



Aldwick Parish Council

Annual Electors Meeting – Tuesday 6th May 2025

Chair's Report – Cllr Guy R Purser

Welcome

It is both a pleasure and a delight to welcome you to this Annual Electors Meeting for the Parish of Aldwick. My name is Guy Purser, and I am Chair of Aldwick Parish Council in succession to Cllr Richard Gotheridge, who stood down in May 2024. Cllr Richard, a valued and experienced Member, employed a good deal of knowledge and experience to his role as Chair and it is entirely appropriate that I thank him at this time and in this place for the very commendable work he undertook during his tenure.

This meeting is not a regular meeting of the Aldwick Parish Council, but one which is facilitated by the Council for and on behalf of the residents of Aldwick and Members of the public. As such, the meeting is open for anyone to attend, but only those who are residents of Aldwick and registered on the Electoral Roll as such may vote upon any resolutions tabled before them. There are none this evening.

It is therefore your opportunity to ask questions, to make suggestions regarding future business, and perhaps to tell us about organisations you may be aware of that benefit the Parish. It is also an important opportunity for the Council to provide residents with a brief resumé of its activities over the last year.

Your Council

To properly represent in excess of 10,000 residents of Aldwick, your Parish Council is permitted to have up to 14 Councillors. In May 2023, and following the Pandemic, just four Councillors stood for election of which three now remain. These have since been joined by a further six Members who expressed a wish to serve and were duly co-opted onto the Council. We therefore currently have nine Councillors and have vacancies for a further five, two of which we are hoping to fill through the co-option process within the next 2-3 months.

Of the nine Councillors currently in post, two (Cllrs Trevor Bence and Ash Patel) are also County and District Councillors and I too am a District Councillor (Aldwick West), each of whom endeavour to add local knowledge and wider experience for the benefit of the Parish and its residents.

Your Parish Councillors are apolitical and represent the four Wards within the Parish – Aldwick East, Aldwick West, Barrack Lane and St Richards, and each Member has a seat at full Council meetings. Six Councillors also serve on the Planning Committee, currently chaired by Cllr Jan Rufey, which because of the frequently large number of applications that we receive, meets twice monthly. Four Members also serve on the Staffing Committee which meets as and when required. Over the last year we have also set up two working groups; the first, chaired by Cllr Gotheridge, to consider the annual budget and the second, chaired by Cllr Basford, to procure a new Grounds Maintenance Contractor and I thank them all for their work. In the forthcoming year it is my intention to return to a full committee structure to include amenities and finance. This will enable us to achieve more of what we would like to undertake for residents in the Parish going forward, and with a now much stronger cohort of Councillors to complete the stated aim of our previous Chair to return to the sensible and efficient pre-pandemic practice of holding full Council meetings on a bi-monthly basis.

Council Management

Council is expertly managed by our Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer Heather Knight, who joined us in August 2023. In November 2024, Council appointed a welcome addition to the team in Ms Alison Colban as Assistant Clerk. Alison, who is also Clerk and RFO to Sidlesham Parish Council, brings with her a great deal of experience and is responsible on our Council for the administration and clerking of the Planning Committee and management of the Parish's allotments.

Both are very busy part-time roles, and I take this opportunity to express our sincere gratitude and appreciation to them both for their hard work, and to commend them on your behalf for the diligence and the expertise they apply to their respective roles.

Work of the Council

Over the last year, Council has undertaken a great deal of work for residents, and whilst there isn't the space to identify all that has been achieved, some of which are that we have:

- Appointed and pay for our new contractor to develop and maintain the beautiful floral planters at Rose Green as well as two roundabouts and the Millenium Gardens outside the Council offices.
- Managed the administration of our allotments at The Nurseries, including letting plots to residents on our waiting list.
- Laid on the summer Play Rangers playscheme at Avisford Park and West Park last year, providing free outdoor activities during the school summer holidays for local children and their parents. Work is currently under way to lay on a similar scheme in 2025.
- Repaired or replaced several broken benches in the Parish and refurbished the bus shelter by the Aldwick Duck Pond following vandalism and offensive spray painting in late 2024.
- Identified further locations and paid for the planting of twelve trees to add to the thirty or so trees we have already planted over the last three years.
- Provided a very well-attended Remembrance Day Service for our residents at the Millennium Gardens in November 2024 and returned to the popular practice of providing tea and cakes afterwards. Residents have asked us for more of this most welcome kind of community engagement.
- Maintained regular communication and updates to our residents through the monthly newsletter printed within Sussex Views and on the Council's website (www.aldwickparishcouncil.gov.uk) and boards.
- Engaged with County and District Councillors, Southern Water and the Environment Agency on behalf of residents regarding the flooding within the Parish over the winter months.
- Represented our residents on the Bognor Regis and Aldwick Bathing Water Partnership Group to advocate for and drive forward the monitoring, testing and improvement of our beaches and bathing water quality.
- Worked with County and District Councils and Councillors to help further deter traveller incursions on West Park, Avisford Park, Queens Field and Aldwick Green.
- Awarded discretionary grants of £10,000 to support local charitable organisations and youth activities.
- Advocated for residents to West Sussex County Council on their proposals for the development of the A259 to try to ensure that the already stressed road networks in Aldwick are fully assessed and considered alongside the increasingly high number of developments in Parishes that border with the Parish of Aldwick.

