

**Draft minutes of the Annual Parish Meeting
held on Wednesday the 23rd March 2022, 8 pm at the school**

Present: 39 members of the public in the room and 20 on Zoom. Parish councillors Cath Connolly, Graham Lee (chairman) and Norton Mahy (vice-chairman) in the room; joining on Zoom Martin Hoffman (due to recent health procedures unable to attend in person) and Mark White. The clerk (Jane Porter) and deputy clerk (Laura Brooks-Payne) were also there.

Apologies: Parish councillors David Sims (away) and Gemma Allan (unwell), District councillor Tom Tyson and County councillor Steve Jarvis (both attending a meeting at NHC), and three parishioners.

1 Reports from the Parish Council (PC).

1.1 Co-options to the PC. Chairman Graham Lee reported the co-option of Cath Connolly to the Parish Council. She was a much-welcomed addition to the team. He made a plea to the whole village inviting/encouraging others to put themselves forward. Younger members would be particularly welcomed.

1.2 Litter picking/Great British Spring Clean. Parish councillor Cath Connolly reported that she was leading on the organisation for a village litter pick on Saturday 9th April meeting at 2pm at the pavilion on the Rec. The event would be publicized on posters, notice boards, the website and social media. This would be a sociable event as well as improving the look of the village. A full risk assessment was in place, equipment available, and she encouraged people to sign up to attend.

A local resident noted that littering of bags of dog waste were a particular issue; another that one of the dog waste bins provided by the Parish Council was often overflowing. Graham Lee reported that the ten dog waste bins (10 in number) were emptied weekly. Following consultation with some residents and dog owners, an additional bin had been ordered for a new location in Ashwell Street and would be installed shortly. The issues of the overflowing bin by the Churchyard and the dustbin on a farmer's land would be investigated.

1.3 Village Hall. Chairman Graham Lee reported that following an approach from the trustees some years ago the Parish Council had been in communication with a solicitor on behalf of the Village Hall. Their proposal for the change of status was intended to address the liability of individual trustees and to ensure that there were safeguards for the

future of the premises. The intention was for the Village Hall to remain independent, managed by the trustees and users, but that the Parish Council would provide a 'back-stop' in case this was ever needed. The clerk to the Village Hall, Rosemary Pearch, emphasized that charity law would require community consultation on any disposal of the premises.

1.4 Broadband and FTTP -fibre to the property. Chairman Graham Lee invited local resident Al Jacoutot to report on recent developments. A company called Voneus had approached the Parish Council re their plans to provide this to the village to provide a significantly enhanced service to that currently available from BT. He had carried out some research on this including communications with residents of Dunton and Eyeworth where Voneus had already installed their service. Reports were generally good; he noted that a different provider was involved in the Mordens villages where reports were not so favourable. Voneus were intending to set up info sessions and would advertise these to the public; the Parish Council would put details on their website and push out further publicity. He would attend on behalf of the Parish Council and report back. A list of questions to be put had been started and it was clarified that these included aspects such as coverage and disruption.

1.5 Safer routes to the station for pedestrians and cyclists. Chairman Graham Lee reported that parish councillor Martin Hoffman had been leading on this over a considerable period of time but was unable to be present at the meeting. He invited parishioner Guy Reed, who had done the liaison with the NHC and HCC Walking and Cycling Infrastructure Plan group, to contribute. Guy reported that achieving priority listing by the NHC and HCC group had been a big step forward. The project was now very much in the hands of the Cambridgeshire landowner to progress it further. He noted that parish councillor Martin Hoffman had been pushing on this for many years and although there were still issues to resolve, particularly funding, it was now much closer to being achieved. It was noted that additional parking spaces for the station were also being proposed by the landowner.

The view was expressed by others present that Ashwell was classified as a 'sustainable' village and that this was a 'perfect integrated solution' not only for commuters but for school children, students, visitors to the village, etc.

