

RUSKINGTON PARISH COUNCIL

ANNUAL REPORT 2022/23



Chairman of Ruskington Parish Council Annual Report for 2022/23

Cllr Owen Ditch

Introduction

As the recently appointed Chairman of the Ruskington Parish Council (RPC), it is my duty to provide an Annual Report recording some of the highlights, achievements and challenges during the previous year, as well as to 'signpost' some of the plans we have for the future. Much has happened in this post-covid period with many of us still fondly remembering the Platinum Jubilee Celebrations of Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II in February 2022, only to learn the sad news of her passing just 7 months later. That sadness gradually gave way to celebration and optimism as our new monarch, His Majesty, King Charles III, was crowned in May 2023, an occasion which our Village acknowledged with many events culminating in a hugely successful and well-attended Families Fun Day.

As a village, we continue to grow with a population of more than 6000 residents and a rapidly increasing housing stock in excess of 2000 dwellings. Indeed, for administrative purposes, this year, our Parish has been recategorized from 'Small or Medium Parish', to 'Large Parish or Small Town'. Of course, such expansion can bring benefits as well as pitfalls with an increased population generating more receipts for local projects, while at the same time, putting extra pressure on our infrastructure such as roads, schools, shops, Doctors' Surgeries etc. As a Parish Council, we may make comment on such developmental initiatives but, in reality, we have little influence as they are invariably the result of Directives from Central Government passed down through County and District; however, local funding does filter down to our coffers – not only through increased 'Precept' receipts – (that's the small percentage of the Council Tax that the RPC receives to provide the services described in this Report) but we also receive a 'one-off' Community Infrastructure Levy receipt based on the size and number of new dwellings, income that must be spent on Community Projects within 5 years of receipt; more of which later.

In a small departure from the usual format of previous Annual reports, I have added photographs and diagrams to illustrate some points. Also, on this occasion, I thought it prudent to pay tribute to the longstanding outgoing members of the RPC Team in recognition of their service. I hope you find this Report useful and informative.

People

Cllr Graham Conway. I should like to pay tribute to Graham Conway who for 8 years has served the RPC and our Village with selfless dedication, and for the last 3 of those years, as our chairman. Graham brought great experience to the post as his pre-RPC employment roles including owning and running his own Private School and serving as a Local Magistrate – some would say essential qualities to guide a disparate team of councillors, but I could not possibly comment. In particular, Graham's skills honed through his years as a Magistrate enabled the Council to navigate through a number of potentially challenging employment and legal issues allowing us to make timely and accurate deliberations and to formulate considered solutions. In addition, his business acumen helped formulate the RPC Financial Policies thereby contributing to our overall budgetary efficiency. Graham was a great 'champion' for environmental issues, relentless in his pursuit of innovative and sometimes 'novel' approaches - even if his visionary methods did not always gain immediate universal

support. Time, however, served to confirm the wisdom of his ambitions and many initiatives - as detailed in the Environmental section of this Report – serve as a legacy to his foresight, tenacity, and knowledge. Graham also worked tirelessly setting up websites chronicling and mapping both the ‘Closed’ Graveyard in the ‘All Saints’ Church and the Sleaford Road Cemetery. We thank Graham for his sage leadership and unwavering support during his time in office and wish him every success with his next challenges.

Cllr Cunningham. Also standing down as a Councillor after serving our community for 29 years is Peter Cunningham, MBE, and although it is beyond the scope of this Annual Report to do justice to all of Peter’s contributions, I thought it appropriate to include some highlights. Peter joined the Council in May 1994, becoming Vice Chair in 2000 before stepping-up to the position of chairman in 2003 - a post which he was to hold until 2014. Peter also served with distinction as ‘Chair’ of the Finance and Policy Committee and, over the years, was also an active contributor to the Environment, Planning and Human Resource Committees. Worthy of particular note were his achievements relating to the Sports and Recreation facilities within our Village, as he was the driving force in the initiation and creation of the Elmtree Road Play area and the refurbishment/building of the Parkfield Pavilion and Changing Rooms. An accomplished and experienced resource and systems manager with a comprehensive understanding of budgetary procedures, Peter used his experience gained from the years that he spent as a Senior Officer in the Royal Air Force to help develop many of the ‘Finance’, Safety, Environmental, Recreational and Personnel Policies - many of which form the basis of Parish Council’s operating guides in use today. Peter leaves us to concentrate on his other passions such as acting as a host and guide at the Bomber Command Visitors’ Centre in Lincoln, Public Speaking, volunteering in our Village Library and his Rotary Club duties. We thank Peter for his exceptional and sustained contributions and wish him continued success in his future endeavours.

