

Present : Parish Councillors Beveridge, Cochrane, Driver, Grant, Hagan, Lewis, Presgrave and Thomas. Borough Councillors Dawlings and Warne. 14 parishioners

1. **APOLOGIES** – Cllr Holden. Russell and Mary Cruse. Ruth and Giles Clark.
2. **PARISH COUNCIL CHAIRMAN’S REPORT** – Cllr Thomas

Cllr Thomas welcomed everyone. The first since the pandemic.

Parish Councillor changes since 2019 : Dee Manford left in February 2020, and Mervyn Skeet in February 2022. Stephen Cochrane joined in July 2019, Guy Hagan in October 2021, and Cathy Presgrave in September 2022.

Encouragingly, in recent times there has always been more than one applicant for each vacancy arising on the Council, and with the very high calibre of applicants there have been some tough choices which has resulted in a great team of councillors who are strongly committed to serve the whole of the parish.

Cllr Thomas has been a member of the Parish Council for over 10 years, joining in March 2013. Since then the small, rural village has welcomed a new primary school, a new community shop and café, a new (and now award winning) village magazine, two new playgrounds, a parish plan followed by the Neighbourhood Plan, and new allotments coming soon.

And yet the village fundamentally remains the same, a strong, vibrant community brought together by the many different events over the year, the village fete, Iden Green jazz, the panto, the fireworks, village quizzes and the wine tastings to name but a few.

The Parish Council operates with a collaborative approach, listening to residents’ issues and concerns, and with the wherewithal to bring the relevant parties together to help to resolve these issues.

The Parish Council does not believe that it needs to take control of everything that goes on in the village, and it is tantamount to the health and vibrancy of the community that there are plenty of groups and organisations within the parish that are willing to take the lead on the different events throughout the year that bring residents together, and it is encouraging to see new groups emerging.

One of the Parish Council’s main projects over the past year has been the refurbishment of the wells, which has not run smoothly and has had a very negative impact on our finances.

The unaudited accounts for 2022-23 show that the deficit this year is substantially larger than last year, so increasing from around £6k to £15k. This is because the cost of the wells is being met from of our reserves, and while the year-end balance is still half-way between the ideal 1 to 1.5 times the precept figure, the Parish Council had been hoping to have achieved more funding one way or another towards the cost of the wells.

To address some of the deficit and generally rising costs, it was agreed to raise the precept from just under £41k to £46k per annum. To give this some context, this represents an increase of just £4.94 a year on the council tax bill for those residents in Band D. Benenden’s precept figure still remains the 2nd lowest in the borough.

The next potentially expensive project is the essential improvement and refurbishment required to the public toilets.

Cllr Thomas thanked Councillors Tom Dawlings, Nancy Warne and Seán Holden who have all helped with various issues over the past few years, the Clerk, Caroline Levett, parish council colleagues and family for all their support and guidance.

3. PRESENTATION OF KALC COMMUNITY AWARD

The annual KALC Community Award was presented to Jane Dalton-Holmes, as a stalwart of the community for many years, bringing her uniquely gentle manner to volunteering at the Church, the Fete, the village shop and at Benenden School, as well as being the unflagging organiser of Royal British Legion Poppy Appeal for Benenden for over thirty years, raising over £100,000 along the way.

4. PARISH COUNCILLOR REPORTS

❖ Highways – Cllr Driver

In November 2022 BPC submitted a plan containing our proposals for improvements to Highways in Benenden. Due to restructuring difficulties, KCC will now only consider 1 or 2 issues from each parish. BPC proposed 3 issues for consideration:

- Safety at Benenden Crossroads. BPC is concerned that traffic continues to overshoot the crossroads without stopping. This was improved for southbound travel on New Pond Road by improved signage but BPC feels that signage could also be improved for Northbound travel on Iden Green Road. BPC proposal is to extend the 30 mph to the entrance to the Grange and also to Change the Give Way sign to a mandatory STOP at the crossroads. Highways has looked at this but currently consider the signage adequate and feel that there is not a problem with traffic speed approaching the crossroads. On 6th April Cllr Driver met with Nigel Rowe the KCC Highways Community Engagement Officer to press the case but BPC is still waiting for an official response from the Highways Engineer.
- Extend the 30 mph Limit west along the B2086 to the entrance to Benenden School which is currently the start of the 40 mph limit. KCC do see some merit in doing this but it is not a scheme that they would prioritise for funding. They think it will only reduce speed by 2-3 mph and would also look for the parish council to undertake an informal consultation to gage the likely levels of support locally for such a scheme. Cllr Driver asked the Highways Officer if the scheme could be brought forward if local funding were to be available but have not yet had a response.
- BPC proposed a Vehicle Activated Sign in Mill Street Iden Green to address the problem of speeding traffic approaching the crossroads. KCC undertook to carry out a traffic speed survey but there has been no outcome yet.

A replacement fingerpost sign for Benenden Crossroads has been ordered with a 16 week lead time it should be in place late spring/summer.

Anyone wishing to report a highways/footpath issue should do so using the KCC Highways Report A Problem – link on the PC website.

❖ Wildflower Meadow – Cllr Driver

In 2021 BPC decided to turn Beacon Field into a wildflower meadow. At that time, the field was in a sorry state having been heavily compacted by heavy machinery during the construction of the new primary school and subsequently left so that the field had become heavily infested with Creeping Thistle.

BPC has agreed to lease the field from KCC for 5 years at a peppercorn rent while at the same time we have approached KCC for a grant of £1400 per annum to cover some of the development costs. This has been agreed in principle by KCC.

For the last two years BPC has been working closely with Bumblebee Conservation who have provided good advice as well as organising joint Volunteer Working Days. Volunteer activities have included strimming and removing arisings, Green Hay strewing, seed sowing. Weed control - manual pulling of Creeping Thistles and Bristly Ox Tongue.

Green Hay, cuttings from existing wildflower meadows at Great Dixter, Rare Breeds Centre at Woodchurch and St George's Churchyard have been strewn with a small amount of wildflower meadow mix seed purchased and sown.

This summer should begin to see some improvement in the meadow with some seedlings already starting to come through (although many perennials do not flower until their second year). Although some good progress has been made, control of Creeping Thistle and Bristly Ox Tongue are likely to be an ongoing problem for a while.

BPC is working to develop a species rich meadow containing a diverse range of native wildflowers all of which occur naturally in the High Weald. The aim is to develop a meadow of lasting interest to people as well as invertebrates and we hope that the Primary School would also find it a valuable resource to support the National Curriculum in Science.

Volunteers are always welcome to assist.

❖ **Planning – Cllr Grant**

Planning is dictated by local and national planning policy; local being the local planning authority Local Plans, and national being the National Planning Policy Framework. Our parish has its own local plan in the form of a Neighbourhood Development Plan. The BNDP was 'made' in February 2022 and now forms the development plan documents of the planning authority. This means that TWBC must ensure that planning applications conform to the BNDP policies, and developers must adhere to it, whether that is a householder seeking to extend their property or build a single residential dwelling or convert an outbuilding, or a developer building multiple dwellings. However, although the BNDP cannot override national or local policy, it must be taken into consideration in the decision-making by the LPA.

The BNDP is unique in that it remains the only NDP in the borough that allocated sites for development. Basically, we stated where development can take place in the parish, allowing us to achieve our housing need for affordable homes as set out by TWBC.

Four years in the making by dedicated people of the parish, of the four allocated sites, one is the almshouses development in Walkhurst Road which includes private market houses to fund construction of the 12 new almshouses; planning permission has been granted on this site. The two sites at the former Benenden Hospital have recently been the subject of public consultation by the developer, Esquire.

Despite the BNDP showing the extent of the allocated sites at the hospital, the developer proposes to incorporate a green field parcel of land to the east of the Southeast Quadrant (SEQ), which was deliberately excluded from the allocation, and proposes to develop a reduced area allocated to the NEQ.

The parish council finds the proposals to be unacceptable, whilst the developer claims that the lack of inclusion of the green field makes the site unviable. We have approached both the developer and the Benenden Healthcare Society expressing our disappointment in the proposals but have received nothing other than a lack of engagement. To date we have also received worryingly little support regarding our issues with the proposal from TWBC.

