

A warm welcome to this edition...

... of your parish newsletter and, as always, many thanks to everyone who has contributed to its production and distribution.

This time around, to save paper (and lighten the load for those who have to deliver this to you!), we have taken out the index and some contact details. For details of Parish Councillors, please visit the SMPC website.

Graham Bridgman (Editor and SMPC Vice-Chairman)

Introduction

2025 looks to be a busy year for the Parish Council...

The work on the cemetery extension will have started by the time you are reading this, with completion scheduled in the spring, providing the village with an attractive and peaceful site with room for burials for many years to come.

The long-awaited footpath and cycleway to Burghfield is getting nearer and it is hoped to start construction work on it before the end of the year.

The Parish Council has just committed to reorganising its committees; from May we will have a Community Committee looking to liaise with village groups to foster and support more village ideas, events and activities. This new council initiative may appeal to some people who haven't considered being a councillor before – please do read the article about our current vacancies.

Danusia Morsley, Chairman, Stratfield Mortimer Parish Council

Front Cover

The cover photograph shows our Christmas Tree in our new utility square on the Fairground (see article within).



Councillor Vacancies

The Parish Council has been short of two councillors for several months now following resignations.

We haven't as yet received any applications. Could you help your community in this way?

There is a need for councillors who represent all ages and backgrounds in the community - no special skills or knowledge are required. Our meetings are friendly and open to the public.

If it's not for you, do you know someone who could join the council and help decide how your money is spent and what projects should and shouldn't be undertaken?

Please give the Parish Clerk a call for more information or drop me a line to arrange an informal chat and answer any questions you may have.

Danusia Morsley

New Clerk

The Parish Council was very pleased to welcome Danielle Davis as our new Parish Clerk at the start of this year.

Danielle is a local and has hit the ground running — she is picking up all the idiosyncrasies of council work very quickly alongside undertaking various training courses (she has already gained her ILCA (Introduction to Local Council Administration) qualification and is working towards obtaining the next stage). She is also a keen gardener and spends a lot of time walking her dog Buddy.



We can see that Danielle is going to be a great success in the role.

Lynn Hannawin

At the end of 2024 we sadly said goodbye to Lynn Hannawin who had worked with the council since 2017, initially as Assistant to the Clerk and then taking over as Clerk.

I think all the councillors would join with me in saying she has been a joy

to work with and has helped us progress tremendously as a council.

We wish her all the best in her retirement.

Danusia Morsley



Our new Custodian, Jay Sylla



Jay joined the council as our Village Custodian last June. A lot of his work involves keeping the Fairground and the Cemetery neat and tidy and fixing things like gates.

Give him a wave when you see him on the Fairground!

Speeding in the Village

The council currently has two items of 'traffic management equipment' – a Speed Indicator Device (SID), which shows drivers what speed they are doing and records anonymous speed data, and an Automatic Speed Watch Camera (ASWC) which takes photographs of vehicles travelling above a set limit and has software that results in the details of speeding vehicles being sent to Thames Valley Police (TVP) as part of the Community Speedwatch Programme.

The SID was deployed 95 times in 2024 and the ASWC 19 times, each on roads with a 30 MPH limit - the ASWC recordings resulted in 309 vehicles being reported to TVP for excessive speed.

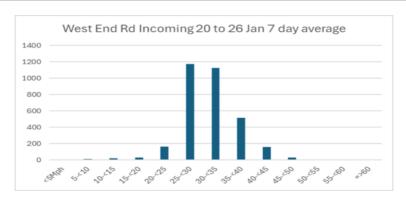
Our ability to deploy both pieces of kit is severely limited by the number of volunteers we have to do so.