Cllr Sarah Tongue. Sarah served as a Parish Councillor for over 8 years and as Vice Chair for the last 4 years, an important role that encompassed acting as a Line Manager to the Parish Clerk and providing professional input to both the Finance and Human Resources Committees. With a seemingly endless appetite for hard work, Sarah was the driving force behind many village recreational activities, the most recent of which was the very successful ‘Fun Day’ in May of this year, an event that saw hundreds of parishioners come together to enjoy an extremely well organised day of games, activities and refreshments.

As a qualified Parade and traffic management supervisor, Sarah has regularly organised teams of volunteers responsible to ensure the smooth running of village events, most notably, during the Annual Remembrance Sunday Parade and Ceremonies. As the proprietor of a very busy village pub and with the increasing needs of her family to consider, understandably, Sarah has decided to take a break from RPC duties although she has agreed to provide continued support to the Council and has not ruled out returning at a future date. We thank Sarah for her unstinting and detailed work as a Ruskington Parish Councillor and wish her all the very best for her future endeavours.

New Team Members. Cllr Anne Jennings joined the Council in October 2022 and has already made valuable contributions to the Human Resources Committee.

Scott Johnson joined the team as a part time Administrative Assistant, his previous experience as a Parish Councillor proving invaluable to our growing operation and already, he has improved the ways Council connects with its community and developed the website.

Steve Collett joined the team on 5 April 2023 as the Caretaker for Buildings and Play Equipment, bringing with him many valuable skills that are having a positive impact on our village. Already he has undertaken training and is now qualified to routinely inspect our play equipment. In addition, he has inspected all Parish seating and benches repainting and repairing as required and installing additional litter and dog waste bins around the village.

Ben Pallister joined the team on 3 April 2023 as the Parish Caretaker. As well as litter picking, Ben's role is to educate dog owners on the need to keep their dogs on a lead and to scoop, bag and bin the poop. Ben is settling in very well and has been praised by the public for his work in tidying the entrance to the cemetery.

Team Success.

RPC was runner-up in the Lincolnshire Authority for Local Councils, Council of the Year award 2022. Council was recognised for its environmental work and its community engagement and involvement, and the Clerk and Deputy Clerk were joint runner up for the Clerk of Year 2022.

Environmental Issues

This has been a busy year for the environment committee, with fantastic work from our environmental caretaker, Andy Doughty.

