

## **Wick and Abson Parish Council - Chair's Annual Report 2023-2024**

### **Background**

Wick and Abson Parish Council was formed under the Local Government Act 1894 and represents the third tier of government. The parish benefits from nine, volunteer councillors who give their time freely, with no financial reward, and who are politically neutral. Councillors have broad backgrounds and experience, and work together to manage and improve village facilities, review planning applications, and support local voluntary organisations via financial grants.

### **Local elections 2023**

We began the year with the local elections that are held every four years in May. The election attracted nine qualifying candidates for the nine positions, and who were duly elected without contest. In November, Cllr Stallard resigned, and the Council has started the process to co-opt another Councillor to bring Council back up to full strength. At the same time, two Ward Councillors were elected, who attend most of our Parish Council meetings and offer valuable insight into the workings of our local unitary authority, South Gloucestershire Council.

### **Parish Council staff**

The Parish Council is ably supported by The Clerk, Jo Bray-Warner, who has provided excellent service to Council and the Chair, offered legal guidance, and acted as the responsible financial officer. This past year, the Chair has been supported by the Vice-Chair, Cllr Pete Crew, and I would like to thank Pete for his swift communications, incisive commentary and honesty. The Council also employs a park keeper, a park gatekeeper, a bus shelter maintenance operative, and has the benefit of about 20 litter picking and flower planter volunteers who help to maintain the village. These paid and volunteer staff quietly go about their business, often unnoticed, rarely appreciated by many, and so I wish to thank them publicly for what they contribute to parish life. I would also like to thank former Ward Councillor and now Siston Parish Councillor, Steve Reade, for his unwavering and continuing support and guidance over many years.

### **Parish assets**

The Parish Council owns local assets that include the village hall and the sportsground. These two, well-used operations are managed on behalf of the Council by separate management committees, again staffed mainly by volunteers. I want to pay tribute to and thank the volunteers who keep these important facilities running in good order, year in year out. The Parish Council also owns Brockwell Park, six bus shelters, three defibrillators, the village hall skittle alley (currently under restoration by volunteers), and six areas comprising some 8 acres of common land at Abson Green, Barrow Hill, The Green in Wick and three areas of Holbrook Common. The annual precept, part of our council tax, funds the maintenance of these assets.

### **Local voluntary groups**

On the topic of volunteering, there are many local organisations run by unpaid volunteers who deserve a mention. These include the Brownies, the Guides, the WI, the Memory Café, the Cotswolds Wardens, the Wick Walkers, the Freecycle and Community Cuppa team, the Friends of Wick School, the Friends of Golden Valley Nature Reserve, and the recently formed Friends of Wick Village. The Parish Council is pleased to support these voluntary groups who work hard to offer residents of all ages, a range of social events where residents may come together. Very recently, volunteers have established a Neighbourhood Watch scheme in Wick to gather intelligence and provide guidance about protecting persons and property; the Council was pleased to fund the NHW signage now on display around the parish. This group is considering setting up a Speed Watch team to monitor the speed of traffic travelling through Wick.

### **Wick village hall**

The hall has seen some changes over the last year. The 1950s constitution was changed from a charitable trust to a charitable incorporated organisation, with the Parish Council as the sole trustee, registered with the Charity Commission. This change absolves those managing the hall from personal liability which has deterred potential volunteers from helping to run it.

Repairs were undertaken to the roof to stop wet ingress that included works to valleys, some of the timber structure, felting and fascia boards. A subsequent buildings survey has revealed works are required to check for any movement in the structure. Currently, a project to install solar PV with battery storage is being pursued, funded by a rural community grant. Further works will be required to improve the surface drainage and resurfacing of the car park.

### **Brockwell Park**

The park continues to attract many visitors who enjoy this open green space. The BMX track has benefitted from some minor repairs and its future is yet to be decided. The children's play equipment is approaching the end of its life, and the Council is planning a programme of replacement over the next couple of years. An additional memorial bench was installed during the year, funded by the Anstee family, and the Commons Connection group is managing a biodiversity enhancement project with additional hedgerow at the top of the park, and a wildflower border along the footpath. The top boundary fence is to be repaired shortly. Further benches and pathways to improve accessibility are also being considered.

### **Planning**

The Council is a statutory consultee and reviews all planning applications within the parish. This year we considered some 20 applications. The planning system is designed to enable development, not hinder it, and most applications attract no comment. However, some can be deemed to be inappropriate in terms of size, style and location to which Council will object, although the planning authority may ignore Council's comments.

