

Before I begin, I would like to take a moment to remember our former Chairman, Mike Palmer, who sadly passed away earlier this year.

Mike gave a great deal of his time and energy to this parish. His contribution to this community will not be forgotten, and on behalf of the Parish Council, I would like to again place on record our sincere thanks for his service and say our thoughts remain with his family and friends.

I must also acknowledge, with deep sadness, that this will be Graham's final meeting as a Parish councillor. Graham has been a valued member of this council for a long time, and his contributions and knowledge have made a genuine difference. On a personal note I wish to thank him for all his help getting me settled as parish councillor. And on behalf of the whole council we would like to thank him sincerely and wish him all the very best.

I am also delighted to welcome our newly co-opted councillors. We look forward to working together in the coming future.

#### Recognising Our Community

This parish runs on the dedication and goodwill of its people, and it is right that we recognise that properly.

A particular congratulations goes to Iona, who has done outstanding work engaging young people in the parish on behalf of the parish council. Her involvement with local schools and the Youth Parliament has been truly impressive. It is encouraging to see the next generation taking an active interest in the community, and Iona deserves real credit for all her efforts.

I would also like to extend our sincere thanks to Janet, our Parish Clerk. Much of what keeps this council and the village functioning, happens behind the scenes, and Janet's diligence, knowledge and patience are invaluable to us all.

More broadly, I want to thank the many volunteers who make Norton Fitzwarren such a welcoming and wonderful place to live in. So much of what defines this community happens quietly, driven by people giving their time freely for others and the community as a whole.

In particular I would like to thank

The Village Hall Committee, for maintaining this vital community space.

The volunteers at the skittles cafe are an invaluable asset in bringing the community together.

The organisers of the Annual Scarecrow Trail, a highlight of the year for many, particularly those with young families. It's always lovely to see so many young people and parents roaming the village on that weekend and long may it continue!

Thanks is also due to the Playing Fields Association, for their ongoing work. The playing fields are a vital outdoor space.

To each and every one of you and to those who quietly get on with making this community so wonderful - thank you. This village would not be what it is without you.

#### Community Projects & Achievements

Playing Fields

As a parish council have been working towards taking on the management of the playing fields for some time and we are hopeful this will be formalised in the coming year. This represents an important step in safeguarding the spaces for the future and allowing it to be utilised to its maximum potential.

#### Speed Indicator Devices (SIDs)

The SID recently purchased and installed is having a positive impact on vehicle speeds. We will continue to publish and share this data, using it to support further road safety measures in due course, where appropriate.

A sincere thank you goes to the volunteers who install and rotate these devices through the 3 postings in the village. Again a great example of an essential but often unseen contribution.

#### Russet Cider Trial

Following an approach late in 2025 we engaged with the Russet Cider Trail group. After much discussion and numerous routes and ideas suggested, a way forward has now been proposed that seems to work for all involved at this time. We are pleased this matter has reached this outcome and wish the group the best of luck with their ambitious aim and goals.

#### Planning & Development

It seems that progress with Ford Farm Development remains stalled and has hit further planning obstacles due to ongoing issues involving the Environment Agency and flood management and mitigation. We will continue to monitor the situation closely and will keep residents updated with any updates.

#### Staplegrave Development

Although not within our boundary, we are actively monitoring the new Staplegrave development, particularly the impact of associated roadworks. We are hyper aware that these works affect the daily lives of residents and the Council will continue to ensure the concerns of Norton Fitzwarren residents are heard by the appropriate people.

#### Flooding & Environment

Flooding remains a significant concern in parts of the parish. Although lots is being done to help alleviate as much of the risks and management as possible. This includes successfully lobbying Somerset Council Highways Department to arrange for the clearance of the gullies to help with surface water on our main road. As well as logging and reporting known flood spots, along with evidence to support our efforts to get the Unitary Council to do more.