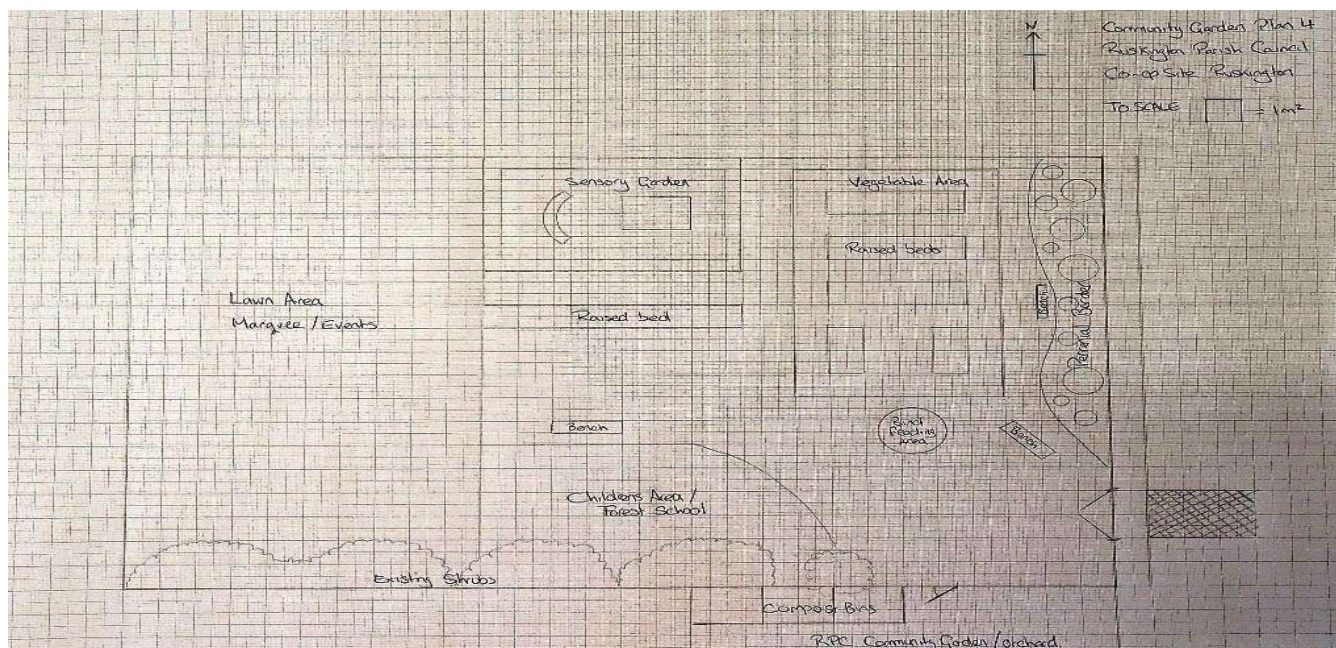


Figure 1 Drawing of Plans for the new Community Garden

Community Garden.

The existing garden behind the Parish Office has undergone a transformation, with new hedging planted, new composting space, mown areas and the development of wilder spaces for wildlife. All of our bird boxes have been occupied this year. In addition, we have leased the grassy area at the back of the co-op car park, which is situated behind the parish garden. This area has been fenced off from the car park and we plan to make it a welcoming community space for all to enjoy. The plans include a sensory garden, community planning space, children's area and a grassy space for community use. Both areas require further funding and preparation before they will be ready to open to the public, but we remain optimistic that these plans are achievable.

Allotments.

The Small Holdings and Allotments Act 1908 imposed a duty on councils to provide allotments if six or more people say that they want them. Ruskington has 64 allotments and demand usually exceeds supply. RPC strongly encourages the provision of these plots as, not only do they have the potential to provide an economical and nutritious form of organic food, they can improve physical health through ongoing maintenance, and provide a sanctuary of calm which can facilitate improved mental health. For details of cost, availability, and conditions of hire/use, please call into the RPC Office.

All Saints Churchyard.



All Saints Parish Church

'The Living Churchyard' project

The church and the parish council are embarking on an exciting project to bring the churchyard to life, creating a sanctuary for the living and the dead. We believe the churchyard should be a haven for plants and animals, as well as a pleasant and reflective area for the congregation and visitors.

Encouraging biodiversity


Churchyards and burial grounds often contain 'time capsule quality' soil which has avoided the plough and has been unfertilized, essentially 'sleeping meadows' that can wake up under the right conditions. By mowing less frequently and removing grass cuttings we aim to recreate a biodiverse wildflower meadow that will benefit pollinators and other insects. This, in turn, will provide food for bats, shrews and birds, including our local summer visitors, the swifts.



What are we doing?

- **Mowing less frequently** - this will encourage flowers and discourage coarse grasses. We will mow along the boundary and next to the paths to ensure ease of access and visibility.
- **Sowing locally sourced seeds** – Lincolnshire Yellow Rattle seeds have been sown to reduce the vigour of the grasses. Local wildflower seeds will be sought to enhance other areas over time.
- **Installing bat and swift boxes** – we will create homes for our local bats and swifts to increase the population size of these declining species.

