Woodford & Weedon Ward Annual Report 2022/23

Cllrs David Smith, Jo Gilford and Rupert Frost

Around 700 guests have been welcomed across West Northants as part of the Homes for Ukraine scheme, many of them in our ward, and much work happened to ensure everything was in place for their arrival and to arrange support such as the £200 payment that each guest receives for subsistence costs. Homes for Ukraine workshops for parish councils were held to advise villages and towns on how they could assist. We increased payments for hosts to £550 a month from December through to March 2023, with the additional £200 to help cover rising living costs.

The new Highways contract with Kier commenced in September 2022 and we are all looking forward to seeing the anticipated improvements. The contract should provide fresh flexibility to meet the changing priorities of the council and needs of our communities. WNC increased investment to the service by more than £1million per year and put in place a new contract management team to monitor performance. For next year's contract, we have included a further £1, aimed at fixing more potholes, in addition to which the Govt budget has given us an additional £1.8m. The three of us have been assured that road signs in our area will be cleaned by this autumn.

The Council organised and facilitated a huge number of events to mark the late Queen's Jubilee, as thousands of people turned out to enjoy a spectacular bank holiday weekend of events and activities. Commemorative beacons were simultaneously lit across our area and on the Saturday the crowds turned out for a spectacular countywide pageant in Northampton, all ensuring a very fitting tribute.

WNC has been given approximately £2.6million from the Department for Work and Pensions' Household Support Fund to support those most in need of help to cope with the rising cost of living. Around a third of the money was used to support families with children, with more than 10,500 children receiving £20 per week food vouchers to use during the school summer holidays. Over 6,500 residents across West Northants who receive Pension Credit each received a £100 payment, while anyone who receives the Pension Credit Top Up for pensioners with severe disabilities received an additional £50 payment. Further allocations of funding were received later in the year to enable this much needed support to continue.

In common with local authorities across the country, the Council has been facing severe financial pressures due to factors including the current economic climate, high inflation rates driving up running costs and an increase in demand for services, particularly around supporting children in care and vulnerable adults. Despite these pressures, the Council continues to balance the books and has set a balanced revenue budget for 2023/24 of £383.5m (excluding grant funded schools spending of £443.7m). The budget includes a Council Tax increase of 4.99% which is well below current inflation rates and in line with the Government's allowance, crucially generating extra funding of around £12m – with 2% of the increase going towards funding adult social care. This represents an average increase on a Band D property of £80.50 a year, the equivalent of £1.55 a week.

We were delighted to have secured the 200 Daventry-Banbury until next spring and the Council will be investing up to £215,000 in the year ahead towards bus services across the region. This continues the funding allocated for the current year, while the Council shapes a new bus strategy and considers the most viable options for supporting and delivering services in the future.

Problems with planning and enforcement have been well documented and our new Assistant Director of Planning, Stephanie Gibrat, was appointed to implement the recommendations of an independent review of our planning services. Priority is being given to improving the way in which WNC handles section 106 agreements and getting payments to local organisations in a more timely fashion.

The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) released its proposals for new Council electoral boundaries, with draft recommendations for 76 members to represent 35 wards across West Northamptonshire. The LGBCE recommendations are out for consultation until 15th May.

WNC has launched its plans to encourage Town and parish councils to get involved in a Bank Holiday weekend of special events being planned to mark the Coronation of King Charles III. His Majesty will be crowned at Westminster Abbey in London on Saturday 6 May 2023, the first of three days of celebrations as communities across the country are invited to come together to mark this historic occasion.

Very best wishes, David, Jo and Rupert