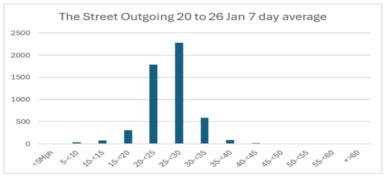
The road with the highest speeds registered was West End Road, west of the mini roundabout at Stephens Road / Drury Lane, in both directions. Next highest was the west end of Victoria Rd with traffic going out of the village near the junction with Catherines Hill (based on SID data only). Third highest was Catherines Hill, in both directions.

The numbers reported to TVP were 161 vehicles westward on West End Road, 103 eastward on that road, and 36 for Catherines Hill both directions. The Street eastward near the Pillbox gave 4 offenders, The Fairground eastwards produced 2 and Victoria Road, westwards near College Piece, 3. SID data from the latter site gives many more speeders as it is located further towards the junction with Catherines Hill.

The ASWC has just been upgraded and can capture more images. A recent session on West End Road in early afternoon captured 116 images in 70 minutes, 46 of which were at 36 mph and above, with the highest speed being 54 mph.

Residents recently complained to West Berkshire Council about speeding in West End Road and The Street. As a result, WBC placed radar devices in both locations for a week (20 to 26 January). These recorded the speed of vehicles over 24 hours each day. Detailed data is available but the graphs below show the number of vehicles in 5 mph bands averaged over the seven days.





For West End Road, the 24 hour mean number of vehicles was 3,236 with an average speed of 31.4 mph. The 85th percentile was 36.7 mph. This means that 85% of vehicles were below this speed and 15% were faster than that.

For The Street the corresponding numbers were 5,189, 25.7 mph and 29.8 mph. The higher speeds in The Street tended occur during the overnight period.

We think that we are having an effect on driver behaviour, but we can only continue to do so if more parishioners are prepared to step up and assist. This isn't onerous – and hour or two a month, and for the camera it basically means standing near to the ASWC and having a chat with your companion (there are always two of us) whilst the camera does the work! To help us encourage drivers to obey village speed limits, please contact the parish office.

Mike Dennett

Cycleway

Readers may remember that we noted in the last issue that a dormouse survey was underway. I am pleased to be able to tell you that no indications of the presence of dormice was found, so the project won't be held up by that!



A supplementary Road Safety Audit is underway to check the final detailed plans which were required to comply with the planning permission conditions. Once West Berkshire Highways approve those in early February we expect to be progress promptly to writing tender documents.

Please see the article about the council budget for more about our spending plans for this project.

Danusia Morsley

Frank's Bench

Following the sad loss of our previous village custodian, Frank Stansfield, we decided to install a bench on The Fairground in his memory, with contributions from parishioners going towards the total.

Graham Bridgman



Community Award

The Stratfield Mortimer Community Award takes the form of a plate that Parish Council has commissioned from Andrew Hazleden (you may remember when he had a pottery in Aldermaston), every year since 1982, to recognise outstanding service to the community. The recipient gets to choose a few motifs to be included which reflect what the service has involved.

Last year it was awarded to Doug Overett; he chose the Fairground, a scarecrow and a gazebo to denote the many, many MVP community events he has been involved in organising.



Anyone can nominate someone to receive it; there is a simple form available from the Parish Clerk or the SMPC website.

So please have a think about the people you know who give a great deal to the village and write a few sentences about what they have done. We are always told by the recipients about the great pleasure they feel in receiving

this unique award from the village. The chief criterion is of outstanding service to the community in Stratfield Mortimer over several years.

The plate is usually presented at the Annual Parish Meeting in April, this year on 28th April. To allow time for the recipient to be chosen, motifs agreed and the plate made, the deadline for nominations to be received by the Parish Clerk is 9th March.

If you have nominated someone previously but they didn't get that year's award, please do try again. Some years we receive several strong applications and it is hard to choose one. All of which is a great indication about the high level of exemplary voluntary work which goes on in Mortimer.

You can view a list of all the previous recipients on the SMPC website; they are also listed on a board in St John's Hall.