A selection of the beautiful flowers already recorded in our churchyard: from left to right, Hoary plantain, Common Knapweed, Pyramidal Orchid, Harebell, Common Cat's ear, Oxeye Daisy, Bulbous Buttercup and Yellow Oat-grass



There has been great progress in the naturalising of the churchyard. The initially vigorous grasses have been tamed by the addition of yellow rattle, a parasitic plant that steals nutrients from grass, reducing their growth. Yellow rattle seeds have been collected each year and spread around. Extra seeds will be planted in horseshoe hollow to replicate the effects there. Information boards have been placed at the entrances to provide information to the community about the purpose of wilding and what it might mean for the churchyard. Over time we hope to see more species which we hope will naturally become established.

Information board for the churchyard identify wildflowers appearing in the new meadow areas.

Horseshoe Hollow.

Horseshoe Hollow

What is Horseshow hollow?

This area is a seasonally flooded water meadow. By letting the beck flood here in winter, we reduce the risk of flooding elsewhere in the village.

Making space for nature and people

This green space at the heart of our village provides access to natural areas for the community to enjoy. With careful management, we hope to encourage more wildlife to use this space too.

Encouraging biodiversity

A range of habitats will provide homes for lots of different plants and animals. These include:

1. Hedgerows and areas of 'scrub'
2. Wildflower meadows
3. The beck and its margins
4. Woodland

Woodland

Growing trees lock up carbon and provide roosting sites for birds and bats. A mature oak tree can support over 2300 species!
What are we doing? We are planting extra trees in the woodland areas and maintaining a walkway through them. We will create and interactive trail with information for the different tree species.



Hedgerows and areas of 'scrub'

Hedges, scrub and tussocky grasses will provide shelter for small mammals, reptiles and birds. Hundreds of rare species of plants insects and birds in the UK rely on this habitat.
What are we doing? The hedges will be thickened by extra planting, while the scrub and tussocky grasses will develop naturally. These areas will only be cut every few years.



Wildflower meadows

The UK has lost over 95% of its wildflower meadows, which provide homes for rare plants, support a huge variety of insects and attract insect-feeding mammals, reptiles, birds and bats.

What are we doing? We are only mowing twice a year and removing the cuttings to reduce the vigorous grasses, making space for wildflowers.



The beck and its margins

The limestone beck is home to water voles, which are an endangered species and protected by law. It also has water plants such as yellow flag iris and wetland margin species, such as ragged robin.

What are we doing? We are reducing access to the banks of the beck, allowing the plants to grow to provide food and shelter for the water voles.



Ruskington Parish Council

The new mowing regime for Horseshoe Hollow, which involves cutting and collection of cut material to reduce soil fertility, started in 2021. This year we hired a new cutting contractor with good ecological knowledge to cut twice in the year. The cuttings are being bailed and collected by a local farmer. Not only is this much cheaper than the previous contractor price, but the work has been done to a high standard with cutting taking place in only the areas specified by the council. The banks of the Beck are being managed with the needs of the information board for Horseshoe Hollow water voles in mind. We received 695 trees from the Conservation Volunteers Trust, which have been planted along the eastern boundary (mostly Hawthorne), some for hedging, and, in the northeast corner, to develop into mature trees. An oak tree was planted in the southern area. In the southwest quarter, a path is being maintained through the trees, with plans to create a tree identification trail for children. This winter we plan to improve the hedging along the northern boundary. Going forwards we would like to encourage a community 'Friends of Horseshow Hollow' group that could help with elements of the management plan.

Memorial Garden. A new tree was planted in memory of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II to mirror the tree planted for Prince Phillip. New planting is gradually being introduced. We plan to re-lay the gravel area within the Memorial Garden and remove the outer paths which are not well used.

Cemetery. A new ashes scattering area is still under development.

Litter and the NKDC Litter Picking Grant.

