**Chairman’s report**

**Ashley Parish Council annual meeting 2024**

It is my pleasure once again to report on the activity of the Ashley Parish Council for the last 12 months.

I would summarise the year by saying that we continue to focus on making Ashley a pleasant and a safe place in which to live.

Following several years of prudent financial management and boosted by money received from CIL (Community infrastructure levy) payments made for houses built in the village, our finances are strong and this has enabled us to begin a process of renewal, replacement and investment in equipment and infrastructure.

I’ll start my report looking at those enhancements.

During the year we purchased 3 picnic tables which you will see outside this building which we already know that families are enjoying and making full use of.

As in previous years a significant investment has gone into repairing and replacing equipment at the play area. We have recently installed a new See Saw in place of the bridge that had become rotten. More investment is planned and we suspect we are rapidly approaching the time when we need to have a complete renewal of the equipment. We are exploring how we might fund what will be a very significant spend.

Also at the playing field, though on a much smaller scale, we have installed 5 bat boxes, funded by an environmental grant available through ECDC.

Further afield, together with the Pavilion Trust, we funded a wonderful bench by the pond in memory of Peter Bridge who lived in the village for many years and did so much to support the village, this council, and the Pavilion Trust in so many ways. It is a fitting tribute to Peter and I hope many of you will enjoy sitting on it and watching the world go by.

Also at the pond we have purchased a new notice board to be sited at the pond - it will be installed once the very unsightly telephone box has been removed. A new board to be attached to the village shop is also planned.

Last summer a drunken driver swerved off the road by the pond and knocked down the white direction sign. I’m pleased to say that this was repaired by Anglia Fabrications and the cost of the repair work was met from insurance.

Moving west toward Dalham and Gazeley, at the suggestion of one of our Councillors, we explored the possibility of installing street lights around the bends at the end of Church Street. Those bends are currently unlit making the walk along the narrow pavement hazardous and unpleasant. The initial quotation received for street light was in the order of £30k which was far outside what we were able to afford. Since then we have explored the option of solar lights, mounted on poles on either side of the street. The cost of solar lights is around £10k and a proposal to approve that expenditure is being put to the Parish council at our meeting which follows this this evening.

Moving on to our programme of repairs and maintenance, just before Easter a team of volunteers and councillors did the annual clear up of overgrown vegetation at the pond. Special mention must go to Robert Summers who donned waders and did the bulk of the heavy lifting. I should also like to thank Robert for the other pieces of maintenance and improvement that he quietly carries out around the village. Thank you Robert - your community spirit is fantastic and hugely appreciated.

We’ve spent quite a lot of time this year trying to establish exactly who owns the boundaries of the footpath that runs from Ashley to Cheveley, specifically along the length of the new development on the site of 28 High Street. Land Registry plans are unclear and in the absence of any definitive information on ownership we are asking both landowners - PR Build and Hascombe Stud, to share the cost of maintaining the trees and undergrowth.

Finally, in relation to maintenance, as in previous years, we have tidied up bushes and trees in the closed churchyard.

Something that has taken a lot of our time in previous years is the consideration of Planning applications. This year we have looked at and provided feedback on 12 planning applications. Happily none were of the scale or complexity of some in previous year and nor, in our view, were they controversial requiring consultation with the village as a whole.

While on the subject of planning and development, we continue to be alert to the CIL money that is due to us and to chase it with ECDC where it does not seem to have been received. CIL money in respect of the site behind Potter’s Cottage, which fell due in August 2022, is still outstanding and we continue to chase it.

Flooding on the Newmarket Road between Ashley and Cheveley and the appalling state of the road surface on this stretch of road and elsewhere has caused numerous complaints from residents. Flooding occurs because the main drain under the road is completely silted up which leaves the water no choice but to run over the surface.

On line reports to Cambridgeshire Highways do not appear to be being dealt despite additional funding provided by the Government to help with road repairs. We have spoken with Lucy Frazer MP about this and have written formally to Cambs Highways but the holes remain and the roads remain hazardous. We will continue to lobby and pester for proper repairs.

In February 2024 we held a meeting with a representative of The Crown pub to understand what his plans are for the pub. The meeting was well attended by the village, in a demonstration that the village are keen to have a pub.

We were told that the owner has no intention of reopening the pub and considers that it is not viable as a going concern. It will be put on the open market and the village will be asked if they wish to put forward a bid.

A small group of residents agreed to view the pub to determine whether a project should be launched to explore whether this was an attractive option. The viewing of The Crown took place on 11 May 2024 and the group will be arranging a meeting to report back to the village.

Those of you walking around the village and the surrounding roads may have seen that they are especially free of litter this year. We know that there is a group of individuals who regularly go out armed with bags to pick up litter but this year we have had some extra assistance. A special thanks to the students at Cheveley school who have volunteered to litter pick for the village as part of the DofE awards. And our thanks to Councillor Parkin for the suggestion and for co-ordinating the children.

We are aware of the need to improve communication to the village about what’s going on, village facilities and news. We are working with the Pavilion Trust to rebuild and refresh the website and look forward to launching that soon. I am hopeful that it will prove to be a useful resource for residents.

To complement the website, Councillor Winson Pearce has spent some time creating and designing a leaflet highlighting key facilities, contact details and important information relevant to the village. The plan is to make sure that everyone new to the village gets a copy to help to orientate them and make them feel welcome.

I’ll finish by thanking my fellow councillors for their hard work and dedication this year. Councillor Maria Parkin joined us during the year and has been enthusiastic, constructive and creative in her suggestions. Welcome Maria.

Each councillor takes on particular responsibilities in addition to their general participation in the Council and this helps enormously in the smooth functioning of the Council and to ensure that we are in touch with everything that needs attention in the village.

Last but not least my thanks to Kevin Dadds our clerk who works tirelessly behind the scenes and is the driving force behind what we are able to achieve.