



## ANSTY AND STAPLEFIELD PARISH COUNCIL

The minutes of the Annual Parish Meeting held at Ansty Sports Club on  
Monday 11th May 2025 at 7pm.

**Chairman:** Brad Williams (sitting in for Simon Stokes).

**Members present:** Bob Birthwright (BB), Maria Fielding (MF) Jon Gilley (JG), Mandi Graves (MG), Nuala Hampshire (NH), Candida Lewis (CL)

**Also present:** Sarah Abellan (SA) (Clerk),

The Chair Opened the meeting at 7pm.

1. **Apologies:** Crispin Salimbeni (CS), Amanda Saunders (AS), Heinrich Schmidt (HS) and Simon Stokes (SS).

2. **To confirm minutes of the previous annual meeting held on 12th May 2025.**

The minutes were confirmed as accurate and signed by the Chair.

3. **To receive Chairman's Report.**

*In the absence of Cllr Simon Stokes, the Chairman's report was presented by Cllr Brad Williams.*

Good evening and welcome to the Annual Meeting of Ansty & Staplefield Parish Council. This forum is for the electors of the Parish to hear from and to ask questions of your representatives on the Parish Council. As Chairman over the last year, I will take this opportunity to report on our activities over the preceding 12 months and to outline our ambitions and the challenges that we face in the coming year.

Obviously, it would be both time consuming and tedious to record much of our day to day business such as the planning applications that we examine or the "business as usual" administration that we oversee, so instead I shall concentrate on our achievements over the year, the major issues and events that we have been faced with and how we are planning for the year ahead.

### **Achievements**

With regard to achievements, I would like to highlight the following.

- The re-painting of village signs in Staplefield and Brook Street.
- The delivery of the new playpark at Staplefield
- Additional drainage at the Playpark
- Improvements to the Pavilion
- The securing of a £20,000 lottery grant towards further work on the Pavilion.

- The new noticeboard at Rocky Lane
- The grants that we have made to
  - The Youth Worker
  - Whiteman's Green Sports Centre (HHRFC)
  - The Beeches
  - The New England Wood Trust

Although I said that I wasn't going to mention planning matters, I do think it is worth recalling the work that Amanda Saunders has done with regard to the communications mast at Rocky Lane. This is not a run of the mill application. As part of the Government's streamlined infrastructure planning changes, masts of this type are being rolled out nationally with what seems to be very limited scrutiny. It is right that our Council takes a stand on this matter as both from the point of view of transparency and to protect vulnerable people in our community.

### **Challenges.**

The grants that we have made and the projects that we have undertaken are the most satisfying part of the job we do because it is here that we make our most tangible and lasting contribution to our communities. Unfortunately, we are also subject to less agreeable and more challenging matters of the sort that Harold Macmillan used to refer to as "events".

Among these, the most surprising was a claim made in relation to Staplefield Common. Although confident we were legal owners, it was still necessary to spend a lot of time and effort defending against this claim. Additionally, because West Sussex took these claims seriously, along with the other affected Parishes, we were obliged to seek legal advice to prove that the Parish Council was in fact the legal owner of Staplefield Common as was recorded in the land registry when the freehold was handed to the Parish Council in 1989. Incidentally, this means The Parish Council not only own the common, but everything on it, including the trees, the playpark and pavilion. It was good to have this fact definitively stated in law.

We were greatly helped in this matter by the time and advice freely given by a retired solicitor and Viscount Brookeborough who is the title holder of Lord of the Manor of Cuckfield.

As a result of firm action taken, these claims were retracted but the whole business cost a significant amount of the Clerks time. Fortunately, Haywards Heath TC covered the legal costs and one benefit that came out of the whole sorry business was that by working closely together, the 4 parishes involved developed a much closer working relationship which may well be a blueprint for how we will work together in the future.

The Cuckstye saga which has now been going on for 4 long years is finally coming to a conclusion. Having sat on the application for more than 18 months, MSDC Officers finally took the decision to approve the Fairfax application on the narrow ground that they felt they had no other choice. Fortunately, members of the Planning committee took a more robust line and by a margin of 8 votes to 4 voted to refuse permission. I (and I expect other Council members) would like to offer our thanks and gratitude to Councillors Avery and Bates who spoke forcefully against the application in committee and to Ward Councillor Knight who addressed the meeting beforehand.

This isn't unfortunately, the end of the matter as Fairfax have appealed the decision and the planning inspectorate will hear the case on 9<sup>th</sup> June. Ourselves and Cuckfield PC will be represented at the hearing

as a so-called rule 6 party where we will be calling 3 witnesses of our own and will be represented by our own Barrister. Although the two Parish Councils are the named party in the case, the great bulk of the funding is and will continue to be provided by the Cuckfield Society who have raised considerable sums in support of this vital cause.