Garth Hall

Following the Royal British Legion (RBL) acceptance last August of the Mortimer Hobby Hall proposal to take over Garth Hall, the steering committee (Mike Gomm, Andrew Tanner, Jo Wyllie and Gareth Price) held an open meeting at the Methodist Church Hall in early September to outline our proposals to local residents.

The meeting was well attended with almost 50 people joining, and the team received a number of offers of assistance which will be followed up on in due course.

Since the meeting the steering committee have been working on plans to renovate the building, and have enlisted the help of an architect to prepare drawings to ensure the best use of the premises - we hope to present these to the parish council planning committee in the next month or so.



We have also had an opportunity to review various surveyors' reports on the condition of the building, and the estimated cost of works will be at least £200k. We are now working to identify sources of funding to both carry out the works, and to provide funding to run the property on a day-to-day basis (there are a number of Government funds available for community projects such as this).

In the meantime we are very grateful to the parish council for providing us with some seed funding to defray initial costs.

At the same time as plans proceed for the renovation of the Hall, a charitable structure is being set up to manage the building and run the activities. It is envisaged that this will be completed in the near future.

The team met again with RBL in January to update them on progress, and

we agreed to meet with them again in April. Once RBL are satisfied with the plans and funding for the project the plan is for them to pass over the Trusteeship of the property to our charitable organisation.

In the next few months the steering committee want to bring someone on board to develop a communications strategy and channels, so if you could help, or know someone who could, please contact one of us (see below) - this might suit an experienced communications professional or a student who would welcome a project to complete as part of their course.

Please feel free to contact us at mortimerhobbyhall@gmail.com if you would like any further information.

Gareth Price

Community Grant awards

For the last few years the Parish Council has included £10,000 in the annual budget to allow for grants of up to £1,500 apiece to non-profit groups and societies in Mortimer starting or progressing a project.

Organisations that might wish to apply need to note that there will be a window for applications that will be decided upon shortly and advertised via our website, on Facebook, and at the Annual Parish Meeting.

Applications must be made on a simple form which can be obtained from the SMPC website or the Parish Clerk at any time. As well as details of your organisation and the proposed project, you will need to include evidence of the financial state of your organisation.

In 2024 grants were awarded to Mortimer Pre-School for a specialist to come in and provide music teaching, Mortimer Music Live for two heavyduty gazebos, and Mortimer Table Tennis Club for hall hire for a new session for teenagers; not all the fund was distributed.

Get your thinking caps on now, so that when the new round opens for applications you are ready to apply!

Arts Competition – Mortimer Past or Future

The inaugural children's art competition last year produced some lovely pictures of My Mortimer, but not very many. We hope more young people will be inspired to enter this year.



Children living in Stratfield Mortimer and/or attending St John's Infant, St Mary's Junior or The Willink schools are invited to enter a piece of artwork which illustrates either "Mortimer Past" or "Mortimer Future". The maximum size for entries is A3 and they may be drawn, painted or collage - photographs, 3D entries or computer-generated images are not permitted.

There will be prizes in each of three categories: School Years R-2; 3-6, and 7-13; the number and value of prizes will depend on the number and quality of entries received, but there is a total possible prize pot of up to £200.

Entries must be delivered to the Parish Office in the week 24th - 28th March and must have the following information firmly attached to the back of the artwork:

Name of the artist;

School Year and school attended;

Home address;

Email address for contact;

The title of the picture.

All entries will be exhibited at the Annual Parish Meeting in St John's Hall on 28th April – the winners will be announced then and prizes awarded.

