

Ash Parish Council

Chairman's Report 2019

Thanks

I would like to thank all those largely unsung volunteers who have worked over the last year to make the parish a pleasant place to live: the ad hoc litter pickers, the street scene planters, the people who clear up after other people's dogs (although why some dog owners steadfastly refuse to bag it and bin it completely escapes me), the book exchangers, the footpath clearers, the club organisers and everyone else who has given their time, energy and money to the parish.

Finance

The Council finances are in good shape and will provide a firm base for the newly elected councillors in May. Unallocated reserves meet our statutory obligations and ring fenced reserves have been established in respect of several major projects - refurbishment of the pavilion, repair and replacement of the playground equipment and repairs to the churchyard wall.

Although the Parish precept remains a very small proportion of the overall Council Tax bill, the precept for 2018/19 has increased by 26% over the previous year. There are number of reasons for this but two stand out. Firstly, as we all know, County and District Council budgets are coming increasingly under pressure. The impact on the parish is that many jobs routinely undertaken by County (gully cleansing and verge cutting for example) are being reduced or abandoned entirely. The Council felt it prudent to make allowance in the coming year for some of those tasks to devolve to the parish.

Secondly, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find volunteers to undertake tasks on behalf of the Council as parishioners become more and more "cash rich, time poor". Consequently, we have made provision for more tasks, historically carried out by volunteers, to be contracted out many of which are now being undertaken by the parish lengthsman.

NB There are still plenty of opportunities to get involved in village projects - read on!

We have also budgeted for increases to the ring-fenced reserves for the major projects mentioned above.

Of course, the precept is based on the budget that the Council has produced and published - it is only an estimate. It is entirely possible that your new Council will be able to reduce expenditure in which case future budgets may be reduced. It is worth remembering, though, that the precept is not currently capped as other parts of the Council Tax are. This may not always be the case.

The Council decided, as the budget continues to increase, that our Standing Orders no longer adequately cover Council business. Consequently, we have adopted stand-alone Financial Regulations for the first time. This document is available for study on the village website as are the updated Standing Orders and Code of Conduct.

The Council's budget and all items of expenditure over £100 are now also published on the website.

Parish Clerk

Of the challenges faced by the Parish Council in the last year, the sudden death of our Parish Clerk, Di Clarke was the most difficult. Di had been Ash Parish Clerk for 40 years and is still sadly missed. She took part in village life in many different ways and I am pleased to say that her contribution was recognised in a Chairman's Award for Service to the Community. The presentation was accepted on her behalf by members of her family at a ceremony in Taunton.

I am also pleased to report that Helen Moore has been appointed as Di's permanent successor. Helen, who is also the Parish Clerk for Walton, holds a Certificate in Local Council Administration, and lives mid-way between her two parishes. It has not been easy for Helen to take up the reins with little or nothing in the way of a handover. She has coped brilliantly and our administration is once again back on firm ground.

Village Website and Parish Office

In the past year the PC has established a village website (now a statutory requirement) and a Parish Office in the Pavilion. Helen can be found there each week on Monday between 1.30pm and 4pm. Both website and office were setup using a grant from SSDC for that purpose. Thanks are due to Mick Wooden for struggling through the bureaucracy to access the grant, Antoinette Groves for setting up and managing the website and Nick Bluck, Steve Vickery and Roger Coombes for setting up the office. I should also add that various gifts of furniture and equipment from parishioners have helped to keep the costs down. Overall there was no cost to the precept in establishing either the website or the Parish Office.

The Council would be grateful for constructive feedback on the Village Website both the format and the content.

Allotments

Sadly, the village allotments were closed this year. This was partly because of reduced demand - half of the plots were unused - and partly because the land owner wished to regain his use of the area. It remains the case that if six or more parishioners request the provision of allotments, the parish Council must try to provide them.

