

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT – APRIL 2020 TO MARCH 2021

Thank you for joining us tonight via Zoom.

2020/21 has been really difficult for many in our community. COVID-19 has had broad-reaching impacts on so many aspects of our lives - schooling, lockdown, families suffering bereavements and long-term ill health, furloughs, home working, and job losses. I'd like to firstly give my thanks to everyone who has kept us going, from carers and other NHS & medical workers to the shop staff, bin men, transport staff, and every other unsung hero who has been critical to keeping our community going.

Because of COVID we made a number of proactive changes to the way the Parish Council has operated including using Zoom to enable us to continue working. We have been keeping our website updated with timely COVID information, and liaising with residents and other local authorities, kept the Rec toilets open through-out the winter so that people can wash their hands, and while we didn't publish hard copy Parish Directories this year, we did provide all the information via the APC website.

We have revised our priorities as circumstances demanded, and some of our work on the three key priorities we defined for 2019/20 was somewhat delayed, but we none-the-less made significant progress in all three areas:

1. Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP) – *progressing well*

There has been a huge amount of work going on in the background to deliver this really important piece of work. The NDP itself went to examination in March this year, and we are waiting to hear whether the examiner has accepted the report. If he has, then we will go to referendum in July. Importantly, because of the COVID situation the rules regarding NDPs have changed slightly, meaning that our NDP DOES have weight in terms of planning as soon as it is accepted, and now must be taken into account for any new planning applications. As I say, this has taken an enormous amount of work and I am very grateful to everyone who has given their time to deliver it.

2. Upgrade of the Children's Play Area in the Recreation Ground – *complete*

The fantastic new play area was completed in April 2020, and after some delays due to COVID, was able to open in July 2021. It's a wonderful new addition to the Rec and has been very well received by the children and parents alike.

3. Highways Improvement Plan (HIP) Phase I – *complete*

Again, after much COVID delay, Phase I one of the plan was completed in October 2020. This involved new gates, road markings and speed signs at Sandwich, Guilton and New St entrances to the village. Going forward, we will have further phases aimed at addressing traffic and speed issues in the village.

We also recognised that it is important that we are able to get our messages out to you, and that you can find the information you need, when you need it. So with that aim in mind, in October 2020 we delivered a much improved Ash Parish Council website that works on any computer or mobile device, and is fully accessible. We have renewed and refreshed its contents and are providing more information than ever before – do please take a look. To get our messages to a wider audience, since July 2020 we have also been publishing Ash Parish Council content onto both the Ash and Westmarsh Facebook pages.

Our Footpaths committee had its first virtual meeting in January. We will be updating our parish footpaths walks document and a new village walk by the Heritage Group is underway.

Priorities for 2020 -2021

Given the successful delivery of both the children's play area and HIP, the parish council agreed some further priorities for delivery in 2020-2021. Alongside continuing to deliver the Ash Neighbourhood Development Plan, these are:

1. Biodiversity

We have set up a new Biodiversity working group. We are creating wildflower strips in the Rec (you may have seen the white lines painted on the grass), local schoolchildren have been building bug hotels with one being installed in our allotments, and via our new website we have been providing seasonal tips for residents on how they can help with small changes in their gardens to improve biodiversity.

2. Highways Improvement Plan (HIP) Phase II

We will be monitoring the effect of our phase I roadway installations, and gathering views on what the next priorities ought to be e.g. 20 mph zone etc. and when COVID restrictions allow, we will be setting up a speed watch group. We would love some volunteers, so if you would like to join us, please contact the clerk.

3. Review of community facilities

This is a sub-project of our Neighbourhood Development Plan. We will be reviewing a broad range of facilities delivered from broadband through to sports to ensure that they will provide what the Ash Parish needs for the duration of our NDP.

You may recall that DDC raised the prospect of charging for use of our car park. Our strong recommendation to DDC was that charges should not be introduced, and the car park remain free for use, ensuring that those who need to drive into the centre of the village are not penalised. I am pleased to say that in May 2020 DDC decided not to introduce them, and we agreed to install notices asking users to be considerate and only use it for short term parking. In August 2020 we also completed a parking survey to understand usage patterns and to further inform our HIP phase II.

The Parish Council fully understand the financial impact that many households will be feeling given COVID related job losses and furloughs, and for that reason, we took an active decision this year to keep our precept flat for many, and actually reduced for some. It means that we won't be able to achieve as much in this financial year, but we hope that everyone will appreciate this course of action.

We have a parish councillor vacancy following Mr Jeffrey Loffman's resignation. If you are interested in becoming a councillor, then do please contact myself, the Clerk or any of our councillors to discuss this very worthwhile opportunity.

Finally, please note that due to the elections there are currently restrictions on what can be published in the period from 19th March 2021 to 6th May 2021 by the police (Police & Crime Commissioner), Kent County and Dover District Councillors. This means that we will receive their factual reports, but they cannot deal with controversial issues, report views, proposals or recommendations at this time.

Thank you to everyone who has input to the work of the Ash Parish Council through this most extraordinary of years, and to those in the parish who have so helpfully provided guidance and their time.

Andrew Harris-Rowley
April 2021