

Minutes

of the Ashwell Annual Parish Meeting held on

Wednesday 22 March 2023, 8pm, at the School.

Present: Thirty-six parishioners. Parish Councillors Nikki da Costa, Ian Duffy, Vinny Hall, Graham Lee (Parish Council Chair and Chair for the meeting) and Norton Mahy (Parish Council Vice-chair). Clerk Jane Porter and Deputy Clerk Sarah Mitchell. District Councillor Tom Tyson and County Councillor Steve Jarvis.

Apologies for absence: Seven parishioners. Parish councillors Gemma Allan, Martin Hoffman, David Sims and Mark White. PCSO Chris Brabrook.

The Chair, Graham Lee, welcomed all to the meeting and introduced the three new councillors who had been co-opted during the year - Nikki da Costa, Ian Duffy and Vinny Hall. Sarah Mitchell had been appointed as Deputy Clerk and would take over from the current clerk, Jane Porter, when she retired at the end of June. Jane Porter was thanked for her service and would take over the role of deputy clerk until the end of the year to ensure a smooth handover.

1. **Proposal to approve and sign the minutes of the 2022 Annual Parish Meeting.** This was agreed.

Action: GEL

2. **Matters of report from the 2022 meeting.** Chair Graham Lee reported that the North Herts Council (NHC) review of the Ashwell Conservation Area was still being processed by them with their consultant.

3. **Chair's Report.**

- 3.1 Yearbook 2023. Norton Mahy and all of the team that had produced the 2023 Yearbook were thanked for their input; it had been an exceptional edition. The design input by Norton was particularly commended. Norton Mahy reported that some 50 parishioners contributed to the production including the core production team, distributors and all those who submitted the content. It was anticipated that this edition would make a small profit. He made a request for submission of suitable photos of village interest/activities throughout the year.
 - 3.2 Local Police. A representative of the Royston Neighbourhood Team had been unable to attend the meeting due to other commitments. There was a good ongoing relationship with local officers and PCSO Chris Brabrook regularly liaised with the Parish Council on matters of importance to the village. He was currently partnering the Parish Council working with the school on a new 'Twenty's Plenty' anti-speeding poster campaign. The winning design would appear on posters to be placed around the village. *See also 5.2.* Following recent break-ins

and thefts from out-buildings the culprit had been apprehended; vigilance and prompt action by local residents had been instrumental in this.

- 3.3 Possible development at Dixies Meadow. The Parish Council had this week received an email from Jarvis Homes Ltd informing that they had submitted a planning application to NHC. As yet no details had been published but the Parish Council would convene a public meeting to allow local residents to express their views before forming its response to the NHC consultation.
- 3.4 Ashwell CLT Ltd. This had been set up by the Parish Council in response to the feelings expressed by parishioners that community assets were increasingly under threat. This was not just about land for development but could include village pubs, open spaces or services such as a post office. There was a desire to address situations like the loss of access to Wolverly House by some Ashwell residents. It was reiterated that no action would be taken by the CLT without village-wide consultation; all were aware that there would be divided opinions in some situations. Funding would be challenging; there were public sources available and maybe also the opportunity for the village to contribute. The CLT was in the very early stages. A bank account had just been opened and membership would now be opened-up for local residents who wished to purchase a share for £1. A meeting to launch a membership campaign was planned for mid-May.
- 3.5 District and county councillors. The support from both, including regular attendance at Parish Council meetings, was commended.
4. **Report from County Councillor Steve Jarvis.** He commended the high number of parishioners present; this was more than in other parishes.
- 4.1 Speeding surveys. These had been carried out as part of the follow-up on the installation of the 20mph limit; readings at three locations in Lucas Lane, Back Street and at West End had been compared to pre-installation data. The results had shown reductions at the two latter locations and similar speeds in Lucas Lane.
- 4.2 Pot-hole repairs. These had increased by a factor of six compared to the previous winter. He remained of the view that 'a better job' could be done by the contractor and would continue to work on this.
- 4.3 A505 safety. In response to a parishioner's question he reported that the proposal for a 50mph speed limit to cover the Odsey junction had been turned down by Herts Highways as traffic was 'too fast'. In response to this he had championed a public petition to present to the county council; this currently had c700 signatures and needed a total of 1,000 to enable it to be put before the full council.
- 4.4 Herts County Council budget. He reported that almost half of this would be spent on adult social care.
- See also 10.1 below.*
5. **Report from District Councillor Tom Tyson.** He noted the restrictions in place in the run-up to the May local council elections but was happy to report on ongoing matters and answer any questions.
- 5.1 Planning matters. The Local Plan and Neighbourhood Plan were now in place.. This would give officers a stronger position in responding to applications and hopefully developers would be more mindful of the criteria to be adhered to.

