**MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL PARISH ASSEMBLY HELD AT WILMCOTE VILLAGE HALL ON WEDNESDAY 19th MARCH 2025.**

**1. Present:** Cllr Stewart, Cllr Hesion, Cllr Shilvock, Cllr.McMillan, Cllr Boyes and between 75 and 100 members of the public.

**2. Apologies:** Cllr Ray, Chairman, Cllr Mahon.

**3. Chairman’s Report 2024/2025:**

**Reflections on 2024/2025**

At the Parish Council we are committed to being a responsible local council in everything we do. We are committed to contribute to the aims of a clean energy and net zero future and to this end we have invested in low energy street lighting. We also aim to support the shop, pub, and reduction in traffic speed particularly near our school. We also value the benefit the play area brings for our younger children in the parish.

Through the past year we have delivered good operational performance and so I want to thank those who have worked tirelessly across our council, as they played their part in keeping our council operating. Together we can use our extensive expertise to help support the communities in the Parish we serve. Our structure aims to empower each councillor for great performance, each councillor has their own area of responsibility.

Our focus remains on protecting our parish ensuring that the various planning policies (National Planning Policy Framework, SDC Core Strategy, and WPC Neighbourhood Plan) are met to create an environment we all enjoy.

We continue to monitor our internal control systems (standing orders) to ensure they reflect best practice as part of our continuing drive for improvement. We strive to take account of the views of residents in the parish in the council meetings and decisions made. Where necessary we will hold open public meetings to seek resident’s views on specific issues to ensure your voice is communicated to the District and County levels. Promoting a culture of openness and debate is one of my key aims and ensuring that we establish good governance to underpin a healthy culture. We always encourage residents to attend the WPC meetings to ask questions or raise concerns directly with councillors. We remain committed to the highest standards of public governance and best practice in all we do.

We deliver value for residents of the Parish operating within the planning frameworks of the government National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), the District Council Policies and our local Neighbourhood Plan Policies. These include street lighting, children’s play area, highway signage as well as grants to support activity groups in the Parish balanced with the desire to invest in services for residents of the Parish to deliver the Neighbourhood Plan which was supported by residents and remains our goal. Our commitment is to be a responsible business Parish Council and is central to the way in which we operate. We welcome direct engagement with residents to help informed decisions. For example, the public participation is a regular part of our agenda in which we seek regular feedback from residents to help to shape future actions. Continual improvement is our aim.

Safety is incredibly important to us, the people that work for us and the residents of the Parish, in particular the children, parents, and teaching staff at our primary school. It is imperative that we continue to monitor good safety behaviours and act where needed.

It’s important that we are open and transparent for all our residents, and that’s why we encourage residents to attend our meetings, our accounts are subject to independent audit to ensure we deliver strong economic value.

We recognise the hurdles in the move to create a 20mph speed limit throughout the parish and the ban on parking of cars on the pavement which is a particular problem around our railway station. We will continue to support these changes.

Finally, we recognise the cost-of-living pressures for some residents and aim to keep our parish council precept to near zero increase and manage all investments within the budget this provides.

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**SWLP – South Warwickshire Local Plan**

The biggest challenge to our parish in the past year has been the publication of the South Warwickshire Local Plan. This proposes the development of 6700 homes covering an area of Bearley and Wilmcote. A contribution to a consultation on the proposal has been made. We have had two meetings of residents to hear their views on the proposals. Below is the response we have submitted:

**Wilmcote Parish Council Response to Proposed Development of 6,700 Homes**

**Summary**
Wilmcote Parish Council, representing the majority of our residents, strongly opposes the proposed development of 6,700 homes near Wilmcote. This proposal would effectively create a new town, causing irreversible damage to our historic village, green belt land and local infrastructure. Key concerns include:

* **Loss of Green Belt and Agricultural Land** – Threatening open spaces, food security and violating core planning principles.
* **Severe Infrastructure Strain** – Roads, healthcare and public transport are already at capacity.
* **Flooding and Environmental Damage** – Increased flood risks and harm to air quality and biodiversity.
* **Heritage and Character at Risk** – Threatening Wilmcote’s historic identity, conservation area and tourism appeal.
* **Lack of Sustainable Justification** – Alternative sites exist and this proposal prioritises housing targets over local needs.

We urge Stratford-on-Avon District Council and the South Warwickshire Local Plan authorities to reject this development and seek more appropriate solutions.

