

Annual Report: Wolston Parish Council Chair 2024 – 2025

2024-25 has been another year of challenge for the Parish Council, primarily due to a significant number of staffing changes and a reduction in Councillor numbers – we're down to six from a maximum of 10 at the current time - which in turn impacts on the capacity of those who remain. However, I am happy to report that as my second year in the Chair has progressed, particularly the second half of the year, the Parish Council has seemed better placed to address a number of long-term issues, e.g., working collaboratively to unravel complex Burial Board matters or managing sensitive negotiations with the key stakeholders involved in delivering and handing over the 'Management Building' on the Allotments. My thanks to all – officers and Cllrs alike – for your commitment to getting the job done!

In terms of challenges, last year I reported on probably the biggest challenge of all to be experienced by Wolston in recent times – I refer of course to the Storm Henk flooding event of 2 January 2024 that disrupted the lives and wellbeing of villagers on both Main Street and Brook Street, and the immediate aftermath as the community fought to steady itself. Little did we know that history would repeat itself in 2025 - almost to the day – when the village was once again hit by a flood event on 6 January, ironically just 3 days after there had been significant media interest in the village with regard to how the village had recovered from the Storm Henk event. More of that a little later!

As mentioned, the Parish Council has continued to improve its BAU approach. With this in mind, let us take a little time to celebrate some of the successes!

a). Planning and Delivering Events

2024-25 has seen the Parish Council deliver no less than 3 'commemoration' events at the War Memorial, i.e., our annual Remembrance Day along with the 80th D-Day and VE Day events. The Council has also delivered a very well received and well attended Christmas Market at the Village Hall – both inside and outside - as part of our annual Christmas Lights switch on, which in 2024 was led by the Mayor and Rugby Olympians. All events now require much more organisation than in previous years, including road closures and event planning, and the Parish Council now has well managed precedents in place, which will enable it to deliver similar, successful events in future years.

b). Allotments and Management Building

This has been a long, drawn-out process over a number of years and the cause of much upset due initially to local resistance in the village to the planning application for a 48-unit housing development. However, 2024-25 saw the long-awaited release of compensation funds to the Wolston and Brandon Allotment and Gardens Association (WBAGA). This was followed by robust input into the delivery of the Management Building, which eventually saw handover take place on 4 April, thus triggering a new era for the plot holders. The journey has not been without its problems and frustrations, and I am happy to offer my personal thanks to all those who have given up their time to play some part in getting this 'over the line' – a key

milestone! May I also offer a huge 'Wolston' welcome to those residents who have chosen to make Allotment Drive their home!

c). **Funding** – as in previous years, the Parish Council has not held back from approving vital funding to underpin many of our local groups and village assets. The list of those groups that have received funding includes:

Wolston Conservation Group
Wolston Leisure and Community Centre
Wolston and Brandon Village Hall
Wolston Juniors Football Club
Wolston & Brandon Flood Action Group (FLAG)

And not forgetting **Wolston Youth Club**, which will see a grant application considered at tomorrow evening's Annual Parish Council meeting.

I mentioned the impact of the latest **flood event** earlier – this was the second such event in as many years and on 6 January it once again tested the resilience of our wonderful community. The flood hit us in the early hours meaning we were caught out once more and saw a significant number of our Brook Street and Main Street residents directly affected, many of whom had not long returned home after the last flood event. This time the darkness, the cold and the incessant rain and snow were against us, and it took longer to assemble a team of volunteers to address the challenge of rising brook waters, which eventually cascaded into much-loved homes. However, there are some success stories to report, i.e., two properties on Main Street were not flooded this time due to the defences they had put in place following last year's flood event and two properties on Brook Street were 'saved' due to the actions of volunteers.

Talking of volunteers, we should never forget the efforts of those members of the community who stepped up and helped not only those at very immediate risk but also were quick to provide a makeshift 'base camp' at the Baptist Chapel. From out of nowhere, blankets and duvets appeared in order to keep warm those directly affected, which was quickly followed by the arrival of freshly made soup, hot drinks, sandwiches, and other welcome treats. Without this direct intervention, the latest flood would have caused even more disruption. How blessed we are to live in a village where kindness and community spirit burns so brightly!

So, will we ready if we are hit again is a frequently asked question? We know there is no single definitive solution, but the good news – if we can call it that – is that our Flood Action Group (FLAG) is working closely with the leading key agencies, i.e., the Environment Agency and the Flood Risk Management team at Warwickshire County Council, as well as Rugby Borough Council in an effort to ensure we are better prepared in the future. In addition to readily available sandbags and the flood defences that are now being put in place at individual properties, we are also seeing pro-active works taking place, e.g., ditches, gulleys and culverts are being cleared, and the Fosse Way Attenuation Pond is undergoing much needed works, which should be completed by September ahead of the next flood 'season'. Fund-raising events at the Rose & Crown and St Margaret's School have raised more than £8,000, which is being used to bolster our local flood defences and warning systems

to help ensure we are better prepared for future events. This is all being done with the support of the key agencies, although there is always room for more support from community members. Please don't leave it to everyone else – get involved!

Looking to the future, the last few months have been dominated by a number of proposed key policy changes that will likely have a long-term effect on Parish Councils across Warwickshire. The first of these is the proposed move to a Strategic (or Unitary) Authority, which despite Warwickshire surprisingly missing out on the first wave of reform, is still very much under consideration. The latest position on this issue is that following the central government request for the submission of 'Expressions of Interest' for the move to a Unitary Authority (or possibly two!), Warwickshire County Council duly declared its intention to be considered for the same - notwithstanding the change of administration at Shire Hall, the County Council is required to submit a detailed plan of how this would be done by mid-November. This would likely see Borough and District Councils amalgamated into one (or two) larger Council(s), which would in turn impact significantly on Town and Parish Councils and the potential widening of their responsibilities. Watch this space!

The second key policy change that is likely to impact on Wolston and many other rural communities is the draft Local Plan Preferred Option, which has just concluded a period of consultation. The Plan includes details of future house-building targets – 618 per annum across the Borough until 2045 – with large numbers currently recommended for the rural areas, e.g., 400 new homes at Long Lawford, 400+ at Brinklow and 700+ at Wolvey. Thankfully, Wolston has only 15 dwellings recommended for development, which is at the Telephone Exchange site adjacent to the cemetery on Dyers Lane. However, let us not forget the amount of water that poured down the Lane on 2nd January 2024. As a community and as a Parish Council, we need to ensure that the appropriate Authorities have all the correct measures in place before any further developments are approved in our village. We owe it to those residents who were previously affected by flood events!

We are blessed in terms of the number of volunteers and volunteer groups we have in the village – and they have our sincere thanks for their efforts. However, in terms of volunteers, the village and the Parish Council still need help with other initiatives, e.g., organising events in the village such as the Christmas lights switch on and/or finishing our Neighbourhood Development Plan and thus increasing our S106 or CIL payments from future developments. We are also still four Councillors short of a full load following a number of departures in 2024 as we head into the Parish Council Election year – just 50 weeks away – so do please help if you can as a volunteer and/or step up and become a Cllr and be a part of a changing landscape as Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) is rolled out – we can't do it by ourselves! Thank You.

TW – 26.05.25