Ash-cum-Ridley Parish Council

Annual Parish Meeting - Chairmans Report 2024

By Cllr Shaun Fishenden

It is an honour to be standing here today giving my first annual report as Chairman of Council, and I firstly wish to thank my predecessor Mike Brown for the dedicated years of service he gave to the Council as its Chairman.

I now want to take the opportunity to set out what your Parish Council has been doing for you since the last Annual Parish Meeting:

- In May 2023, the Council decided to adopt a streamlined structure, abolishing several of our committees so that most decisions are now taken at Full Council meetings and also we have a Planning Applications Working Group that all councillors attend.

  We made this change as we wanted to ensure all councillors were involved in decision-making and to ensure we can effectively utilise the wealth of knowledge, experience, and skills amongst our team of parish councillors, so we can deliver for our local communities as best as possible.

- The following month we co-opted to fill the eight councillor vacancies we had at the time and were delighted to welcome five new councillors and three returnees. All our newer councillors have settled in well and have made a great contribution to the work of the Council.

- The Parish Council has during the past year made improvements to our community engagement, hosting a multi-agency drop in event in New Ash Green Village Hall in Summer 2023, an event we plan to run again soon. We've increased our social media and website presence so that our residents can hear about the work the council is doing. We also continue to regularly publish the Bulletin that is delivered to every household in the parish.

- In addition, we are currently working on preparing a Highways Improvement Plan, alongside our County Councillor; Cllr David Brazier. These plans are used to highlight local highways issues and to give an order of priority as to which issues get addressed first. This document will be published on our website once it is finalised so residents can see it.

- Previously the Parish Council spent many hours of work on producing a draft Neighbourhood Plan, such a plan helps to guide and govern future development, regeneration and conservation of the parish. Work on the plan was paused in 2020 due to the Sevenoaks Local Plan being rejected by the Planning Inspectorate. However, we are now looking to re-activate work on

the neighbourhood plan shortly, so that we can get the plan adopted and in place to protect and enhance our parish.

- The Parish Council continues to operate Ash Green Sports Centre, based on the Milestone Academy site. The Sports Centre has a strong community-focused ethos and offers a range of facilities, from a gym and badminton courts, to regular classes such as gentle exercise and pilates. I wish to thank Cllr Mark Manley for his chairmanship of the Sports Centre Management Committee until March 2024. During his time, there were numerous key improvements to the centre and the very fact it is still operating post-Covid when many other sports and leisure facilities closed their doors, is in large part thanks to Mark's tenacity to keep the centre open for the community.

  One achievement I have been asked to highlight is the Summer Holiday and Easter Holiday activity schemes run at the Centre, which are either free or low cost for families. These are funded by the Parish Council and arranged by the excellent staff team at the Sports Centre.

  I am delighted that Cllr Matt Aspinall has now become Chairman of the Committee, and I am pleased to see he is brimming with ideas and enthusiasm to lead the Sports Centre and the Committee through its next chapter of growth and improvement.

- Along with responding to planning application consultations received within the parish, your parish council has also worked hard to respond to the various consultations that have been held by Kent County Council and Sevenoaks District Council. This has included –

    1. The KCC consultation on Childrens Centre's and Family Hubs, and I pay particular thanks to Cllr Jill Clucas and Cllr Chris Gorton who spent a lot of time and effort engaging with users of the children's centre and helped to prepare the council's response to challenge the loss of the childrens centre services in New Ash Green.

    2. The Parish Council strongly opposed the reduction to KCC's Community Warden Service, and now KCC have confirmed it is indeed making the savings, we are working with our neighborhing parishes; Hartley, Fawkham and West Kingsdown to discuss the opportunity of jointly funding a warden between us to maintain the much loved and valued warden.

- We've also participated in a meeting alongside New Ash Green Village Association with the new managing agents of New Ash Green Shopping Centre, enabling us to represent the views of our residents.

- It became apparent during the year, that our two existing staff members; the Clerk and Deputy Clerk had been overloaded with work for considerable time, and so given the Council's responsibilities as their employers, we commissioned an independent staffing review from an experienced local government consultancy. Their report identified a need for additional staffing hours to enable the Parish Council to be pro-active, and not reactive.

  Ultimately, we are here to serve the local residents, and without the right staffing levels, we would not be able to deliver the professional service level we wish to provide. We were therefore delighted to appoint Megan as our Assistant Clerk in Autumn 2023, who has settled in well and it has made a real difference to the team.

- The Parish Council has continued to regularly host the Crime and ASB Focus Group, this is attended by a range of partner agencies including Kent Police, Sevenoaks Community Safety Unit, the Community Warden, Village Association and resident societies. These meetings allow discussion of local crime issues and to work together to identify suitable solutions.

- The Council also continues to work with our neighbours; Hartley Parish Council, in the guise of Northfield Management Committee to manage the sixty-four acres of open space between New Ash Green and Hartley.

- The Parish Council continues to operate the Thursday lunch club, providing a low-cost meal to the older generation, and for young people, we support the provision of the Young Adventures youth group by funding the venue hire costs.

- In setting the budget and our precept for this financial year, we had to make the difficult decision to increase it by £26.10 for a Band D household. This is equivalent to a 50p per week increase. Whilst we are completely understanding that household finances are tight, as I set out earlier, the Parish Council made the decision to appoint an additional member of staff, and it is largely for that reason that the increase at first glance, may seem substantial. However, the benefits of having a fully resourced staff team, mean we can pro-actively respond to the needs and concerns of the communities we serve. In addition, we also have battled with the rising costs of goods and services that we procure, and despite the diligent work of our Deputy Clerk and

Finance Officer; Karen in always seeking value for money, we have faced unavoidable cost increases in these areas too.

- I apologise for the whistle-stop tour of the work of the Parish Council, I now wanted to close this report by giving several thank you's.

    - To my fellow Parish Councillors for all of your contributions, and for your support to me as Chairman. I also particularly wanted to thank Cllr Roxana Brammer for serving as my Vice-Chairman throughout the past year.
    - To the County and District Councillors, the Village Association and our neighbouring parishes, for continuing to work alongside us to serve our communities and try and make a positive difference.
    - To my family and friends, for their support and being so forgiving when I regularly disappear off to chair a Parish Council meeting.
    - And finally, a massive thank you to our staff, Alison, Karen and Megan. They are the engine room of the Council and without them we would be lost. Their support and advice to the Council is invaluable in ensuring we can make a difference to our community. I cannot thank you enough.

You'll be pleased to know that now concludes my report! And we can now move onto opening the floor for any questions you wish to ask.