**Key Concerns**

**1. Loss of Green Belt and Agricultural Land**

* The development would encroach on protected green belt land, leading to irreversible urban sprawl and the permanent loss of agricultural land vital for food sustainability.
* The Council must provide a clear technical justification proving that no other sustainable locations exist outside the green belt. As of now, this justification has not been produced.
* The Council must first produce a technical justification which demonstrates that there are no other more sustainable locations for this development elsewhere outside of the Green Belt.
* Through our District Councillor, Thom Holmes, we will be requesting the Council may consider requesting involvement in its production or at least sight of the relevant working documents as the work proceeds.
* The original green belt designation aimed to prevent the merging of settlements. Approving this development would result in Wilmcote and Bearley effectively becoming suburbs of Stratford-upon-Avon.
* With the UK already importing 60% of its food, safeguarding agricultural land is critical for national food security.
* Agricultural land classification data must be made available to assess whether this site is suitable for development. Wilmcote Parish Council challenges the Council on this point. There is a classification system for agricultural land which identifies land of the most value, in agricultural terms through to land which is of least value for either arable or livestock farming. Development must be directed towards land of least agricultural value in the first instance. Where is the access to this data for the land proposed for Wilmcote? We challenge the Council on this point.
* The principle reason for the original Green Belt designation is to prevent the coalescence of settlements. Even if a technical argument for the removal of land from the Green Belt, the principle of respecting existing settlement boundaries in identifying locations for new development and avoiding coalescence should still be respected. Under these circumstances Wilmcote and Bearley would not be a suitable location for a new settlement because Wilmcote and Bearley are effectively becoming suburbs of Stratford upon Avon Town.

**2. Severe Strain on Infrastructure and Public Services**

* **Road Network**: The A3400 and surrounding roads are already at capacity, with existing bottlenecks near Stratford, Henley-in-Arden and the A46 at Billesley. Increased traffic will worsen congestion and create safety hazards, particularly in villages where roads are used as rat runs. Villages are already being used as rat runs with motorists ignoring village speeds, especially the 20mph at school times with narrow and in places no pavements where young children walk to school.
* **Healthcare**: GP surgeries and hospitals are already overstretched and large developments often fail to provide sufficient new medical facilities.
* **Public Transport**: Existing services are inadequate, with no detailed proposals to address deficiencies.
* There appear more sustainable areas highlighted in the SWLP, in development terms. The significance of the existing transport and other infrastructure within and near to these communities must be considered in the identification of any new settlements. For these reasons  any new settlement would be better delivered if located near to the motorway, larger carriage ways and larger scale rail networks found at the northern boundary of the District.  These locations are closer to a number of large towns and the City of Birmingham so access to services and employment would be more easily facilitated.
* While proximity to a railway line may seem beneficial, infrastructure constraints mean a more suitable location for a new settlement would be closer to motorway and larger rail networks near the northern boundary of the district of Warwickshire.

**3. Flooding and Environmental Impact**

* Residents have raised concerns about flood risks in areas such as Featherbed and Pathlow. Increased development will only worsen drainage issues, heightening flood risks.
* There is already a sewage problem on Featherbed Lane and increased groundwater will only make the problem of sewerage worse.
* Dispensing of wastewater and sewage is already over running sewage facilities and the River Avon is highly polluted.
* Additional traffic and construction activities will harm air quality and biodiversity in this rural setting.

**4. Impact on Wilmcote’s Heritage and Character**

* Wilmcote is of historical significance, particularly due to its connection with William Shakespeare. Large-scale development threatens its unique identity and tourism appeal.
* These are assets of the highest significance and local planning authorities should not permit the loss of the whole or part of a heritage asset without taking all reasonable steps to ensure the new development will impact the asset and heritage of an historically important village as Wilmcote.
* Increased traffic and pollution will impact Mary Arden’s Farm and many listed buildings, some over 400 years old.
* Much of Wilmcote falls within a Conservation Area, where new developments must be carefully managed to protect historical assets.
* The scale of the proposal risks transforming Wilmcote and surrounding villages into an urban extension, fundamentally altering their character and identity.

**Resident Concerns and Consultation Feedback**

At a well-attended public meeting on 8th February, where the South Warwickshire Local Plan (SWLP) was presented, residents expressed strong opposition. Key concerns included:

* The proposal is driven by government housing targets rather than local needs.
* Profits from land sales should be reinvested into rural communities rather than benefiting a small number of landowners.
* A more balanced approach should be considered, with smaller, distributed developments rather than one massive settlement.
* If one massive settlement is the plan then other sites nearer larger scale rail networks found at the northern boundary of the District should be top of the list.
* Green belt once lost is lost forever!

