



STRATTON ST MARGARET PARISH COUNCIL

Annual Report of the Council 2023/24

We in the Parish Council are proud of what we do.

Stratton St Margaret is one of the largest Parishes in the UK with an annual precept of £1.3million and has nearly 23,000 residents. We are larger than most towns in the UK. The Council holds 2 x allotments, 2 x burial grounds along with 10 play parks and over 200 acres of land. We work in partnership to deliver the Leisure Centre, here at Grange and we own and maintain the Community Halls and Parish Offices at Meadowcroft. Stratton St Margaret must be one of only a few Parishes who can boast three centres benefitting the community, the third being Beechcroft Library Community Hub, now in its sixth year run by the Stratton St Margaret Parish Council. The Council has 19 Councillors and 26 employees.

The Parish Council hosts regular community events and has a Council or Committee Meeting almost weekly. The events we hosted over the past year, include the Annual Assembly, Festival, Car boot, Christmas Carol Service, Allotment holders meet and greet. This year we added a Youth Christmas dinner and an Older generation Afternoon Tea to ensure we are catering for all.

We hold the annual Remembrance Service, in partnership with the Royal British Legion, which is popular with residents.

In many ways this has been a busy and momentous year for Stratton St Margaret. We have many things to celebrate, we have kept our precept to a 0% increase for the 5th year in a row, which me and my fellow Councillors believe is a massive achievement.

As for the Chairmans Charity, this year being the Prospect Hospice, the Council has raised a whopping £4789.09 which is THE highest amounts the Council has raised for a Chairmans Charity!

We are currently undertaking an exercise to enhance the Community Hub in Beechcroft Road and this year has seen the Parish Council go into partnership with Brew Books who will be providing the Community Café. We welcome them along today.

We have opened a Community Pantry to support food poverty in the parish and opened the doors of Meadowcroft on Christmas Day to give a free dinner to those in need. This pantry is giving around 100 items out per fortnight. We have opened the Library as a warm space to support the cost of living and have a community café running from Meadowcroft.

We have a strong Youth Provision within the Parish who have had approx.. 4800 interactions during the past year in the area, this includes Youth Groups and 121 sessions that cover the entire parish. We had a Homework Club based at the Library and dedicated educational and life skill speakers and workshops.



The Council is proud to hold the Local Government Award Scheme Quality Award which means: the council achieves good practice in governance, community engagement and council improvement. Quality councils go above and beyond their legal obligations, leading their communities and continuously seeking opportunities to improve and develop even further.

This year has seen the Council install a fairy trail, dragon trail and crocodile trail and launched an initiative to place painted rocks in Coleview.

We have a skatepark that was installed at Meadowcroft Park and now 2 x blue plaques in the Parish, one to commemorate John Arkell at Arkells Brewery and the other for the Spitfire crash on Ermin Street.

At Meadowcroft we now have a knife bin and bleed kit and defib machine and work to support safety initiatives for residents.

The Council has supported local organisations to the sum of £24,456 through the Grand Aid process, many of whom are here today.

We regularly work in partnership with many local organisations for the community and would like to give thanks for the support to Grange, Stratton Junior Football Club, BEST, Stratton Advice Point, SBC, Royal British Legion, Beechcroft Friends, Claridge's Fishing Club, White Hart Allotment Society and the Police.

We welcomed a mural of the history of Stratton this year, at the underpass by Greenbridge. This year has been a focus on the history of Stratton St Margaret with commemorating the Crocodiles and Dragon with a dedicated page on our website for this.

None of the above can happen without the hard work and dedication of all the Stratton St Margaret Parish employees and Councillors. From the Clerk, the Open Spaces Team, Finance Team, Library Team, Youth Provision and the Democratic Team, we offer our thanks for your continuing efforts. We should cherish our open spaces, brilliantly maintained by the Parish Council Open Spaces Team.

To the Councillors, thank you for all you do. Your voluntary time is a vital and integral part of the local scene.

Working together to make Stratton St. Margaret the very best it can be.

Cllr Tim Page - Chairman of the Council

Personnel

The personnel Committee is made up of the Chairs of our other committees and is usually chaired by the Council Vice Chair of the Council.

Among its responsibilities the Personnel Committee considers the conditions and welfare of staff including grievance appeals and any other matters relating to staff that the Clerk or councillors wish the Personnel Committee to review.

The Council has a total of 26 full and part time staff which cover all Council activities, from democratic, civic, open spaces, biodiversity, event management, youth activities, community initiatives and library.

Every successful organisation has to be well led. In Amy Loxton (our Clerk) we have a leader whose work ethic and style of management have driven the improvements we all see in the Parish.

Amy's brilliant team of senior managers: Zoe our Responsible Finance Officer, Chris our Deputy Clerk, Callam our Open Spaces Manager, Lee the Head Groundsman, are totally committed to delivering the high levels of service our Parishioners rightly demand. We also proud to have Cherry our Youth and Community Worker and Stacey from the Youth Team who is making such a difference to people in the parish.