The perennial problems with the irresponsible discharging of litter and the failure of some dog owners to remove faeces continues on public paths, highways, open spaces, play areas and sports fields. Members of the RPC maintenance team spend many hours to rectify this problem and have recently had to increase the hours of our Litter Warden, thereby incurring additional costs which could be better utilised on community project or village enhancement schemes. We remain grateful, however, to the enthusiastic group of volunteers who routinely help to collect this waste throughout the village.

Ruskington Parish Council works with NKDC to remove and prevent littering and dog fouling incidents in the village, and applies annually for the NK Litter Picking Grant which goes towards the equipment, additional bins, and people power to keep Ruskington clean, tidy, safe and litter and dog poo free.

Recreational Matters

Parkfield Play Area. As was reported last year, the project to enhance the play park facilities at the Parkfield Road Sports Field was well underway made possible by the hard work of RPC Staff and Councillors who successfully secured FCC Community Foundation funding. I am delighted to report that this project is now complete and has been enthusiastically received as a valuable enhancement to our recreational facilities. Work continues to identify further sources of funding to improve our village services and it remains our goal to provide inclusive and accessible facilities available to all regardless of age, gender or abilities. All such projects are preceded by a Consultation exercise in which all parishioners are urged to participate.



Figure 3 The Completed Play Park Project at Parkfield



Figure 4 Close-up of Play Park Activities

Community Café and Pavilion Refurbishment. Plans for the continued development of a community café and the Pavilion building continue with initial consultation feedback showing great support for this initiative. There was enthusiasm for expanding the use of the Pavilion to include:

- An outdoor, sheltered seating area perhaps incorporating a ‘serving hatch’ for customers to use whilst accompanied by their dogs.
- Better indoor furniture, decoration and toilet facilities.
- A panoramic window within the café to allow viewing from indoors.
- An expansion of opening hours and menu offers.

We are extremely grateful to Lincoln School of Architecture and the Build Environment department at Lincoln University have provided advice and design concepts of what could be achievable (example below) which are available on the RPC Website. Further ‘end-user’ consultation will take place over the coming year although, the final decision will depend on support for the project and available funding: the greater the support, the more likely funding will be available. Currently, the café kitchen has been partially refurbished and received Local Authority Environmental Health Authority certification to offer refreshments to sports teams and their supporters.

