

Minutes of Dorchester Annual Parish Meeting 2025 Wednesday 7th May 7.30pm In the Abbey

Councillors Present Chairman Mike Corran, Vice Chairman John Taylor, Councillors Mike Atkinson, Chris Hill, Stephen Woods, Robin Jones, Becky Waller, Jon Brydges.

Robin Bennett District Cllr. Gavin McLaughan County Cllr.

Approximately 50 residents attended.

1. Receive & approve Apologies for Absence. None.

2. To Approve Minutes of the previous Annual parish Meeting 1st May 2024 – to be signed at next Council meeting.

3. Dorchester Parish Council's Annual Report

Like last year our format tonight will consist of an update from me on what the parish council has been up to, then our clerk, Jenny, who is also our responsible financial officer, will update you on our finances for the past year and then, after a few questions, we will end the formal part of the meeting and invite you to visit the four zones we have at the back of the abbey to give you a chance to discuss the Dorchester2030 initiatives in more detail.

I would like to start my annual updates with some well deserved thanks for all the great work that goes on in our community.

Firstly to all your parish councillors who put their energy and passion into serving our community. This year we have seen two councillors retire, Mark Williams, who served on the council for most of the past two decades and Charlotte Garside. I'm delighted that Robin Jones and Steve Woods have stepped up to fill those vacancies so we continue to have a full set of councillors with a wide range of skills and interests.

I would also like to thank our district and county councillor, Robin Bennett, who has helped us with ideas, contacts and funding on occasions. Robin is standing down as our county councillor but will still be with us as our district councillor.

Our parish clerk, Jenny Welham, has led a major transformation of how our parish council works and the councillors have been delighted with the way she has worked hard with us to modernise the way we work. Jenny was not able to be at last year's meeting so this is her first Annual Parish Meeting in Dorchester. So please do say hello to her when we end the formal part of the meeting, she will be waiting for you at the back of the room.

Lastly, but by no means least, our thanks are due to the mass of volunteers and businesses who make our community tick. So thanks are due to those who work on the Hurst, with GreenDoTs, in the various activities centred around the abbey, those who work on our Dorchester2030 working groups, those who pick litter, plant bulbs and

many other things besides. And also to our local businesses who provide both jobs and activities and social life for residents and visitors, our pubs and hotels, our amazing Coop team who continue to be a brilliant example of a local shop, our farms and cafes who welcome us all in.

As you may well know, the government is looking to radically restructure local government. There are several options being put forward for the government to decide upon but whichever way they decide to go, parish councils will remain as the vital local element that focuses on our local priorities. To make sure we can do this, whilst the wider funding environment remains very tight, we have raised our parish council precept again this year to make sure we have the funds both now, and in the future, to do what you want us to focus on.

So, what has the parish council been doing for you? Let's cover this in two parts, firstly the operations of the things we are responsible for and then the Dorchester2030 initiatives.

Our most important task is to maintain the areas we own as a parish council. We have the rec, the allotments, the cemetery and the closed churchyard by the abbey to look after. In addition we choose to look after a number of footpaths and verges, sometimes supplementing the work of the county council to deal with priorities we have chosen as a community.

This year we made the decision to transfer how we manage our grass cutting, hedges and trees to a new provider, an Oxfordshire based company, BGG, who look after a large number of parish councils in Oxfordshire and also, rather handily, are responsible for the cutting of roadside verges for OCC. They took over on 1st April and we also made the decision to increase the scope of their work to provide better maintenance of things like the hedges by the rec and allotments and also to look after more regularly some more important footpaths, such as those down to the bypass bus stop.

We are lucky to have wonderful venues at the Abbey and Bishops Court Farm that attract lots of people and, of course, their cars. We have spent some time working with both the abbey and the farm to try and do parking for big events better so they don't disrupt residents more than necessary. This is not easy, but we have changed things so we use both the Rec and Abbey View (weather permitting) car parks for more events. It won't always be perfect, visitors have the right to park on the highway whatever signage we put up. And we have also recruited some residents, currently all young, We will see how things go.

This year we launched a new, upgraded PC website. As well as holding the usual information this has allowed us to provide a way for residents to sign up for information updates from our clerk on things like road closures. If you haven't signed up, and over 80 households have then do so, it's a useful service.

Prompted by a request from a resident we have put in place an updated policy to allow residents to install memorial benches or, on occasion, trees to loved ones who have

passed away, in the cemetery and on the rec. If you want more information you can contact the parish clerk.

Allotments – the allotments are largely managed by the allotment committee with the parish council making sure there is water, skips and the outer hedges are maintained. The allotments remain popular although they do have some spaces available....

The parish council is allowed to make donations that support our community. We get a number of requests each year. This year our largest donation has been our regular support of Green DoTs. We always welcome requests from organisations or groups so if you have an idea you want PC support for then do contact the clerk and we will see if we can help.