- 5.2 Police matters/speeding. He had recently spent time with the local Neighbourhood Team as part of their priority setting exercise. Speeding was an issue in other villages not just Ashwell and a proposal had been made to form a joint volunteer group with Hinxworth, Newnham and Bygrave working together under the 'Community Speed Watch' banner. The police had offered support and training for this and he would welcome contact from anyone interested.
- 5.3 Bygrave Woods music festivals. He had contacted the landowner and been informed the likelihood was that there would be no events this year due to poor uptake of ticket sales/financial issues.
- 5.4 Bygrave solar farm. The NHC planning officer had informed that issues with some of the required technical reports were still ongoing and nothing further was expected until June/July at the earliest.
- 5.5 Community engagement. District councillors from the Baldock & District Area, of which Ashwell was a part, had held a surgery outside Tesco's; similar future events may be planned if feedback was positive. He reminded that small grants were available to local groups from this committee; anyone interested should get in touch with him.
- 5.6 Waste and recycling collections. The NHC change to the Purple Bin waste collection from two to three weekly was noted. It was emphasized that the recycling collection would remain as a two-weekly service and the food waste weekly; arrangements were to be made to cover large households and any others with special requirements. The paid-for garden waste collection would remain two-weekly. The changes to the waste collection had been driven by cost savings but also by the need to increase recycling; changes to national regulations meant that an increasing amount of packaging was recyclable. Concerns were raised that householders would find the emptying schedule confusing and also that the cost-saving to NHC was not large. The Chair requested a show of hands to gauge views on the changes with a clear majority in the room against the change to three-weekly collections estimated at a 60/40 split.
- 5.7 Proposed Boundary Commission changes to Arbury ward. In response to a question he reported that there had been no further information following the objections made by NHC, the Parish Council and others.
6. **Parish Council budget for 2023-24.** It was noted that the Financial Report was in the Yearbook and on the website. The Vice-chair, Cllr Norton Mahy, reported that the expenditure for the next financial year had been set at £112,000, an increase of £16,000 on the estimated expenditure for 2022-23. Parish councillors had unanimously supported this increase in order to maintain the level of service that it provided to the Parish. The extra expenditure would mean a rise in the Parish part of the council tax of £10.74 per year for a Band D household. The Parish Council's costs had, in line with those of others, increased due to inflation; routine costs of suppliers for items such as ground maintenance had increased. It also had to cover some large capital items such as the rabbit fencing at Small Gains and tree works at the Springs.
7. **Working groups of the Parish Council.**
- 7.1 **Litter Picking.** Cllr Norton Mahy reported that the annual village litter pick was scheduled for Saturday 15th April meeting at 2pm by the pavilion at the Recreation Ground. Equipment (bags, litter pickers) would be provided.
8. **Reports from Parish Councillors**