The purpose of allocating sites was to protect our green fields and the countryside, limiting development in the case of the hospital sites and Uphill in New Pond Road, to brownfield sites i.e. previously developed land (PDL).

We anticipate that there will be no further discussion and suspect that a planning application for the hospital sites will be submitted with little or no change to the proposals. It will be at this time that the BNDP will be put to the test.

The parish council deals with several planning applications a month. Site visits are made by the PC's planning group where necessary and the councillors are briefed on the property and the proposal. The council then votes on whether to support or object to the application. It is then in the hands of TWBC to make the decision to grant or refuse permission.

Cllr Grant acknowledged the amount of work, time and effort given by a number of people required to achieve the BNDP, especially the dedication of Paul Tolhurst and Nicola Thomas

❖ **Wells** – Cllr Beveridge

There has been a temporary fence around the Benenden Well on the crossroads for a considerable time and a protracted programme for the Queen Victoria Well repair project.

In July 2021, the Parish Council went out to tender and Anthony Hicks returned the most comprehensive quote. Both Well structures required substantial repairs but at the outset it seemed that the Benenden Well structure required more attention.

Benenden Well

Initially, BPC was just expecting to replace the timber which had infestation and some rot. However, it became apparent that the plinth stones on which the Well structure sits had a steel locating pin, protruding from the top of the stones, which had rusted over time, expanded and cracked the stones. Not only would the infested timber need to be cut out and new timbers spliced in position, but a method of locating the structure on the stone plinths needed to be agreed.

Both the Benenden Well and the Iden Green Well are listed structures and so any work carried out would need to be agreed with the Tunbridge Wells Conservation Officer and Listed Building Officer.

It was decided by Graham Stevens of Anthony Hicks, that the work could be completed in situ and he contacted a stone mason to provide a quote for either replacing the plinth stones or repairing them. We investigated grant funding for the Well structure repairs in October 2021, but as most grants, including Heritage England and the National Heritage Fund, require an 'envisaged use for the benefit of the community' and as the Wells are simply 'present' and not 'of use', grant funding is unlikely to be available.

Added to the requirement of decay repairs was the requirement to provide repair drawings and specification for Listed Building approval. A structural engineer was employed to verify the proposed repairs would be structurally sound because the structure had a considerable weight of approximately 4 tonnes. The drawings were completed in March 2022 following various meetings with the Conservation Officer.

A further complication was that in June 2022, a vehicle with a large, stolen, Openreach cable trailing behind it, was travelling at speed from Rolvenden and turned right into New Pond Road. The cable struck the Well structure and knocked it off its plinth stones. The force to do this must have been huge bearing in mind the weight of the structure. There then had to be a reassessment of the further damage to the Well structure and an agreed repair proposal put forward again to the Conservation Officer. BPC's insurance company would now need to assess the damage as well.

It was decided that the best way forward would be to carefully record and dismantle the Well frame completely, store it in Anthony Hicks' yard, repair the structure off site and return to re-erect it. This would additionally take away the worry of an unsafe structure as not only were roof tiles hanging precariously but the structure was now split in several places. An insurance loss adjuster then had to visit the site before the structure could be dismantled.

The Conservation Officer requested the structure to be dismantled under a 'Notification for Emergency Works' mid-July 2022 and then gave permission for the dismantling to proceed. A schedule of additional works due to the accident damage was prepared and submitted for approval to the Conservation Officer. This was then priced and sent to our insurers for approval. BPC is still waiting for the insurers to agree a final settlement sum but said repairs could go ahead. Needless to say that they say they are not going to cover the whole additional damage claim and BPC is contesting this position.

The Well structure was dismantled in September 2022 and work has proceeded at the Anthony Hicks' yard. The current status of the Well structure is that timber repairs are complete and the timber elements are wrapped and

sitting on pallets. The Conservation Officer requires the existing plinth stones to be repaired rather than replaced and we are waiting for this specialist work to be completed before the structure can be re-erected on site.

Iden Green Well

Work has been halted on the Iden Green Well structure until sufficient funding can be raised to proceed with the works that Anthony Hicks priced.