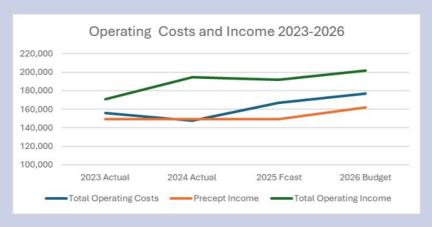
The Parish Council Budget 2025- 2026

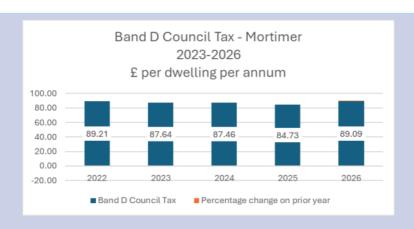
Operating Costs

The council set its budget for 2025-2026 at its meeting on **9 January 2025**. The 2025/2026 Council Tax requirement (Parish Precept) has been increased from £149,319 to £161,379 in order to cover increasing operating costs of the Council - **this is the first increase for 4 years.** The reason for this increase is that SMPC expects to incur higher operating costs in the coming year (8% on underlying costs) as a result of:

- higher staff costs (primarily National Insurance);
- higher training costs to address national training requirements for staff;
- improvements to equipment to assist administration of the council;
- provision for expenditure on fixed speeding devices;
- provision for expenditure on involvement in community events.

The good news is that although the Parish Precept has increased, the council tax for each band of house in Mortimer remains at 2022 levels. It is expected that the 2025/2026 charge for Band D will be £89.09 compared to £89.21 in 2022, and the same small percentage decrease will appy to all the other household bands. This means that individual households will be paying slightly less than they did 3 years ago.





Operating Income

The Precept is the council's main source of revenue - other sources of revenue from cemetery fees, Fairground hire and tennis court hire are expected to remain broadly constant year on year.

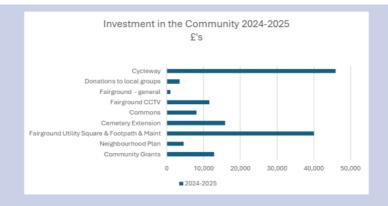
In addition to the above revenues SMPC may receive Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), via West Berkshire Council. CIL is a payment made by developers as a result of obtaining planning permission that can only be spent to improve community infrastructure (i.e capital as opposed to revenue so can't be spent on running the Council office, for example).

In 2024/2025 the council received £173,295 of CIL arising from housebuilding on Tower House Farm. In 2025/2026 it is expected that a further £91,000 will be received, £30,000 from Tower House Farm and the remainder from other housing projects in the parish.

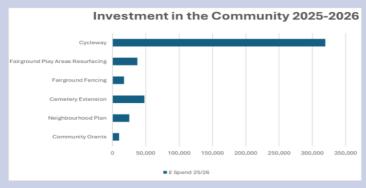
How we are investing in the Community?

A combination of CIL monies and additional reserves built up over the years enables the council to invest money in community assets.

During 2025/2026 the council has spent over £143,000 on community projects, as shown on the next page.



As the above graph shows the projects undertaken have involved investment in a range of the council's community assets such as the Fairground, Commons, Cemetery and also financial help for other community groups. The Cycleway spend reflects preparation for the full tendering process and construction in 2025-2026. Consequently the investment in 2025-2026 reflects a much higher proportion earmarked for this. The proposed budgeted capital spend for 2025-2026 is upwards of £460.000 and is summarised in the graph below:



The key projects for the upcoming year are the cycleway (£319,000), Fairground fencing and resurfacing of play areas (£55,000) and completing the cemetery extension (£48,000) – a busy year for SMPC.

Full details of the budget are available on the council's website.

Andrew Richardson

The Importance of Your Voice - Parish Council Surgeries

As your Parish Council, we are committed to making informed decisions that reflect the needs and wishes of our community. With this in mind, we have been holding regular monthly contact surgeries for over a year now - at Mortimer Bistro at 10am on the first or second Saturday each month, and at the Horse and Groom at 7pm on the following Tuesday (dates are published on the parish notice boards and on our website). We'd like to thank both venues for their generosity in hosting us!

The objective is to better engage with you (our residents) to address local concerns and foster a collaborative spirit. However, we face a challenge that we need your help to overcome.