Planning has not overly taxed the parish council this year, there have not been any significant or controversial planning applications submitted. And given the governments intent to review planning law we have taken the decision to suspend refreshing our neighbourhood plan until things become clearer. If you are interested in wider house building plans in our area then SODC produced a very clear documents a few months ago about their plans for the next few years which you can find on their website. From our perspective it places Dorchester in the lowest priority category but of course we are expecting developments nearby in Berinsfield in due course.

One of the tasks we asked Jenny to prioritise was to update our systems and processes, how we manage our assets, records, finances, governance etc. This might sound a bit dry, but it is important that your parish council works to a high standard. I'm delighted to say the transformation priorities we agreed with Jenny have been completed and the governance of the PC is now where we want it to be. We owe Jenny considerable thanks for the speed with which she has moved things on.

So, what of Dorchester2030?

To remind you we agreed 4 priorities in response to the D2030 survey we did in 2023 and which we launched at last year's APM; to refurbish our pavilion; to seek to promote affordable housing; to address a range of traffic issues; to develop a nature recovery plan.

We are delighted with the overall progress on the stretching goals we have set ourselves. But there is, of course, a lot more to do. You will have the opportunity to discuss these priorities in more detail in smaller groups after we end the formal part of the meeting but I'll give you the highlights of each workstream.

The pavilion – we have made good progress with the considerable efforts of the working group which includes councillors, our sports clubs who are playing a major role on both the vision and how we raise the money and a good number of other residents who are giving their time and energy. Many of you will have been amongst the over 100 residents who came to the pavilion a few weeks ago to see the progress and look at the options. And you gave a clear idea of what you wanted to see happen, delivery of a modern single storey pavilion for the next 50 years which supports, cricket, football and tennis

for young and old, boys and girls. So the working group is pressing on, funded by the parish council at this stage and those plans will soon be facing into the challenge of raising grant money to fund our plans.

Affordable housing – following considerable investigation into the best way to deliver and maintain affordable housing in Dorchester, the working group held a well attended meeting here in the abbey a few months ago with external speakers. That meeting supported the establishment of a Community Land Trust to follow the model used by a number of other communities in Oxfordshire. The land trust, provides a vehicle for raising funds and then holding assets depending on precisely what plan we support. That CLT is now legally established and is now looking at possible sites in Dorchester. We won't say anything else on those at this stage as its early days but we will share information as and when plans crystalise and we can speak with more certainty.

Traffic – our traffic working group have been focused on three areas; bypass speeding, accidents and noise; speeding on roads with in the village, Henley Rd, Abingdon Rd and within the 20mph limit; parking on the high street. I'm delighted to say that our decision to work robustly but constructively with OCC and their Vision Zero initiative, which is trying to reduce serious road accidents, and with the help of Robin Bennett and our local MP, Freddie van Mierlo, has paid off. We encouraged a speed survey which showed some shocking speeding with regular vehicles over 90mph and gave a call to action. We have already been consulted on the A4074 being the first road in Oxfordshire to be changed to a 50mph limit and whilst not formally approved by OCC we fully expect that change this year. In addition, we expect the stretch of the A4074 past Dorchester to be reorganised with fresh lines painted which remove the central hatching that enables so much of the speeding, again we hope to see this happen later this year. This is real progress and whilst we are naturally interested in monitoring of resulting traffic speeds, we even have TVP engaging a bit better now. On the speeding within the village, OCC have rejected our approach for funding for flashing signs as they are prioritising funding 20mph limits. We are interested though in establishing a community speedwatch team, using cameras which feed data to the police, the most popular way of controlling speed within Oxfordshire but to do that we need enough volunteers to step forward to run it, so please contact us if you are interested. Lastly, we hope to lay out some reasonable guidelines for parking on the high street which is sympathetic to the needs of residents with cars but also to those with buggies and lower mobility.

Nature recovery plan – a NRP is important to provide a framework for initiatives to promote wildlife. Work is ongoing to document what is going on inside the village and we hope to finish that process in the next few months and share it with the community. In the meantime the parish council has approved a biodiversity policy that ensures the environment is taken account of in all our decisions. Alongside the efforts of the farms in the parish and Green DoTs we are keen to encourage local initiatives and possible twist the arm of the parish council or other grant givers to help. So, if you have ideas, let us know.

Before we come to any questions and then to our breakouts to discuss D2030 we will get a financial report from our Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer.

4. Dorchester parish Council's Financial Report

The Clerk gave a summary of the process the PC follow with setting a Budget to present to South Oxfordshire District Council to be paid their "precept" which is funded from Council Tax.

The PC are governed by several best practices for their finances and they need to hold General reserves for eventualities and any extra ordinary unplanned payments. The Clerk was pleased to report that this past financial year very little had been drawn from the general reserves and the Pc ended the year in a small amount of credit.

The PC are currently going under scrutiny by their Internal Auditor, when this is finalised the Annual Governance and Accounts will be sent to the External Auditor. However, in the meantime any member of the public can request a copy of the unaudited Annual Accounts by request to the Clerk and they can be emailed or posted to on request.

The Chairman then inited questions, several residents had questions which were dealt with. The meeting then broke out to the D2030 groups.

5. D2030 – Working Groups - break out sessions to update progress and take questions.

Meeting closed 9.00 pm