The Parish Council is currently looking at ways to raise funds in the community. If anyone who is present today would like to assist with funding, we would be pleased to give you details where payment can be made. The cost for the Benenden Well are in excess of £30,000 and for Iden Green is in excess of £15,000. Donations in excess of £5000 will be entitled to a plaque with their name fixed to the structure.

❖ Public Toilets – Cllr Thomas

With the toilets looking increasing tired and outdated, and with the continued vandalism and anti-social behaviour that has occurred over the past few years BPC has reluctantly taken the decision, as a matter of public safety, to close our public toilets until further notice.

However, the Parish Council understands that the toilets are an essential facility for the community, as well as for tourists and visitors to our village, and so BPC has given a lot of thought and discussion into what type of facility, if any, we should replace them with.

BPC decided that we needed a facility that was easy to access and maintain, while still being as secure and vandal-proof as possible. Disabled access is essential and the addition of baby changing facility would also be useful.

So BPC has decided to move ahead with a proposed unisex toilet, just one unit with disabled access from the front of the building, with an adjacent service area for cleaning operatives, also accessible from the front of the building. This would leave a substantial area to the rear of the building (around two thirds) which we will need to give further thought to as to the best use moving forward.

BPC has been in discussions with 3 specialist contractors regarding estimates for the work, and these are coming in at around £30k to £50k. But as this will create a state of the art, fit for purpose facility, we're hoping it will be worth the expense.

Again, BPC is hoping to secure funding for this from outside sources, such as Lottery funding, and this should prove slightly easier than for the wells, as the project can be seen as having a strong community function and purpose, but it could also again be a large drain on our reserves. If funding for this project again falls short of the overall costs, BPC may have to make the difficult decision of having a temporary increase in the precept to cover the costs involved.

5. COUNTY AND BOROUGH COUNCILLORS

❖ Cllr Warne

Cllr Warne has been re-elected as Borough Councillor for Benenden and Cranbrook.

Cllr Warne thanked the whole Parish Council for their hard work and time.

Cllr Warne is the cabinet member for Rural Communities, was involved in the TWBC Cost of Living Summit, the Love Where We Live Awards, the Community Grants Programme.

The TW administration has focused on 5 key priorities : safeguarding finances; vibrant and safer town and villages; carbon reduction; affordable housing and social rental housing; digital access, transparency and local democracy. Some actions have been completed.

Community Safety Partnership Plan : the priorities are domestic abuse; substance misuse and supply, and alcohol-related behaviour; anti-social behaviour; road safety; violent behaviour (including violence against women and girls).

A new neighbourhood policing model is to be introduced and Cllr Warne highlighted the importance of crime.

❖ Cllr Dawlings

Council Tax : TWBC collects the council tax for the Parish Council, KCC, Kent Fire and Rescue and the Police. Less than 9% is retained by the Borough Council, representing approximately £200 for a Band D house.

New Ward Boundaries : the outcome of this review is expected soon.

Benenden Action Team : an excellent example of community.

❖ Cllr Holden

Finances : It has been a hard financial year for Kent County Council (KCC) as for all people and organisations. For the first time in 20 years we faced (in December) a projected overspend of £53.7m. It was partly defrayed by a £25m reserve set aside at the beginning of the year. The biggest causes were: cost pressures in adult social care, notably older people's residential services; increasing costs in school transport, particularly for Special Educational Needs students (SEND); sharply higher costs for more specialist placements in children's services.

Severe inflationary pressures hit KCC as they do everyone and so last Autumn the Leaders of Kent and Hampshire wrote a well-publicised letter to senior ministers about council's unsustainable position resulting in a ministerial meeting and government undertakings to look further at the problem.

Help for residents : KCC has a strong record of support for residents through the crises of recent years, from the pandemic to the cost of living crisis. It's run the government's Household Support Fund from September 2021. In two rounds 450,000 awards were issued to Kent people covering food vouchers for Free School Meals families, energy vouchers, and support with water bills. The third round has gone out and £22 million for the fourth will run to March 2024.

NHS and social care : In July 42 Integrated Care Systems (ICS), joining health and social care services began. Kent and Medway are an ICS; KCC has worked closely with the NHS to manage pressures on both services, using technology to reduce the risk of crisis, increasing care and support at home. There is still a way to go in this huge undertaking.