I'm afraid to say that there has been another development this last year which will present us with some very major challenges in the near future. On 25<sup>th</sup> February, Mid Sussex District Council reversed their earlier position on the local governance review and chose to support the transfer of the Rocky Lane wards to Haywards Heath.

This represents a major blow to our Parish as from May 2027 we will have lost almost half our precept, our only source of income. This represents a big challenge to our finances going forward and we will need to carefully plan for how this challenge can be met.

Perhaps of even greater significance is the loss of our Rocky Lane Councillors who have made such an outstanding contribution to the Parish over the last few years. Hopefully, if that is their wish, they will be able to rejoin the Council if and when suitable vacancies arise.

I am personally disappointed that the model of a multcentred Parish bringing together the villages, hamlets, and the Haywards Heath suburban fringe has been curtailed in this manner. We had achieved a great deal in terms of creating a Parish structure that was working for all of our communities and enabling us to operate an ambitious grants program that was benefitting the people of the Parish as a whole.

### **The immediate future**

How we respond to this change in our circumstances will be a big part of our work in the coming year. To this end we are establishing a new working Party to look at how we can maximise our future revenues and carefully control our expenditure which together will make us less dependent on the precept in the future. We are also speaking to Haywards Heath Town Council, who are keen to see how they can help us to adjust to the new situation we find ourselves in. In the next couple of months, we should have some firm proposals from them on this matter after they have discussed it amongst themselves.

The initiative from HHTC dovetails neatly with how future local governance in West Sussex may work in the future. As people will be aware Local Government Reform and Devolution are dramatically altering the Local Government landscape. Although final plans are yet to be published, it is certain that Mid Sussex District will be gone and the sole principal authority for our area will be based in either Horsham or Chichester. Experience from elsewhere in the Country suggests that the new Unitary Authority will wish to divest itself of many assets currently held by the District Council. Frustratingly Mid Sussex are not currently choosing to discuss what assets would be transferred until the new shadow authority is in place. Once that happens however, it is safe to assume that the Parish could well be taking ownership of such facilities as the sports pitches and playpark at the rear of the Ansty Village Centre. We will need to make sure that in taking on such assets that these are transferred with future funding attached. WSALC and MSALC will be providing guidance in the matter.

Although less certain, it is possible that some of the powers currently exercised by the District could pass to the Parish. This would be done as part of the overall devolution program in which central Government cedes powers over transport, planning, and infrastructure to a new Sussex wide regional authority

headed by a Mayor. As powers pass progressively downward it makes logical sense that those activities that can be performed at the most local level should do so. Proposals are sketchy at the moment but this is certainly the direction of travel.

Obviously as a small rural Parish which has lost much of its precept income, Ansty and Staplefield might well find taking on more responsibilities quite challenging. It makes sense therefore to explore how we can better cooperate with our near neighbours in Cuckfield, Haywards Heath, Slaugham and elsewhere. Our joint work on the claims against Staplefield Common very much demonstrated how we can cooperate together. This coming year may well deepen that relationship further.

### **Thank-you to our colleagues**

Having looked at achievements, challenges, and what the coming year may bring, I would like to say a few words about our longstanding Council colleague and friend – Crispin Salembeni who is making a good recovery from his recent illness. Crispin has conscientiously served the Parish for many years and served previously as Chairman. His expertise, calm manner, and good humour have been much missed and we look forward to welcoming him back the moment he feels able to do so.

I would also like to thank our Clerk – Sarah – for all the hard work she has done for us this past 18 months. Although Sarah only started as the clerk for Ansty & Staplefield Parish Council in November 2024, she has already made a significant difference. She managed the completion of the Playpark and launched the initial phase of the Pavilion rebuild, successfully securing a National Lottery grant for the pavilion and obtaining a generous donation from a resident for the playpark. On behalf of the Parish Council, I also want to thank this donor for their invaluable support. Sarah has also done much to professionalise the Council and make it ready both for the challenges of the present and those of the future. With her help we are hopefully moving away from the world of “The Vicar of Dibley” to one in which we play our part as an effective and representative arm of modern local government.

Thanks are also due to our colleagues at District and County – Pete Bradbury, Malcom Avery, Richards Bates and Jim Knight who frequently attend our meetings both to keep us in touch with the wider work of local government and to highlight our concerns to the bodies on which they serve.

My thanks finally to other colleagues on the Parish Council and my apologies for not being able to be here in person tonight.

### [Acknowledgement of Chair's Service](#)

On behalf of the council, Councillor Williams offered heartfelt thanks to Councillor Simon Stokes, recognising his commitment and hard work as chair over the past year. The council greatly appreciates the dedication shown by Councillor Stokes in fulfilling his responsibilities which has contributed significantly to the effective governance and progress of the Parish Council. His leadership throughout the year has been invaluable, and his efforts are sincerely acknowledged by all members.

### **4. To consider any other questions.**

No questions received.

Chair closed the meeting at 7.15pm.

**These minutes are in draft form until agreed and signed at the next full council meeting.**