As an organisation we are very fortunate to have been able to recruit and retain such talented people. The Council can only deliver with the hard work and boundless enthusiasm shown by our admin and support team: Jasmin who looks after burials, Madison who looks after allotments, Joanna who supports finance and Jess who is our media and website expert. Not forgetting our Grounds Team who keep our parish open spaces looking glorious and our committed Library Team, Vicky and Sheila and their volunteers who help run the Community Hub.

We Councillors owe a huge debt to the Parish Team who support the aspirations to give our residents what they want for a precept that represents value for money.

On behalf of both the Council and parishioners, I thank them for their dedication and their tireless work for those of us who live in the Parish.

Cllr Ravi Venkatesh – Vice Chair of the Council and Chair of Personnel

Finance

The Finance and General Purposes Committee meets throughout the year to oversee the finances, income, and expenditure of the Parish Council. It forms working groups as required to conduct more detailed examinations if they are considered necessary.

The committee scrutinises all Parish income and expenditure. It also reviews the budget proposals of the council and of the other committees and makes recommendations to the full council concerning the composition of the annual budget and the parish precept (the amount parishioners are asked to pay).

Councillors understand the difficulties the country has faced over the past few years and the ongoing cost of living squeeze we face at the present so we were determined not to ask for any additional money from hard pressed parishioners. We were equally determined not to see any reduction in the service offered. I am pleased to report that the finance committee recommended that the budgeted precept for 2024/2025 remain frozen at 1,369,964 pounds. This is the same level it has been for the past five years and comes despite the recent high levels of inflation. This recommendation was endorsed by the Full Council.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the finance team for the huge and diligent effort they have put in again this year. Working on our behalf, they oversee day to day income and expenditure and ensure Parish monies are spent and income collected in a proper and prudent way. They also ensure that the Parish receives good value for money spent. They do a fantastic job ensuring our day to day relationships with banks, suppliers, internal budget holders, contractors, and partners are conducted in a prompt, proper, and prudent way.

Cllr Barrie Jennings – Chair of Finance and General Purposes

Open Spaces

Firstly I would like to welcome Callam our new Open Spaces Manager. He's already gained a huge amount of knowledge in the short time he has been with us and has hit the ground running. I also wish to thank our previous Manager for many years of dedicated service to our Parish.

As you will know we have already started grass cutting. This is a major cost to the Parish involving approximately £9k worth of diesel and an overall cost in excess of 120k Our longer-term goal is to make this more sustainable and environmentally friendly when the technology becomes available and affordable.

We are currently spending in excess of 80k annually clearing rubbish from public areas. We have 140 bins which are emptied on a regular rota and employ a full time litter picker who covers all the main roads in the Parish on a three week rolling programme.

In the last year we have £3000 on new trees and flowers. Many of these trees were planted by volunteers! Another major expense is tree surgery costing us £25000 in the last twelve months using several different contractors and multiple contracts. Managing this is only possible using modern technology such as mapping camera, photo editing and location software apps.

We have 10 children's Play Areas within the Parish which are updated and renewed on a rolling programme. Again, this is a costly exercise but the well-being and safety of children using this facility is paramount and we will not compromise on this. Our new skate park was completed last year and has proved to be extremely popular and much valued by the mainly young people using it.

We have two very popular allotment sites. Which are hugely popular. Whenever I visit the allotments I am very impressed by the quantity and quality of the vegetables fruit and flowers which are grown there. One enterprising allotment holder has a number of beehives which not only help with the pollination of other allotment holders produce but also deliver a surprisingly large volume of delicious honey.

In our two cemeteries our crucially important work continues in the same way it always has. In the last year we have successfully delivered 17 full burials and 50 ashes burials. We are the only Parish council in Swindon delivering burial services.

Finally, I would like to personally thank our fantastic open spaces team who are out in all weathers working to make this Parish a clean and attractive environment to live and work in. They are all brilliant but I would particularly like to recognise Lee Plank who cheerfully took on additional responsibilities for the 7 months we were without an Open Spaces Manager.

Cllr Teresa Page – Chair of Open Spaces

Planning and Highways

Since May 2023 which is our new council year to April 2024 we have had over 80 planning applications the majority of these are extensions to properties in the parish I'm hoping that is partly due to the fact people love living in Stratton.

Building work is progressing on the land that was Catsbrain farm for the retirement village The former Groundwell park and ride is now an electric charging station. In Upper Stratton the Old Limes Building is being renovated and the new houses have been built. I'm afraid to say there has not been much progress on the Stratton education centre but a new roof has been put in place. Greenbridge retail park is still attracting businesses and jobs which is good for the community. I would like to thank the officers for putting together the agendas and minutes each month.

Cllr Andree Murphy – Chair of Planning and Highways

Youth Provision

The last 12 months have been a significant year in terms of our youth work provision. Last year the youth provision topic was covered within a subcommittee however in recognition of the good work happening within this area it was made a committee in its own right. The growth has continued with us making the decision last meeting to incorporate the wider community work into the remit too.

This growth has greatly been down to our youth and community worker Cherry. And although she is not able to be here this evening due to some much deserved annual leave, I want to take this opportunity to highlight her work and thank her for her efforts and contribution to our community.