- 8.1 Full-fibre broadband installation in the village.** Chair Graham Lee introduced Cllr Vinny Hall who had been liaising, along with parishioner Al Jacoutot, on behalf of the Parish Council with the supplier. It was noted that the availability of this to a rural community was a significant asset. He and Al had dealt with some complaints from residents by establishing direct communication with the supplier, Voneus. One issue had been the telegraph pole installed adjacent to the Church in Mill Street. Following representations to Voneus this had been removed; the vigilance of local residents on this was commended. The installation would now be underground down Mill St and a road closure notice to facilitate this had been issued. If any residents had any issues with the installation they should get in touch. In response to questions from parishioners it was clarified that the green cabinets installed at the top of Bear Lane did not require any public consultation; these were considered as 'street furniture'. Cabling to serve Colbron Close had been installed underground.
- 8.2 The Springs.** Cllr Nikki da Costa noted that Cllr Martin Hoffman (councillor responsible for the Springs) had been unable to attend the meeting. She commended all his hard work for this key village asset over many years including holding to account bodies such as the Environment Agency and Affinity Water. There was increasing pressure on water supplies nationally and figures such as David Attenborough were involved in campaigns to protect our chalk streams. The SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest) status of the Springs was a major benefit in providing protection that others did not have. The Parish Council had recently responded to the Affinity Water consultation on their 25-year plan and was in regular contact with Natural England and the Environment Agency. Affinity Water had an extraction licence but this was rigorously monitored. There was a bill currently going through parliament and she was involved in tabling an amendment to this with the objective of gaining more protection for chalk streams.
- 8.3 Sustainability and the Environment.** Chair Graham Lee reported that this was an important issue for the village and parish councillors were keen to hear from parishioners whether the Parish Council should take the initiative on green energy. Other villages had established community-wide provision such as air source heat pumps, solar panels, wind turbines, etc. A show of hands showed majority support in principle for a village initiative but with the proviso that the location of infrastructure such as wind turbines would be contentious. A plea was made that any initiative involving, for example, insulation should include social housing.
- 8.4 The Recreation Ground and Pavilion.** Chair Graham Lee reported that upgrades to these facilities was a 'big ticket' item that the Parish Council wished to fund. Discussions were ongoing with NHC re the availability of funds from planning obligations and section 106 held by them but there was still a significant shortfall. Estimates for either a new or a refurbished pavilion had been in the region of £450,000. A levy on the Parish Pre-cept was one option that had been suggested. One parishioner present suggested that the land should be sold for development to raise funds for the purchase of a larger piece of land outside the village where better facilities could be provided. The counter view was clearly held by the majority present that the Rec was a significant and much-valued community space despite its limitations and should not be sold.

9. Reports from other groups.

- 9.1 Village Sports Day.** Organiser Guy Reed reported that this was scheduled for Sunday 21 May.
- 9.2 Village Hall.** Clerk Rosemary Pearch reported that she was due to retire shortly and an advert had been issued for a replacement.

- 9.3 Royal British Legion. Vice-chair Andrew Gillborn commended the recent works at the War Memorial junction and the new entrance to the Rec. The latter was to facilitate access for the annual Remembrance Service that was now held at the rear of the memorial. It was noted that the Parish council had agreed to arrange for some further ground works that were required by the new entrance. Highways were investigating the drainage issues and possible bollards/planters to prevent vehicles mounting the extended kerbed areas.
- 9.4 Ashwell Show. Organiser John Yianni thanked all who had contributed, both helpers and visitors, to what had been a record show. Profits had been distributed to local groups.

10. Parish matters from parishioners.

- 10.1 The Ruddery/question on the proposed changes to the status to restrict four-wheeled vehicles. County Councillor Steve Jarvis responded that this was still being progressed by Herts Highways. There had been objections to the initial, informal, consultation that they were currently dealing with before proceeding to the formal consultation stage. It was noted that all of the immediate residents had been in favour of the proposals.
- 10.2 Weedkilling of footways/concerns that this had resulted in the demise of the Hollyhocks that were a valued village feature. County Councillor Steve Jarvis responded that the need for indiscriminate weedkilling had been discussed with Highways and whether this was necessary. He was working to get it reduced to only clearly defined areas.
- 10.3 Playground facilities/when were these to be updated. Chair Graham Lee responded that the consultation had shown that skateboarding was the preferred activity to be retained in its existing area but the grant money obtained was insufficient to cover the costs of upgrading. Discussions had taken place as to what was the greater priority at the Rec, an upgrade to the playground or the pavilion. Clarification was awaited from NHC as to how the funds already held could be allocated.
- 10.4 Merchant Taylors' site off Gardiners Lane/concerns re lack of use. It was known that the County Council had held the lease on behalf of the school but the latter had withdrawn it use some years ago. Subsequently several village groups had approached the Merchant Taylors' Company, the landowner and trustee of the Henry Colbron Trust, but it was understood that no decisions had been made.

Parishioner Jill Powell thanked all parish councillors for their hard work and commitment.

Meeting closed: 9.45pm