We are pleased and thankful to Janet for her work to successfully secure a grant from the Somerset Rovers Authority for flood alleviation works in the west of the parish. These works are expected to take place over the coming year and should help mitigate flooding. We will continue working closely with relevant authorities and keep the community informed about progress.

#### Community Safety

We have seen an improvement in engagement with Avon and Somerset Police over the past year. And have been informed that a modest increase in visible policing in the village should be noticed soon, once all recruitment and necessary training has been completed. This is welcomed, and we will continue to press for a consistent and visible presence in our community year round.

#### Grants

Grants supporting community groups and projects locally is a vital function of this council and something we feel privileged to be able to do. In the last financial year, a total of £7,748.99 was awarded.

#### Notably:

Maintenance funding for the Playing Fields Association and the Churchyard is now provided directly by the Parish Council, following changes to funding from Somerset Council.

The allotment mower grant delivered has had the added benefit that the allotment holders now maintain the adjacent footpath saving the Parish Council money on maintenance.

We have also supported the Village Hall with repairs, provided funding for the Village Choir, helped with rent payments for the PCC All Saints Benefice Office and provided funding for vital equipment at the local primary school for the Special Needs Room.

#### A Note on Somerset Council Attendance and Engagement.

First I would like to thank Cllr Sully for all his efforts and continued engagement remotely at a difficult time, wish Mrs Sully a speedy recovery and wish both of them the best.

Hope that's this changes with the upcoming year q0

I think it is important to note our disappointment at the limited attendance of Cllr Rigby at parish meetings this year and regretfully scant engagement outside of our meetings too. Having strong working relationships between tiers of local government matters, particularly at a time when the Unitary Council is facing a grave financial situation with non statutory services being cut or removed entirely. Engaged and active Upper Tier Local Government representation is vital for our residents' views to be heard and I do hope to see a more consistent and engaged presence in the coming year. Tomorrow marks the beginning of the 1 year countdown to the next set of elections locally and I'm sure this might focus minds a little.

#### Finally, I would like briefly touch on the wider picture: Somerset Council & Growing Pressures

Out of respect for everyone here I want to speak plainly about the broader context in which we are operating. Somerset Council is facing significant financial challenges, including the

real risk of issuing a Section 114 notice (effective bankruptcy). The threat has direct consequences for parishes like ours.

As financial pressures at County Hall increase, responsibilities are being passed down to parish level. We are stepping up where we can, because we are committed to maintaining services for our residents, but unfortunately this is not without cost.

The reality is that taking on additional responsibilities places pressure on the parish precept. We will always seek to minimise increases and deliver value for money, but some upward pressure is inevitable. At a time when many residents are under financial pressures or finding it more difficult to make ends meet, it is difficult to strike the right balance between precept & budget pressure and maintaining the same levels of delivery. We will continue to robustly represent Norton Fitzwarren's interests at a Unitary Council Level, particularly on highways and open spaces, where the impact of reduced provision is most visible. Where delivery is withdrawn or short of the expected mark, we will do our best to pick up as much of the slack as we can, but we also need your help;

If you are experiencing issues: potholes, overgrown verges, or declining service standards in particular departments, please report them to us as well as to the Unitary Council. Every report strengthens the evidence we need to press for action and supports our calls to get things done. Whether we like it or not, decisions and resource allocation in this day and age are strongly 'data driven' and the stronger our data, the stronger our voice.

To bring this to a conclusion and looking to the year ahead, the Council will focus on:

Delivering flood alleviation works

Taking on management of the playing fields

Monitoring developments at Ford Farm and Staplegrove

Using SID data to support road safety improvements

Strengthening engagement with the police

Pressing for better engagement from Somerset Councillors

Managing where possible the impact of Somerset Council's financial position.

Continuing to advocate for proper service levels.

And above all, we want to encourage greater community involvement. This council exists to serve you, and the more we hear from residents, the better we can do that.

Please do come and speak to us, attend meetings, and share your ideas, together we help build an event stronger and safer community.