

GREAT ASHFIELD PARISH COUNCIL

REPORT TO THE ANNUAL PARISH MEETING – MAY 2025

If there was one word that could be used to sum up the experience of the Parish Council over the last year it would probably be ‘change’.

Over the last 12 months or so a number of longstanding councillors stepped down from their roles and we should all thank them for their service, which has covered many years. I would like to offer specific thanks on behalf of the parish to Arthur Peake, Mark Taylor, Ian Sadler and Richard Dewhirst for their efforts on behalf of the community during their time in office.

Our thanks go to Arthur for continuing in his role of collating statistics from the speed monitors in the village. Unfortunately, a lack of volunteers has meant that the Community Speedwatch activity has been discontinued.

Unfortunately, that situation also applies to the production of the parish newsletter. Mandie Beckley has stepped down after years of service and our thanks go to her for all her hard work. At present the newsletter is being produced by Councillors, but if there is anybody in the village who would like to step into the breach that would be very welcome.

We also saw Carol White step down from her role as Clerk to the Parish Council having returned during a period when it proved to be challenging to find someone to take on the responsibilities of the role. I am personally particularly grateful to Carol for her continuing help during the saga of the Council’s banking arrangements, to which I shall return.

We welcomed new councillors during the year to take the place of those mentioned above. Brian Barker, James Harding, Mark Livens and Jonathan Myers all stepped up to offer their services and considerable experience for the benefit of the Parish. Our thanks go to them for doing so; in their absence the Council would have been at risk of becoming non-quorate and its powers would have passed to the District Council. I am sure all would agree that it is positive for local residents to be involved in matters which directly affect the village. I am also grateful for the input of our County and District Councillors. Andy Mellen and Richard Winch respectively for their assistance and guidance.

At present the Council is operating without a Chairman being in place. The role is being fulfilled on a rotational basis, and this seems to be perfectly effective.

And, in terms of people, I should introduce myself to this audience having taken on the role of Clerk in July 2024. I am Lancastrian by birth but left for the bright lights of

London many years ago. Life moves on and my current phase began when I moved to Finningham with my partner, Helen, in 2020. I continue to commute to London, where I work as the Compliance Officer and Company Secretary of an investment management firm but, thankfully, rarely more than once a fortnight now.

Both the newly appointed councillors and I have been undertaking training provided by the Suffolk Association of Local Councillors to ensure we are well informed about the responsibilities we have accepted.

During the year our major project was the replacement of a streetlight on the Elmswell Road cul-de-sac. There are seven streetlights in the Parish, and it is fair to say all are past their best. This one was deemed to be a priority for replacement due to its location close to housing and the main road, but we will attempt to replace others in due course. Our thanks go to Richard and Andy for helping us through the process of securing funding for the project.

We have a number of initiatives in mind for renewing/enhancing some other items of the village's infrastructure although I think it is important to caution that the council's budget is limited and therefore we rely to a considerable extent on the availability of grant funding for any significant work. On the subject of funding it is appropriate, I believe, that we describe the process of setting the Council's precept which, ultimately is funded by Parishioners. This year's round involved a material, in percentage terms, increase to the precept. Although the Council's finances are healthy it had become evident that the Clerk's salary had not been reviewed for some time and, of course, the Council is subject to the law regarding such matters. The bulk of this year's increase was therefore the result of a detailed analysis of that element of expenditure, which forms a significant part of the Council's overall finances.

The great frustration during my tenure so far has been a, frankly, ludicrous saga of attempting to get access to the Council's bank without which performing the necessary functions is challenging. The issues with the bank, TSB, have largely been a result of so many changes needing to be made to the mandate because of changes referred to earlier in this report. Eventually, we had no choice but to find a different bank and having researched the matter with fellow Council Clerks I am pleased to report that we have opened facilities with Unity Trust Bank, which is a specialist provider to Parish Councils and similar non-corporate bodies.

During the year no contentious planning issues arose. Planning matters are a standing item on the agenda for Council meetings.

David Ogden

Clerk to Great Ashfield Parish Council

May 2025