In response to a question (how can we help support this kind of initiative?) chairman Graham Lee encouraged people to sign up on the website to receive regular updates on matters such as this that affected the village.

1.6 Parish Council accounts 2021/2 & budget for 2022/3.

Vice-chairman Norton Mahy reported that the Parish Council had set its budget for the forthcoming financial year, 2022-23, last December. This included a 2.75% increase in the parish precept, broadly in line with inflation at the time, and an overall expenditure increase of 6%. This had

been predicted to result in a rise of 93pence for a Band D household. The actual cost to residents, however, because of the increase in the number of houses since last year, was actually minus 0.1%. The budget would allow the Parish Council to continue to provide the services and amenities it managed, to cover increased maintenance costs and to support local organisations.

In response to a question as to why such a large proportion of the budget went on administration rather than being spent on the village it was noted that since 2019 there had been a much-reduced number of parish councillors; this placed a greater burden on paid staff. It was noted that the figures shown in the Yearbook for administration costs included premises and project management; these costs were currently not cross-charged to the project budgets that the admin time was spent on.

1.7 Neighbourhood Plan – ‘where we go from here’

1.7.1 Referendum result.

The high level of support from local residents for the plan, the vast majority being in favour, was noted. Chairman Graham Lee thanked all those who voted for it for their endorsement. Vice-chairman Norton Mahy reported that the plan would now be used to inform the PC’s actions and decisions particularly when communicating with NHC on planning matters.

1.7.2 Assets of Community Value.

Chairman Graham Lee reported that the PC was in the processing of submitting nominations to NHC for all three village pubs. NHC had requested further details of their use by village groups/organisations before considering the applications. A request was made that the URC hall be added to the nominations.

1.7.3 Community Land Trust (CLT).

Chairman Graham Lee reported that the PC had agreed to seek a solicitor’s advice on the benefits this might give to the village. CLT’s were designed to give local communities more powers to approach landowners where land was put up for sale such as had happened with Dixies Meadow. As the PC had said in relation to that site no decisions would be made about a proposed site without full village-wide consultation within the framework of a CLT.

1.7.4 NHC Conservation area review.

Chairman Graham Lee reported that the PC had been approached last September by the consultant working on behalf of NHC asking for contacts with local people/organisations with knowledge of the village’s history, design and character to make suggestions about possible revisions based on those criteria, including changes to the existing area, that might inform his report.

The PC set up a working group of individuals known to have the required skills, including a representative from the Museum, and local historian David Short had agreed to lead the group. He was thanked for his input on this; it was noted that he had been involved with the Neighbourhood Plan group for many years and had been instrumental in producing the Ashwell Village Design Statement that was now part of the Neighbourhood Plan. This working group had produced a report, consistent with the consultant's questions and endorsed by the PC, that had made some suggestions including extensions to the conservation area.

In response to a question it was noted that the Chapel in the Cemetery, currently not a listed building, had been recommended for this. It was noted that listing involved many more restrictions than inclusion in a conservation area.

Concerns were raised that the PC had not consulted with residents that might be affected, ie properties that were in the areas for the suggested extension of the current conservation area, before endorsing the working party's suggestions and sending them to the NHC consultant. Although the response time requested by the consultant had been short, it was felt by some that the PC should have asked for an extension in order to allow time to consult with residents.

The view was expressed that the PC, as a public authority, should have consulted with residents before any suggestions were made to the NHC consultant. This would have been 'good practice' and courteous.

Chairman Graham Lee responded that a full public consultation was to be carried out by NHC as this was their project. If it had been a PC project, as the Neighbourhood Plan had been, then public consultation would have been undertaken by the PC. There was also the issue that the PC, and other village representatives, had been asked by the consultant to feed in their suggestions at an early stage of the process. Whether these suggestions were taken up by the consultant and included by NHC in their forthcoming public consultation remained to be seen.