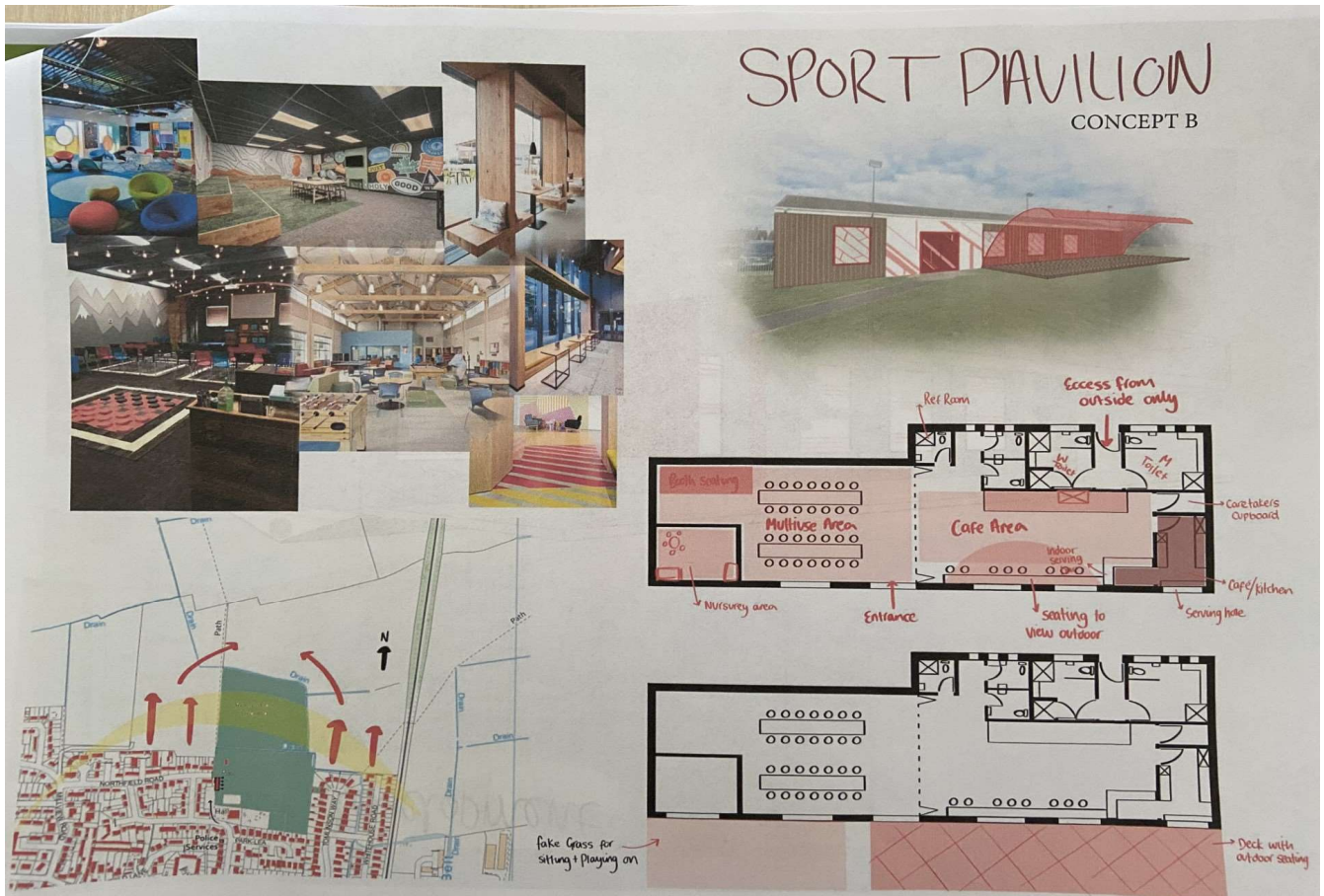


Figure 5 Artist's Vision of Pavilion Development

Parish Office



Figure 6 RPC Offices

As agreed last year after a Public Consultation exercise, the RPC ended its lease of the offices on High Street, North, and entered into a Mortgage agreement to purchase the property. This was to be a cost-neutral arrangement but offering the potential to develop the rear of the property to generate income from commercial renters and the opportunity to enhance community facilities. An Architect's drawing was commissioned, and planning permission was secured. Three contractors provided detailed project plans and method statements and the successful bidder was chosen. In selecting the successful contractor, in line with the RPC's Environmental Policy, Councillors scrutinized the Environmental credentials of those bidding, insisting – amongst other things - that the most energy efficient

systems (heating, lighting etc.) were installed, solar panels were fitted and electric vehicle charging points were included. Work is expected to start in the next couple of months and will include the following:

- (i) An extension to the current Parish Office space to include a comfortable reception space for visitors to seek information/advice.
- (ii) Formation of four 'Office' areas to be rented for use by the village community.
- (iii) Ad hoc meeting/social areas for more informal gatherings, and
- (iv) A communal kitchen and washroom facility for community users and Council employees

Finance

The precept budget (the percentage of the Council Tax RPC receives to run and maintain our green spaces and services) for the year 2023/2024 was agreed by Council on the 19 January 2023 showing a 16.28% increase on the previous year. This equated to £17.73 per year for Band D and equivalent properties, (£1.48 per month). The RFO reports income and expenditure against budget quarterly and action is taken when and if any variances occur. In addition, each Committee can access its Budget on the same basis for its meetings.

Reserves held by the Council at the 31 March 2023 are in line with our Finance Policy.

Council finances remain in a good and stable state enabling us to meet our commitments and obligations to the community. The achievement of this objective is thanks to the policies adopted over many years. The Finance Committee of the Council prepared a budget which was approved at the January meeting of the full Council.

The accounts show that the precept was slightly underspent, showing good budgetary control and reserves are therefore considered to be at an appropriate level.