Two planning proposals did elicit much feedback from parish residents. Firstly, the proposed housing development of the land south of Church Road opposite the former Carpenters Arms, which was withdrawn just before it went to appeal; this brought over 40 residents to a public meeting who expressed their dismay at the loss of this important green space in the heart of the village. Secondly, South Gloucestershire Council's local plan phase 3, to build over 20,000 new homes over 15 years around the eastern fringe of Bristol, and mostly on green belt, green field sites, including 70 new homes in Wick. SGC refused a public meeting, so the Parish Council took this on itself; some 200 residents attended a public meeting to voice their concerns about the loss of green belt, increase in traffic, strain on local services already under pressure, with no assurances about improving local infrastructure. We had excellent feedback from residents.

### **Residents' feedback**

The Council receives regular feedback about potholes and the state of roads around the village, streetlights not working, overgrown hedges obstructing footpaths, damaged inspection covers, blocked drains and gullies, that fence in Church Road, and traffic speeding through the parish especially on the A420, Naishcombe Hill and Abson Road. Generally, these matters are not the responsibility of the Parish Council and may be reported by residents themselves, but it does refer them to the relevant department at South Gloucestershire Council and Avon and Somerset Police. Whilst we appreciate that all councils have endured years of reduced funding, it remains a source of frustration and disappointment that basic maintenance tasks are rarely attended to, especially potholes and drains, without a degree of persuasion.

### Financial overview (unaudited)

	Year ending		Variance £
	31-Mar-23	31-Mar-24	
1. Balances brought forward	179,100.00	152,204.00	
2. (+) Precept or Rates and Levies	85,000.00	85,000.00	0
3. (+) Total other receipts	3,610.00	25,667.00	22057
4. (-) Staff costs	24,407.00	22,645.00	-1762
5. (-) Loan interest/capital repayments	-	-	0
6. (-) All other payments	91,099.00	43,624.00	-47475
7. (=) Balances carried forward	152,204.00	196,601.70	
	Bal c/f checker	Bal c/f checker	
8. Total value of cash and short term investments	152,204.26	196,801.70	
9. Total fixed assets plus long term investments and assets	176,500.00	3,254,000.00	3077500
10. Total borrowings	-	-	0

We have significant expenditure in the forthcoming year to replace equipment in the park and further repairs at the village hall.

### In other news

In other news, and bearing in mind, as I said, that the Parish Council is politically neutral, we do manage relationships with members of political tribes such as our local Conservative MP, Luke Hall, who always replies to queries in a timely manner, who did visit the village in the period to hear parishioners' concerns, and voted to continue to allow Wessex Water to discharge untreated sewage into the River Boyd.

The new Labour/Liberal Democrat run South Gloucestershire Council is now charging council taxpayers more and simultaneously consulting on reducing services. It also consulted on its local plan phase 3, in which, in its opinion, the best option is to build over vast swathes of green belt while, ironically, contradicting itself in its climate emergency declaration, stating that green spaces are vitally important.

The West of England Combined Authority, a body including South Gloucs, Bath & NE Somerset and Bristol City Councils, another level of public administration that we pay for, and headed up by Labour metro mayor, Dan Norris, who suggested last autumn that town and parish councils be given the responsibility of running local bus services, presumably with a photo of him and his dog on the side of every bus, as we saw in Bristol.

Avon and Somerset Police, who were invited to attend our meetings again after a three year absence, asked the Council to move its meetings to accommodate their rota scheduling. The Council refused. Since then, we have had three visits from the local beat team, and we are seeing an increased presence around the parish.

We wrote to the former Conservative Police and Crime Commissioner, Mark Shelford about the lack of police attending our meetings. In what I will describe as a formulaic, frequently asked question response, Mark Shelford stated that it's not his job to hold the police to account, which makes me wonder what his job is for, and why we are obliged to pay for his office.

The late Tony Benn asked, "What power have you got? Where did you get it from? In whose interests do you exercise it? To whom are you accountable? And how can we get rid of you?" I would add, especially when you fail to work on behalf of those who pay for you.

### **Summary**

In summary, I have been privileged and very pleased to act as Chair of the Parish Council over the last year. It has been a busy time with several significant challenges that we have tackled head on. I have enjoyed the often robust debate, the generally courteous nature of the way we do business, and the support of the Vice-Chair, Councillors and our Clerk, for which I thank you. Finally, I would like to thank our families for enduring with grace and patience, the time taken away from family life that being a Parish Councillor can involve.

James Williams  
Chair  
Wick and Abson Parish Council

May 2024