Pavilion

As previously reported, the Council intend to undertake a major refurbishment and enhancement of the Pavilion. However, before investing large sums of money, it was considered prudent to ensure the security of our tenure of the recreation ground, which currently belongs to SSDC. Negotiations with SSDC have resulted in their agreement to sell the recreation ground to the parish Council for the sum of £1. The legal formalities are ongoing but we are expecting to be able to announce the change of ownership shortly. This will clear the way for the pavilion project to proceed.

I must add my thanks to Yvonne and Bob Moseley who, unpaid, clean the pavilion and manage the bookings on behalf of the council.

Planning

With the weight of Government now being put firmly in favour of the developer and many previously relied upon policies being questioned, the role of the parish Council is fast becoming the only voice parishioners have in shaping the development in our area. Accordingly, the Council has begun preparing our own planning guidelines against which individual planning applications can be measured. This work is by no means complete and no public consultation has yet been undertaken but it is hoped that the new Council will take up the baton in due course.

Churchyard

The recent quinquennial survey of the church and churchyard fabric has confirmed what we already knew, that the wall between the churchyard and the old school is in urgent need of repair. However, when the Diocese disposed of the school building, the ownership of the wall was not (as far as we can determine) defined. The question has remained open for over 20 years in spite of the efforts of this and previous councils to persuade the Diocese to document an agreement with the owner of the old school. Without that written agreement, councils have been unable to commit public funds to the repair. The council, with the support of the PCC, continue to apply pressure to persuade the Diocese to address the issue.

Traffic Calming

The project, which our County Councillor was championing, to re-address traffic calming from Stapleton to the bottom of Ash has been put on hold because funding has been removed by County. We will need to look for other solutions in the short to medium term.

Ash in Bloom

The village enjoyed success again in the national competition achieving a Silver Gilt award thanks to Antoinette Groves and her "Bloomsters". Sadly, the extraordinary weather last summer took its toll and the floral displays suffered, which was a great pity. This coming year, the Council are again supporting financially the street scene planting but the planting and watering will need volunteers to carry it out. If you have a couple of spare hours and think this is a worthwhile way of enhancing the place where we live, please contact Antoinette - details on the website.

Millennium Wood

I would like to thank Mick Wooden and his (very small) team of volunteers for their care and maintenance of the wood. It is a beautiful place to walk, the views are fantastic and I encourage everyone to make a visit and see what has been achieved. It is an asset of which many villages would be proud.

However, the Council is split on the long term future of the wood (which the Council owns) - whether steps should be taken to give it permanent protection or retain it as a possible development resource. No formal proposal for either outcome is currently being considered but, should one be made, it is to be hoped that the Council will ensure that the fullest possible public consultation is undertaken before any decision is taken - in either direction.

Mick would be very glad to hear from anybody who can help with work in the wood - details on the website.

Ash Biodiversity Audit

The Council is supporting Mick Wooden's project to conduct a biodiversity audit of Ash parish, which is being put together as a starting point to help focus community action for wildlife. By documenting the natural assets of the Parish, it is hoped to identify where action might be successful in halting or even reversing the local decline in species.

Again, Mick is asking for volunteers from the village to help compile this document. Details on the Website.

School Use of the Village Hall

The Council continues to support a project to enable the school to use the village hall for school lunches along with pre and after school activities. The project, which provides enhancements to village hall kitchen, additional storage and direct access from the school to the hall is now underway after an extended wait while both County and District planning permission was sought. This has now been received, vegetation has been cleared and an industrial dishwasher installed. The project is aimed at boosting the sustainability of the village hall, avoiding classrooms doubling as dining areas and, potentially, intergenerational contact with an opportunity for older parishioners to share lunch with the children.

Councillors

Finally, I would like to thank the Councillors who have served over the last four years. It is a thankless but essential task and there are certainly more brickbats than bouquets! Councillors give their time freely and generally go far beyond their statutory duties in supporting the village. By the time this report is published, we will know who the candidates are for the next council. Hopefully there will be sufficient volunteers to ensure that there is an election so that the parish can give those elected a proper mandate to act on their behalf. If there is an election PLEASE VOTE.

Jack Parker
Chair, Ash Parish Council