Audit. The Council's annual audit of both its finances and systems is carried out by internal and external auditors. At this date only the internal audit has been completed for which we have received a sound report and anticipate the same assessment by the external auditor. It is to the credit of both the Parish Clerk, Mrs Kathryn Locke, and Responsible Finance Officer and Deputy Clerk, Ms Kirsty Sinclair, that the necessary records are maintained to a high standard which contributed to the Council obtaining a most positive report in these areas.

The RPC also wishes to acknowledge the contribution made by our Internal Auditor, Mr Ian Sismey who has provided advice during the year.

Other Matters

Remembrance Sunday. Councillor Conway, the then Chairman of the RPC, presided over an informal Service of Remembrance to our fallen at 11am on Friday 11th of November 2022 in the Memorial Garden. Many parishioners attended, wreaths were laid, and a trumpeter sounded the Last Post. On Sunday the 13th of November, a multi-faith Service of Remembrance in the 'All Saints' Church was followed a parade to the Memorial Garden where Rev. Al Jenkins presided. Scores of parishioners attended, and Councillor Conway laid a wreath.

Freedom of Information and Data Protection. RPC has received no requests made under the Freedom of Information Regulations.

Community Speed Watch Scheme. Cllr. Cox continues to organise the Council's involvement in the Scheme and has been appointed as the Lincolnshire Coordinator in recognition of his diligence and thoroughness.

Council Meetings and News. RPC is established for 13 Councillors but, currently, only has 7. The new housing development within the Village and the corresponding increase in parishioners, could result in the need for an increase in the number of Councillors. As well as the monthly 'Full Council' Meeting held at 7pm in the Winchelsea Centre on the second Tuesday of every month, separate committee meetings are called on a 'as-and-when' basis, specifically to discuss Finance, Planning, Human Resources, Environmental issues, Recreational provisions, and Estates Management – a tall order for such a small number of volunteers. All members of the public are welcome to attend any of the Council or Committee meetings so I urge you to come along, see what we do and maybe get involved with what can be a very rewarding and satisfying undertaking. Should you be interested in joining the Council but unsure of what it might entail or the level of commitment that might be expected of you, call into the Office for an informal chat and ask for the 'easy-read', de-jargonised information booklet that you may take away and read at your leisure.

Information on forthcoming Council and Committee meetings can be seen on the Council Notice board outside the Winchelsea Centre and on the Council Facebook page.

Notes from these meetings are available on the Parish Council Website <https://ruskington.parish.lincolnshire.gov.uk/> Additional news can be found on our Facebook page. <https://www.facebook.com/RuskingtonPC/>

Signpost Magazine and other Platforms of Communication. The Council supports the production on a quarterly basis of the Signpost magazine which brings news about the village and council. Copies of the magazine can be found in the council offices, the library, medical centre, the Co-op, and other areas in the village. In addition, the establishment of our new Administrative Support guru – Scott Johnson - has seen the improvement of our website (link above) and the ongoing development of our electronic newsletter which is free to receive. If you prefer a more traditional way of getting information, or if you have any items for inclusion on any of our communication platforms, call in to the office and speak with Scott.

Summary

This has been a challenging year for the RPC with a number of Environmental, Recreational and Estates Management projects progressing or coming to fruition. The loss of some of our long serving and experienced councillors has only served to exacerbate those challenges but it was largely down to their planning, vision and energy that enabled those of us remaining to oversee the successful completion of the projects they helped to initiate. Similarly, a significant change to our Support Team created its own issues, with only the superb efforts of our Environment Warden – Andy Doughty – and the significant efforts of a publicly-spirited team of volunteers keeping us afloat. We have, however, been fortunate to enjoy the unwavering support of Kathryn Locke – our Parish Clerk, and Kirsty Sinclair – our Responsible Financial Officer, without which, we simply could not operate. Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank the Councillors: the unsung heroines and heroes who work for no reward save for the satisfaction that they are doing 'good' for our village and parishioners. Although depleted in number, the quality and quantity of their output has been both admirable and inspirational.

I believe our village is extremely fortunate in those who have opted to serve our community with diligence and determination.

Owen Ditch
Chairman
Ruskington Parish Council
13 June 2023