Children's Services : Also in July KCC Children's Services were rated outstanding by Ofsted coming back from the shock rating of inadequate ten years ago. Very pleasingly Ofsted said: "Outstanding practice is evident for children in care and care experienced young people as they clearly benefit from the support they receive and make good progress."

In February KCC was designated one of 14 'trailblazer' councils gaining access to £183,000 to develop the government's Family Hubs programme, to give families and children integrated support.

SEND: Very disappointingly Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission found in September Kent had made insufficient progress in all nine of the areas of weakness identified in the 2019 Written Statement of Action for children with Special Educational Needs. A subsequently appointed new Director of Children's Services and a new Cabinet member have produced a comprehensive plan to address the long-running challenges in this service.

Migration : The Channel migrant crisis affects Kent more than anywhere particularly the unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC). The record number referred to KCC in 2022 was 1,390, with about 300 more this year. But after years of negotiations with government Kent taxpayers no longer pay for it. The National Transfer Scheme is now mandatory, and some 1,640 UASCs have been transferred under this scheme since June 2020 to other councils. The number of migrants and the national backlog in handling claims, meant last year we saw ten hotels hired for

housing migrants. Kent's 14 council leaders wrote protesting to the Home Secretary in November. They had some success after meeting the Immigration Minister and the Government has since said it will end reliance on hotels.

Ukraine : Kent has welcomed more Ukrainian refugees than any other area. Since the Homes for Ukraine scheme began last year, 3,274 guests have come here. Presently some 1,800 are with about 850 sponsors. Around 600 Ukrainian children attend our schools. In answer to the breakdown of some sponsorships, ahead of government and other councils, KCC raised rates to hosts in October and linked further increases to the number of guests.

Buses : As KCC took forward the £2.3m reduction in bus subsidies agreed in the 2022/23 budget, the industry started to face a crisis of higher fuel costs, driver shortages and falls in usage. It was a national issue but it particularly affected Kent because so many school children use commercial services. After very long delays the council was allocated £34 million for 2022- 25 for improved infrastructure and new services under the government's Bus Services Improvement Plan (BSIP). An extension of another fund until 30 June buys time to establish a somewhat longer-term package, but the sector remains under severe pressure.

Active Travel : As in previous rounds of Active Travel funding, KCC submitted proposals for funding under Tranche 4 to Active Travel England. Seven schemes will be funded, and details are being released this month

Roads and potholes : Winter weather has been unusually damaging for the roads. December/January highway reports were five times higher than a year ago. Despite tight funding and inflationary pressures, the council has stepped up the pace of repairs. More than 15,000 potholes have been filled and 68,414 sqm of road patched.

Borders :There were two major border disruptions last year with the usual effect on traffic, business and communities. The first was the P&O ferry crew sacking crisis and the second the failure of French border officials to come to work in sufficient numbers (two instead of ten). There has been more disruption because there still aren't enough of them to process the numbers of coaches. £45m Levelling Up Fund grant KCC secured to improve fluidity at Dover will ease matters. That award with successful district bids brings £123m in LUF funding to Kent.

ULEZ : The London Mayor is pressing ahead with expanding the Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) to outer London borders from August. But KCC has argued that the scheme is unacceptable without extending the scrappage scheme to areas bordering London, including Kent. KCC has told the mayor it won't install warning signs on our roads. It hasn't yet joined legal action by four London Boroughs and Surrey County Council, but it may do.

Environment and waste : In March DEFRA began to implement Environment Act 2021 provisions for waste, including consistency in collection, Local Nature Recovery Strategies and Biodiversity. KCC will lead Kent and Medway's Local Nature Recovery Strategy expecting more money for it and new biodiversity duties. KCC has won £1.83m of Public Sector Decarbonisation money for heating systems, double glazing, LEDs and management systems at five KCC buildings.

The booking scheme for Household Waste Recycling Centres will stay in place after a big response to customer surveys showed 96% satisfied or very satisfied with their visit.