As of last week we have over 5000 interactions with young people in our community over the last 12 months, that's on average 14 interactions every single day! This is no small feat with a very small team and these are numbers which you would expect of an organisation with far greater resources in terms of people and money behind them.

One of the great things which Cherry has done is also tried to make sure our provision meets the diverse needs of our community providing sessions for different groups such as neurodiverse & additional needs, LGBTQ+ and most recently a child bereavement support group. Not only content with running groups within the community spaces, youth provision also happens out and about in the parks and open spaces meeting young people where they're hanging out. This will ramp up again as the weather hopefully starts to improve!

The foundations of youth work are built on the 3 E's, informal Education, Equal Opportunity and Empowerment underpinned by building positive relationships with the young people. The delivery within the Parish embodies this. The programme of activities is wide ranging in topics, catering for many different interests as well as providing information about subjects relevant to their age group. For example over the last few months we've had a first aid course, cooking sessions, lego building, nutrition workshop, empathy workshop, self-defence and a girls only session run by an organisation called All Yours who provide period products and education for young people. These teach essential life skills in an accessible, fun and relaxed way.

The work which is happening within the Parish is incredibly valued by the young people who attend, so much so, a few of which have stayed after youth work sessions to attend our committee meetings to tell us about their experiences and how it is benefitting them being part of the groups. These stories which have been shared give examples of increased confidence, being a place where they can eat a meal and having the opportunity to go on residential trip which they haven't been able to do before. These new experiences are character shaping and it's an important element of our work with young people and I am happy to share that we have recently approved another residential which is currently in the planning.

At the last committee meeting we were also visited by a youth worker from another local youth work provider who supports some of our sessions. They shared about how impressed

they were with the provision at the Parish, the relationships that we're building with young people and even went as far to call us the Gold Standard of Parish youth work in Swindon.

This is a huge compliment as a few Parishes have been running youth and community provision for much longer than us.

A key element of the committee's work this year was helping to shape the updated Safeguarding Policy to ensure it meets our needs and provides protections for both our staff and volunteers as well as the young people we work with. This was also followed up with further safeguarding training for our employees who work with young people. As a committee we also approved the install of the bleeds kits and knife amnesty boxes which were installed last summer at both Meadowcroft and Grange Drive.

I would once again like to take this opportunity to thank Cherry for her hard work on delivering the youth work within the Parish, the quality of her work has not gone unnoticed by those within and outside the Parish and I look forward to seeing what we as a Parish can share next year as we expand her role into wider community groups.

Cllr Laura Butcher – Chair of Youth Provision

Property Management

I am immensely proud of the properties the parish council have. Our library is our greatest success, we have seen it go from strength to strength. Visitor numbers are up, book loans are up, opening hours are longer, community groups are more popular than ever. It is a thriving heart of our community. We have invested in improvements to the building too, notably entering into a partnership with Brew Book. I am pleased to say this has been a huge success and have been very popular in the last month since opening. This was the most requested improvement for the library when surveying the public and we are excited to see it in place. The Parish was successful in gaining a £50,000 grant from Swindon Borough Council to create the Café area and this money has created a brilliant community asset for many years to come. Hannah tendered to run the café and she was everything and more in what we were looking for. If you haven't already please stop by Brew book you will not be disappointed. While on the topic of the library, I would like to take this moment to thank all of the parish volunteers & the Friends of Beechcroft Library group, who are a tremendous asset to the library and to the parish. We are incredibly grateful for all their hard work in helping make the library the success it is.

Meadowcroft community centre has had a number of improvements and adaptations, our main aim this year was to install three phase electrics to the building which was completed in February. This gives us the ability to add an excellent solar energy system, air source heating and car chargers points. We have also spent time on making some better equipped to reduce its carbon footprint. By reinstating the zone heating and changing the lights to LEDs.

Our Grounds Depot had lots of investment this year with repairs to the roof and the installation of solar panels. The grounds depo is the council highest consumer of electrical. This is mainly due to our two electric vehicles and our electrical hedge trimmers, mowers, drills etc. With the new solar system we are now producing around 75% of our own energy. The Grounds depo also had a new security system installed to protect the site.

Grange Leisure Centre, where we sit today, has continued to grow in popularity with the community. We are very pleased that the leisure centre continues to prosper and provide excellent services to the community.

We have also been proud to partner with Stratton Juniors Football Club in taking on a lease of the building at the St Lukes site. This has allowed the club to expand and provide more and better facilities for the young people that attend.

Green Road Chapel, this year the council restored the floor and the pews. This is our oldest building built in 1860s. It's a beautiful building with a lot of history.

Over the next year we plan on replacing the floor at Meadowcroft and invest into our pavilion at Meadowcroft.

These buildings are community assets and it is great to see them in such regular and popular use, and I look forward to us continuing to improve them to be the best they can for the community.



I would like to extend thanks to our outstanding Deputy Clerk, Chris Matthews, who leads the property management and compliances in the parish council. Chris ensures by using his excellent diligence the continued safety and security of our properties. I would also like to thank our librarians and our caretaker, Gary, for his hard work in renovating our buildings.

Cllr Tom Butcher - Chair of Property Management Committee