It was alleged that the PC had not communicated what had taken place. It was clarified that between October and January the matter had appeared on all the PC monthly meeting agendas and reports included in all the minutes, an item had appeared in the November Village News that had also been posted on notice boards and the website, and this had been emailed directly to all those signed-up via the website.

Concerns were also raised that inclusion of a property in a conservation area impacted on a householders permitted development rights and residents potentially affected should have been made aware of this. It was accepted that permitted development rights were different (although not completely withdrawn) in a conservation area and planning permission had to be sought for some types of property alterations. It was stressed that these restrictions were not the same as

for listed buildings. It was noted that the suggested extensions to the conservation area were much more about the benefit to the whole village rather than any desire to impose restrictions on individual rights.

Parish councillors agreed to discuss the concerns raised at their next meeting and to take action to address these.

1.8 Other matters. In response to a concern raised about the recent rebranding exercise by NHC, the PC agreed to convey this to district councillor Tom Tyson for his response.

1.9 Chairman Graham Lee proposed that, although there were still agenda items outstanding, that the meeting be closed as it was now after 10pm. It was agreed that reports in relation to those agenda items not covered would be included as appendices to the minutes and any village organisations wishing to contribute should submit these.

Chairman Graham Lee thanked all for attending. He apologised to those joining on Zoom for the technical difficulties re sound quality; this was being looked into for future PC and village meetings.

Meeting closed at 10.05pm

See following:

APPENDICES RE OUTSTANDING AGENDA ITEMS NOT COVERED AT THE MEETING

- A. Premises matters (PC):
 - A.1 Pavilion upgrade (GL).
 - A.2 Recreation Ground/proposals for new equipment for older children. (GA).
 - A.3 Management at The Springs/Natural England assessment (MH).
 - A.4 New tree and hedge planting on parish -owned premises (DS).
- B. Report from our District Councillor Tom Tyson
- C. Report from our County Councillor Steve Jarvis
- D. *Reports from other village organisations (to be added if any requested).*

Appendix A.1 (from the Parish Council)

Pavilion and public toilets upgrade project.

Some time ago it had been agreed by the PC and users that the facilities needed to be upgraded to an enhanced standard and made suitable for increased use. Consultation with user groups and discussion by a working party had taken place in 2019/20. Post-Covid this was back on the agenda. Some funds were available, held by NHC, from section 106 agreements and other planning obligations. A brief had been supplied to an architect to determine what might be achievable with the funds available and a site meeting was to be scheduled.

Appendix A.2 (from the Parish Council)

Recreation Ground/proposals for new equipment for older children.

Funding had been secured from the Henry Colbron Trust and local authority sources. A consultation had been carried out via social media, posters and other media; the school had given flyers to all children. Responses could be made online. It had been emphasised that this was far wider reaching than previous consultations with the views of children paramount. The volunteers involved in setting this up had been thanked. The consultation had ended on 16th March and responses would be used to guide the plans. Once finalised plans would be put out to tender with works progressing at the end of the year.

Appendix A.3 (from the Parish Council)

The Springs. The formal visit by Natural England to assess the SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest) had taken place two weeks ago. The input of Chris James in this had been much appreciated. Various works were now being progressed including fencing repairs, new fencing to protect vulnerable areas and re-siting of litter bins. The Management Plan was to be refreshed and would include some significant tree works to be scheduled for next winter. Routine tree works were scheduled for early April. The monthly communications with the Environment Agency who were responsible for the routine monitoring of water flow rates from the springs and other matters concerning the river were ongoing.

Appendix A.4 (from the Parish Council)

Several more trees had been planted at Small Gains in addition to those planted earlier and the line of new hedging. At the Rec two new trees had been planted and also hedges along the boundary with the horse field and Station Road. Funding for this had come from the Queen's Green Canopy initiative, mitigation paid by the developer for the loss of the Chestnut tree in Lucas Lane and the PC's reserve funds. Further planting was being planned for the autumn/winter.

Appendix B. From our district councillor Tom Tyson

Sorry I can't be with you this evening; I had been looking forward to coming.