Kent's Plan Bee : My own contribution to improving our environment, the county's pollinator action plan, Kent's Plan Bee which I founded ten years ago, has moved from strength to strength. It had its third online summit in November with hundreds of people joining from across the county. The message of mobilising all Kent's people to improve the habitat and forage of pollinating insects has spread across the county from big farms to window boxes. We have Three officers work on it and you can see the very good newsletter and Facebook page on KCC's website. We now have a parliamentary patron, Tracey Crouch MP of Chatham and Aylesford.

Dungeness nuclear : The council is promoting Dungeness as a site for new Small Modular Reactor (SMR) nuclear power generation engaging with potential industry providers. In the budget the Chancellor launched Great British Nuclear, to oversee a programme of nuclear energy expansion.

It has been a disappointing borough council year personally because the Conservative administration lost control and an inexperienced coalition of Labour, Liberal Democrats, Tunbridge Wells Alliance and Independents took over.

The Coalition voted down a move to have four yearly elections, like every other council in Kent, and kept elections by thirds for three years out of four. This matters to Benenden and rural communities because next year the Boundary Commission has ruled that TWBC will drop from 48 to 39 members and if we continue to elect by thirds it said we must have uniform numbers in very large three member wards, regardless of community sensibilities. The likelihood of having a local person, who knows the village is much reduced. Four yearly polls could have allowed single and dual member wards to match communities. This parish council and ten others strongly spoke for that as did the majority of councillors as did 64% of the 1,000 plus people who answered the consultation.

One of the coalition's actions was to increase, during a cost of living crisis and without consultation, car park charges held for five years by the previous administration, led by Tom Dawlings and others.

6. BENENDEN VILLAGE TRUST – Martin Dickson

BVT is not as well known as it perhaps should be.

The assets of BVT stem from gifts to the village in the 1920s from Lord Rothermere – the Village Hall, St George's Hall, Benenden and Iden Green Recreation Grounds and playgrounds, the land on which the Bowls Club, Iden Green Tennis Club and the Iden Green Pavilion sit. Lord Rothermere also gave funds to BVT's predecessor charity to support the running of the facilities.

There is no financial support available to BVT and income is what BVT generates itself.

There is a large annual deficit and injections of cash are taken from reserves.

Trustees took the decision to run Trust assets in a more business-like manner.

BVT is keen to work with other village organisations and volunteers are also welcome.

A review of staffing took place following the resignation of Holly Clayson, the Village Hall Manager, and Karen Saunders, the Village Hall Caretaker. A new Village Hall Manager, John Betts, has been appointed, and he will take on the caretaking role as well.

Martin thanked fellow trustees and staff.

7. VILLAGE MAGAZINE – Peter Thomas

It has been a very successful year for the magazine in terms of broader recognition. Reaction to our efforts in the village has (almost) always been positive, but this year we achieved second place in the National Parish Magazine Awards and Ruth Clark and Peter Thomas received the wonderful accolade of Best Editor.

None of this would have been possible without the unceasing efforts of Camilla Macdonald, whose dedication to the cause keeps the show on the road, month after month; our scrupulous accountants Paul Leek and Charles Trollope; and an army of contributors that seems to grow with every passing year.

The Magazine has tried and succeeded in supplying the readers with the nuts and bolts of news from the village's various clubs, societies and organisations, along with up-to-date reports from the heads of its major official bodies, with plenty of local colour and characters to lighten the mood, uniting and educating people in the village. Demand for advertising space remains buoyant despite significant price increases forced by increased printing costs. The Magazine is supported by almost 70 advertisers, with a healthy mix of businesses, clubs and events from within the parish and the wider locality. Print numbers have been increased to meet demand from postal subscribers and

sales of the magazine by the shop and the church. The Magazine was to return £1,000 to the PCC whilst retaining a surplus.

8. BENENDEN COMMUNITY SHOP – Peter Traill

The Shop has welcomed 3 new members of staff – Karen, Sue and Ellen, and 2 new committee members – Gary and Lucia.

Finances early in the year looked gloomy, with costs continuing to rise, but the Shop is now hoping to show a small profit.

Peter Thomas has revamped the wine stock, taking over from Tracey Claridge.