The Issue—Declining Attendance

Our surgeries, designed as open forums for residents to share their views, concerns, and suggestions, are no longer seeing the attendance we hoped for. These sessions are intended to be a regular direct line of communication between you and your council members, a platform where your voice can shape the future of our community. Without your participation it is a challenge to provide the level of service you want.

Why Your Participation Matters

Your insights are invaluable. They help us understand the issues that matter most to you, from local infrastructure and community events to environmental initiatives and public safety. Without your input, we are navigating without an accurate compass, making it challenging to address your needs effectively.

How You Can Help

We urge you to attend our upcoming surgeries. Your input ensures that your voice is heard, and your concerns are addressed. On the next page are a few reasons why attending is beneficial.

Influence Decisions: you can directly impact the decisions that affect your daily life;

Stay Informed: get updates on ongoing projects and future plans;

Build Community: meet your neighbours and council members, fostering a stronger, more connected community.

Our next four surgeries are scheduled for Mortimer Bistro at 10am on Saturday 8 March and 5 April, and the Horse and Groom at 7pm on Tuesday 11 March and 8 April.

We understand that life is busy, and attending a surgery might not always be convenient. If you cannot make it in person, we encourage you to reach out via email, phone, or via the contact us page on the SMPC website.

Our goal is to create a vibrant, thriving community where everyone's voice is valued. We can only achieve this with your active participation. Please join us, share your thoughts, and help us serve you better.

Thank you for your continued support.

Heath Geary

The Parish Cemetery

If you live near St Mary's Church you will see work start in the near future on the extension to the Parish Cemetery (reported in previous newsletters).

Far more about this when everything is completed.

Graham Bridgman



The Fairground Utility Square and Footpath - from Concept to Installation

The Utility Square:

The process started with a meeting of the Fairground and Cemetery Committee where we looked at the Fairground Christmas tree and the Heras fencing we'd put round it in previous years, and discussed whether there was a better option - it's construction site fencing and not the best look. Discussion took place, suggestions were made, and it was agreed we would put a permanent fence and an electricity supply, forming a 'utility square' which could perhaps be used for other things at other times of the year.

The next stage of the process was to put together a Tender/Scope Document that would go out to suitable contractors to tender for the work. This entailed specifying a lot of details for the utility square and thinking about future needs like the electricity supply, the size of the square, and the colour and finish of the fencing.

Tenders:

The general way that tendering works is that once a specification is complete, the Parish Clerk sends out the tender to suitable contractors for the type of work being undertaken. There should be a minimum of three contractors depending on the value of the contract.

Once tenders are returned they are discussed at the next Committee meeting to decide which contractor's quote is most suitable and, depending on cost, the best value for money all things being equal. Once this is agreed, the Committee makes a recommendation to Full Council to sign it off – if the recommendation is confirmed, the Parish Clerk raises a purchase order and the work can start.

The Path:

This process was being followed for the utility square, but in the meantime a manager of The Oaks Childcare, which runs the Little Oaks Breakfast Club in the Community Centre, came to a meeting of the Committee to ask whether it would be possible for us to do something in the way of a footpath to allow the children from Little Oaks to walk from the Community

Centre to The Street (and onward to St John's School) without getting themselves muddy, and also to avoid dangers of the busy car park.

This was discussed and we decided it would be a good idea, not just for the children, but also on health and safety grounds and to improve access for disabled people.

So, with Full Council agreement, we put a tender document together as before with the specification of the footpath we wanted, having discussed what finish it needed to be in, and including a large mobility gate (specified to be able to be used by disabled/wheel chair users). Then we went back out to tender as one project with the utility square and footpath as one project because this would avoid the inconvenience of two separate construction jobs and would have some cost savings.

Conclusion:

As you will realise, a contract was issued and the work carried out - once construction was underway, councillors kept a close eye on it to monitor the work. We also carried out a post-installation check to look for any snagging or remedial work required (and get that work done) before we made payment.