Planning

The Planning Committee meets every two weeks to review and comment on planning applications. Whilst we are not the Planning Authority and the decision as to whether permission is granted or rejected is not ours, the Planning Committee carefully looks at applications and tries to provide local context to Arun District Council. Members of the committee have access to referred applications, very carefully examine all the documents and, where possible and appropriate, conduct site visits in their own time. Committee members listen to and check for residents' observations and comments presented at our fortnightly meetings. The committee's decisions are always based on the individual application before them without speculation or bias.

After a careful and thorough examination and discussion of each application, the committee decides whether to 'object' or record a 'no objection' response. To retain credibility and comply with Planning Regulations, our objections must be based on material planning grounds within the guidelines provided by the National Planning Policy Framework, the Arun Local Plan, and our own Parish Design Statement.

The local Ward Member will also be informed of any objection recorded at the meeting. At all times, and as a committee, we acknowledge our responsibility for protecting the character and promoting the special qualities of the Parish of Aldwick.

Many of the applications we review relate to trees protected by the Tree Preservation Orders which cover much of Aldwick, as well as the number and maturity of the trees that provide significant character and visual amenity to the Parish. Applications may sometimes propose the complete removal of trees. These will almost always be referred to the Arboriculturist and an 'objection' recorded unless there is clear evidence that a specialist has demonstrated that the tree is diseased, dying, dead or is clearly causing damage to property or infrastructure. In these cases, the committee will normally register a "no objection" with a recommended condition to replace the loss of the tree.

Devolution

Residents will be aware that the Government has stated its intention to devolve some of the management and administration to Unitary Mayoral Authorities, and that this process is being driven quickly and hard. It is not within the gift of Parish Councils to comment upon or influence this process and at the time of writing this report, work is still ongoing between West Sussex County Council, East Sussex County Council, Brighton and Hove Borough Council and a number of local District and Town Councils to put forward proposals for the footprint within which Aldwick Parish Council falls. Whilst County and District Councils will be subsumed into a new Unitary Mayoral Authority, Parish Councils such as our own will continue. The role that we play going forward is also as yet unknown, but our own view is that the potential loss of at least two layers of local Councillor representation will make the role of the Parish and its Councillors for the provision of services and as advocates for local residents even more important and necessary. We will keep its residents fully informed and engaged just as soon as more information is known.

Finance

Managing the finances of the Council is rarely straightforward, and Council is acutely aware that in the currently difficult financial times in which we live there is both a clear duty and need to apply a precept which enables Council to provide residents with the pleasant, attractive and safe place to live whilst at the same time delivering good value for money. Again, I pay tribute to Heather in her capacity as the Responsible Financial Officer for the management of our budgets and finances. This year has been a little more difficult with the application of a new (but better) accounting system and our necessary transition to online banking.

The agreed (balanced) budget for 2025-26 resulted in a precept of £121,909, representing a 6.5% increase on last year's precept. However, when offset by the increased District Council tax base formula, this is reduced to a 4% increase to a Band D (average range) property and equates to an annual charge of £22.41 for a Band D property, or an increase of 89p per annum, or 2p per week.

To ensure good and transparent governance, finance and payment checks are carried out and documented at each Council meeting. This ensures that Members are fully involved with the Council's financial transactions and acts as a positive check to ensure that Financial Regulations are complied with.

All Members of the Parish Council receive records in a rolling format, which are included within the Council's minutes and published online for public view. Annual accounts are independently audited.

We hope that residents feel that Council delivers good value for money, and we appreciate your understanding as we work together to make our community a happy and pleasant place in which to live.

Once again, I thank my fellow Councillors and our hard working and dedicated Clerks for all that they do, and for their magnificent support to me as Chair over the last year.