**Conclusion**

Wilmcote Parish Council urges decision-makers to reject this development, as it would cause irreparable harm to our local community, environment and infrastructure. While we acknowledge the need for housing, this proposal is neither sustainable nor responsible.

We call on Stratford-on-Avon District Council and South Warwickshire Local Plan authorities to:

* Prioritise existing communities.
* Protect the green belt from unnecessary development.
* Explore alternative, more sustainable and stainable housing solutions.

If this site is allocated in the Local Plan, local councillors and parish councils must have a role in shaping the design, infrastructure and phasing of the development to minimise harm and secure necessary facilities for residents.

Throughout this period I have worked closely with the Chairman and councillors of Bearley Parish Council. They too reject the local plans and their submission to the consultation can be read on the Bearley website.

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**Effective Communication**

Effective communication within the community is important. Our aim is to reach all residents in the Parish and to achieve this we use various methods of communication, a Parish website ([www.wilmcotepc.co.uk](http://www.wilmcotepc.co.uk)), the Village Vine, the notice board opposite the village shop and social media. In special circumstances a leaflet is circulated to each house in the Parish.

**Effective Governance**

Each councillor has an area of responsibility, and I would like to thank them all for their hard work, dedication, and commitment throughout the year in dealing with the increasing volume of work that the Parish Council has to manage. We have a strong team with the varied range of skills and experience we need for the challenges ahead.

**Legal**

When Wilmcote Parish Council requires legal advice, it is available from Warwickshire and West Midlands Association of Local Councils (WALC). Using WALC helps to ensure that when legal advice is required the advice is provided as cost effectively as possible. When necessary, the Monitoring Office is consulted for views and guidance to ensure proper response from councillors.

**Reviews from Lead Councillors**

**Planning – Cllr Shilvock, Cllr Boyes, Cllr Mahon**

Planning Applications:

During the year Wilmcote Parish Council has submitted recommendations to Stratford District Council regarding 24planning applications relating to Wilmcote and Pathlow. Response to planning applications is becoming more complex as these need to be examined against National Planning Guidelines, SDC Planning Policy and the Wilmcote Neighbourhood Plan.

Where we need some professional planning input in complex cases, we engage the help of a planning consultant.

**Willow Wood Play Area – Cllr Boyes**

During the year considerable investment has made in new pieces of equipment which has proved very popular with children. The playground has been kept in good order with regular maintenance including grass and hedge cutting, strimming and litter picking.

Professional inspectors visit the playground once a month and produce a report; a more detailed inspection is carried out annually. As a result of their findings minor repairs have been carried out where needed.

**Road safety and Parking (Community Speed Watch Scheme) – Cllr Boyes, Cllr Hession**

Wilmcote CSW continues to operate to promote road safety and reduce incidence of speeding in the village. The speed watch team has become a larger team with a number of new recruits. They have been going through their training and certification which Paul has been organising. Speed Watch activities will begin later and regularly towards the end of March.

**Mary Arden Farm – Cllr Hession**

As part of an action group who met with the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust (SBT) Interim CEO and MP. The CEO has committed to removing barriers to access for the general public and plans to start a reopening programme from July with FREE £ access. However, they are very open to Wilmcote residents to use the grounds for events such as VE Day or a village Easter Egg hunt in association with the school. In conjunction I am working with the SBT to publish an article in the Village Vine communicating with residents. They are asking for volunteers - the more volunteers the more often they can open.

**Grant Applications – Cllr Shilvock**

The system for awarding grants to local organisations continues to work well. The aim is to ensure parity of opportunity for interested groups, transparency in the grant award process and appropriate use of Parish Council funds. Organisations were invited to submit applications and the dates and process was advertised locally.

**Parish Emergency Plan/Defibrillators – Cllr Stewart**

The Parish Council emergency plan and Emergency box were updated and approved by the Parish Council in the previous year. These will be reviewed annually.

The two defibrillator units at the Training Shed and outside the village shop remain in good condition with no vandalism to either unit. The gel pads have been changed and are up to date and ready for use. Neither unit has yet been called upon in an emergency.

**Mary Arden Inn – Resident Ingrid Everson**

Fleurets, the selling agents used by Greene King, informed me that The Mary Arden has been withdrawn from the market. It is one of a number of properties that have been withdraw.

The lease is now held by Sheldon Inns and Mark Seymour has been brought in as house manager.

In the March edition of the Village Vine you can read more about this really positive move and we wish Mark well.

**4. Issues of Particular Local Importance:** No issues raised by parishioners.

**5. Matters raised by an Elector of the Parish:** No matters were raised.

This meeting was immediately followed by the ordinary Parish Council meeting.