project to review the playground and also the wider recreation ground to develop a longer term plan for replacing equipment and enhancing the environment of the recreation ground. We thank Clare Humphreys for her time and input on getting these reviews under way and for contributing to writing the grant application.
- Flooding of the Rec during February was monitored and SODC contacted in case of a groundwater flooding event.
- Continued liaison with SODC regarding the Packaged Treatment Plant installation.
- Met with Director of Education, OCC to discuss availability of school places for village children

Covid-19 response

The impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and restrictions placed on national life have been highlighted throughout the report, reflecting the deep impact that the crisis has had on all aspects of our lives. In addition to finding ways to ensure parish business continues, the PC has also developed a community network for parishioners needing support as they self-isolate or shield. Many thanks are due to Bernadette Sachse as lead PC co-ordinator of this effort and we are also deeply appreciative of over 50 people who rapidly volunteered to as neighbourhood co-ordinators or to carry out requests for help. Within two weeks, nearly 40 requests for help had been received and answered across the network.

Moulsford's strong community spirit is often cited: in this time of need, when everyone has been tested by challenges brought by the pandemic, the lockdown, restrictions and isolation, that spirit has bloomed. We truly have a community to be proud of and we thank you all for your part in it.

Acknowledgements

- The Moulsford Events Committee volunteers, with Dave Reynolds as Chair, Stephanie Musk as Treasurer and Bernadette Sachse as Secretary.
- The Pavilion Management Committee, with Nigel Mansford as Chair and Philip Sachse as Vice-chair, Peter Brass as Treasurer, Emma Shakeri as Secretary, Karen Gilmore as Bookings Secretary and Tony Hughes as Caretaker.
- Rupert Elvin and Morris Elvin for their work on behalf of the PC around the Rec
- Bernadette Sachse for managing Moulsford News
- The Moulsford News distribution volunteers, coordinated by Linda and Darryl Dixon
- Linda Dixon for her work as playground monitor
- Nigel Baker and the Wildflower Meadow volunteers
- John and Valerie Viner as local footpath wardens
- Veronica Shann as the Age UK Moulsford representative
- Gail Slinger, Linda Dixon and their volunteers for running the coffee shop at the Pavilion
- Moulsford Preparatory School for their printing of Moulsford News