So, that is some of the work that goes into our decision-making as Parish Councillors - as you can see, there's a lot of planning, and also public input, into the process from concept to completion of projects.

Do you have an idea for using the utility square? We have wondered about

art installations or some kind of pop-up stall in the summer but we would like to hear your ideas too.

Steve Hill

Willink Leisure Centre

In the Autumn 2024 newsletter we had an article from Danusia Morsley looking for feedback about users experience of the leisure centre and had a number of responses.

You may recall that, in that article, we reported that in 2023/24 the Council contributed £13.8k to the centre's running costs – we expect the amount requested for 2024/25 to be £15k+.

Very recently I attended, on SMPC's behalf, the first leisure centre Joint Advisory Committee for a number of years, alongside the new centre managers (Everyone Active), West Berkshire Council (who have overall control) and representatives from Sulhamstead and Burghfield PCs which also contribute financially.

This is a summary of the main activities and facts from WBC:

"Willink Leisure Centre

In the first year of operating Everyone Active welcomed 130,000 visitors, 30,000 swim lesson attendees,14,000 gym visits and over 24,000 individuals participating in a range of activities including football, netball and karate.

Since July 2024 to December 24 attendances totalled 71,631 compared to 65,621 for the same period last year.

In collaboration with "Let's Play" Willink hosted activity camps during the summer holidays. In the first year an average of 45 children attended each day. The summer camp offers multiple different activities including football, badminton, and swimming.

Complementary and concession memberships

Everyone Active offer complimentary membership to people living with Parkinson's. Free membership will also be given to their carers to provide support, if needed.

Everyone Active also offer a complimentary membership for cared for children and care experienced young people.

Everyone Active has concessionary memberships for:

NHS workers

- Fire Service workers
- Police workers
- Full-time carers
- People in receipt of Universal Credit.

Upcoming events or activities

• Upcoming Swings and Smiles sessions at Willink Leisure centre (see below).





- Everyone Active will be running a Swimathon at Willink Leisure the weekend of 28- 30 March 2025, to raise money for charity partners.
- A new senior circuits activity is to be run in Mortimer from early March (see above).

Feedback

If users want to feedback to Everyone Active they can do so in the centre or online at www.everyoneactive.com"

Andrew Richardson

New Community Committee

Last August we had a council away day (these sound far grander than they are – a Saturday all-day meeting in the scout hut, away from formal agendas and minutes) and, amongst other things, we had a wide-ranging discussion about what we do, what we want to do, and how we should go about doing it. This in turn has led to a decision to move things around between our committees so as to free up space to create a new Community Committee to push forward existing and future links with community organisations and develop new community projects, plus take on various things that currently fall down the cracks between the existing committees – communications, greening, etc.

So, from our annual meeting in May, we will have the following committees:

Community

Dealing with the community grants, cycleway fundraising and construction, communications, greening, community involvement generally, links into and with MVP and others, sponsoring (eg) village events, etc.

Estate Management

Dealing with the Fairground, the Cemetery, the Pill Box, the West End Road Car Park, and other the land owned or leased by the Council (Brewery Common, Windmill Common, etc).

Finance & General Purpose

Dealing with finance, risk and HR.

Planning and Highways

Dealing with planning applications and consultations, licensing issues, the neighbourhood plan, roads, footways, footpaths (and bridleways), and hedgerows.

As is the case now, all our meetings will be held in public (unless there are confidential issues being discussed) and residents are warmly invited to come along if there is anything you wish to raise (or just to see what we get up to!).

Graham Bridgman

Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group

Tower House Farm - Reserved Land

Further to an SMPC Resolution last year, the existing Stratfield Mortimer Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP) now provides for a new dental surgery with parking, plus 24 houses (for those over 55), on the 'reserved land' within the Tower House Farm site.

We anticipate that the developer, TA Fisher, will soon submit a detailed planning application for the works, which would also include additional recreational space and car parking for St John's School.