It's been my privilege to serve you as District Councillor in Ashwell for nearly three years now. In that time I've spoken to many of you about your hopes and fears for the village. The key word is 'village': many of you share concerns about Ashwell growing too quickly, becoming urbanised and losing its special rural character.

We have seen two significant housing developments approved and built in that time and the planning authority has refused two others. Planning decisions are informed by policies formulated nationally by the government and at district level in our Local Plan. This has still not been adopted, however. It remains, rather amazingly, in the hands of the Inspector, who seems to enjoy taking his time over the final decision on whether to recommend it after the endless rounds of consultation. Assuming he eventually does, it will then be voted on by North Herts Councillors.

Against this backdrop it's great to see that Ashwell's own policy document, the Neighbourhood Plan, is now finally in place. Congratulations to everyone who was involved in putting it together over the years. It will be instrumental in helping retain Ashwell's intrinsic village character. In addition, North Herts is currently reviewing the conservation area and the Parish Council's working party has suggested some very interesting extensions to it which I hope will be adopted.

As well as keeping an eye on incoming planning applications and intervening when requested, I've been pleased to help wherever I can with other local problems - from fly tips and broken walls to parking infringements and missed bins.

Across the district, the demand-responsive Lynx bus service has met with a positive response, with more stops recently added. We gave away 10,000 young trees this winter and are now looking at ideas for a follow-up project. The Council has administered almost £50 million in various grants to support businesses during the pandemic, and community grants have been awarded by the Area Committee to several organisations in Ashwell this year. We gave our leisure centres the backing they needed to get through the periods of lockdown and plan to extend the opening hours of our outdoor pools this summer in response to public demand. The Council building has had its solar panels fitted and the first electric vehicles have been purchased to supersede conventional models as they go out of service. Additional wilding schemes are planned to supplement those already in place. We have responded to the changes in town centre use, for example by installing bike parking, increasing pedestrian areas, introducing recycling bins for litter and extending the licences for outdoor seating at cafés and restaurants – so here's hoping for some more fine weather as spring arrives.

Please sign-up on the website to receive regular updates on matters of village interest
www.ashwell.gov.uk

Thank you for your time, and apologies once again for not being here with you. Meanwhile, please get in touch if there is anything I can help you with.

Tom Tyson

Appendix C. From our county councillor Steve Jarvis

I am sorry that I am unable to be with you this evening since I was looking forward to attending the meeting with its normal discussion of village issues after its enforced absence for the last two years. Unfortunately it clashes with a North Herts Council meeting which I need to be at.

I shall assume that you have all seen my report in the Yearbook so will not repeat its contents but there are a number of areas where things have moved on.

The West End Chicane is now in place. Like all new streetlamps the new lamps that have been installed at the chicane initially operate at full brightness, rather than the reduced level that has been adopted for all the other street lights in Ashwell since their upgrade to LEDs. This should be rectified shortly once they are connected to the control system (like almost everything else street lights are now connected to a data network).

The work on Station Road and at the Lucas Lane junction, including paving in front of the war memorial is scheduled for the first quarter of the new financial year.

I had hoped that the path alongside Station Road to Sunnymead would have been resurfaced by now, but unfortunately this has been delayed to a date as yet unknown in the coming financial year.

I have been attempting to get some action to address the many holes in the A505, particularly between Royston and Odsey and I am now told that the scheme to do this is being planned. In my view the work should already have been done, but a commitment to do it before too much longer is at least a step forward.

The County Council will be involved in support of refugees from Ukraine (as indeed it was and still is for those from Afghanistan) and there is apparently funding from government which the County Council will distribute to districts in some but the details of how this will all work are far from clear at present. A message that we have all been encouraged to spread is that giving money to the various relief organisations is (for those who can afford it) much more likely to be effective than collecting items to send.

I am always happy to try to help with anything related to the County Council's responsibilities and to answer any questions that those at the meeting may have if these are passed on to me.

Steve Jarvis