The New Neighbourhood Plan

The primary work of the Steering Group is to develop a new Stratfield Mortimer Neighbourhood Plan (NP) on behalf of our community, to take over from the NDP when it expires next year.

The new NP will have updated policies that will influence any planning applications for future development within Mortimer, working alongside the West Berkshire Local Plan, National Planning Policies, and the Government's direction on growth.



Design code model https://www.gov.uk/guidance

Utilising supporting funds from the Government, an experienced Consultancy Firm has helped us consider housing design codes for the village, which would steer the character and look of any future development. With the new policies and the housing design codes in draft, the next steps will be to turn these into a draft version of the new plan.

The Steering Group meets every 3rd Tuesday of the month at the Methodist Church. The meetings are always open to anyone from Mortimer who would like to join in. Agendas for, and Minutes from, each meeting are uploaded on to the Mortimer Neighbourhood Plan website: https://np.stratfield-mortimer.gov.uk/.

Jo Emberson-Wines

Outside Bodies

In each newsletter we try to have an article about one of the outside bodies the Parish appoints a member, trustee, etc, to. In this edition we have an article about Clarke's Education Foundation, on which Mollie Lock is an SMPC appointed Trustee.

Graham Bridgman

Clarke's Education Foundation

Clarke's (Charity Number 307308) provides educational grants to schools, youth organisations and individual residents of the parishes of Stratfield Mortimer, Mortimer West End and Wokefield.

The principal recipients of grants are university students who are supported throughout their first three years, but grants are also made available for educational purposes to local schools (to cover items not available from the Local Education Authority), other organisations such as Scouts and Guides, mature students, apprentices, and for vocational training.

The charity owns part of the land and buildings comprising Mortimer St Mary's School, the School Cottage, the School House and its garden.

The charity derives most of its income from renting the School House to tenants, but we also obtain modest investment interest. In 2024 we also received a substantial grant from the Stratfield Mortimer Relief in Need Charity.

Following a number of urgent repairs in 2020, the trustees commissioned a survey into the general condition of the 150+ year old School House. This revealed a programme of works to be carried out over five years, estimated at costing approximately £35,000. This year saw further work within this programme, with the long overdue replacement of the kitchen and other minor works at a total cost of £12,898.

2024 saw an unprecedented demand for university grants. Clarke's supported 44 university students (40 in 2023) with bursaries amounting to £34,708 (£30,050 in 2023) and made a further £2,377 (£3,170 in 2023) worth of grants to a variety of education related projects including school trips, books for school leavers, travel for education, and an online course.

Jim Thompson (Hon Treasurer)

CONTACT US

Parish Council Office, The Library, 27 Victoria Road, Mortimer RG7 3SH Opening/working hours: Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday

09:30 to 17:00

Tel: 0118 933 1955

Website (announcements, meetings, people, committees and policies): https://stratfield-mortimer.gov.uk

Facebook: https://facebook.com/stratfieldmortimerparishcouncil

Neighbourhood Plan: https://np.stratfield-mortimer.gov.uk/

Fairground Emergency contact - for emergencies and dangerous situations: 07436 807543

Non-emergencies contact the Parish Council Office: 0118 933 1955

PARISH COUNCILLORS

To contact a Parish Councillor please see our website

OTHER USEFUL CONTACTS

West Berks Council: 01635 551111 (inc out of hours emergencies)

Report a problem online: https://www.westberks.gov.uk/reportaproblem

West Berkshire Council Streetcare Team (to report problems with streets, roads, highways or pavements): Telephone 01635 519080 Email: streetcare@westberks.gov.uk

District Councillors for Burghfield & Mortimer Ward:

Cllr Nick Carter - Nick.Carter2@westberks.gov.uk

Cllr Geoff Mayes - Geoffrey.Mayes1@westberks.gov.uk

Cllr Vicky Poole - Vicky.Poole1@westberks.gov.uk