The café continues to be busy and the Shop has tried to be sensitive with prices.

It is hoped that outside terrace area can be revamped, including making it more level, whilst maintaining an overall pleasing visual effect.

The Shop is currently looking for someone to take on a lead financial role.

Peter thanked all those who help keep a whole community shop, with particular thanks to Mel and her staff, and all the volunteers.

9. ALLOTMENT SOCIETY – Chris Heath

The late Pat Thoburn of Pympe Manor bequeathed to the parish council a 1 acre plot of land in Walkhurst Road for use as allotments for the parish in perpetuity.

The parish council is the legal owner of the land, and has agreed that the site should be managed by an allotment association who will run the site, set rents, grant tenancies to the plot holders and ensure that the plot holders abide by the terms and conditions of their tenancy. Rules and regulations have been written by the parish council with input from the start-up group of what will be the Benenden Allotment Association.

Chris Heath and Nancy Tolhurst are working hard to get the Association up and running.

Chris Heath reported that a committee is being set up, with Nancy Tolhurst chairing, and other officials will be appointed. The Association will apply for funding and priorities are to create access to the site, a parking area and the provision of water.

10. GARDENING CLUB – Sally Ann Marks

Last September a letter to the Village Magazine asking if there was any interest in setting up a new Gardening Club here in Benenden had a good response and an exploratory meeting was held in October which subsequently led to the formation of the BGC. Enough people volunteered to come together to join a committee.

A delayed 'Christmas' event was held in January – the snow having scuppered the one arranged earlier which was an opportunity to meet each other; swap plants and seeds and have a fun Quiz on Gardening.

Since then, there has been a very successful inaugural Spring Show with entrants being encouraged to display their Spring flowers and vegetables – along with some spring flower arrangements. There were 16 paid up members before the Spring Show, a number which was more than doubled at that event.

The Gardening Club has ambitions such as holding a Summer Flower and Produce Show and encouraging our local Pre-School, Primary School and other children to get involved too.

Most want to learn more about how to make gardens grow better; learn how to combat pests; increase the yield from vegetable patches and learn from each other on design and which plants can thrive in Benenden. There is a keen committee with some great ideas and everyone is welcome to the Club. Wine is offered and enjoyed as well as some refreshments; the feedback from the Spring Show was extremely positive with people saying how welcomed they felt and how friendly everyone was.

The BGC has plans for the rest of this year which include a visit to our Chairman's garden; Ron Froud is a professional horticulturist and has managed the City of London gardens as well as being an accredited Judge at Shows across the South-East. Later this year BGC plans to visit the Sussex Prairie Garden and Borde Hill; in September a visit from Edward Flint who will talk about Autumn Sown Hardy Annuals. Also hope to hear from Annabel Lear on Shrubs and will be arranging a fun Christmas get together – with possibly a demonstration of seasonal flower arranging.

If anyone is interested to join contact Treasurer Mr Stephen Cochrane on stephenc@mdiversified.co.uk. Membership is £20 per person or £30 for a couple – this is for the first year only a small kitty for expenses to be built.

The decision to ask a higher initial fee was so that we could afford to hire a venue for the meetings; potentially invite well-known speakers to visit us and to arrange Garden visits and so on.

Starting a Club with no capital is not easy, but a small charge is made to visitors and a gardening themed raffle is held at each event and the group does lots of research into ways to increase the member satisfaction.

Gardening can be enjoyable, hard work, frustrating, therapeutic and fun and we look forward to the Benenden Gardening Club growing in strength!

11. **BENENDEN ACTION TEAM** – Guy Hagan

BAT was the brainchild of David Commander and set up at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020.

At its peak there were 214 volunteers.

BAT continues to offer villagers a place to contact if they need help or advice. Recent calls have included the need for lifts to and from hospital that were directed very effectively to Mick Moore and the great service he offers.

The BAT website was active with specific information during Covid but it was decided to shut this down in favour of Parishioners turning to the Parish Council and Benenden Village websites that are well established and carry good information.

The village magazine will run the BAT advert every now and again, when they have free space, to keep awareness ongoing and there are small posters in the shop and the church. The advert carries Guy Hagan and Ruth Clark's mobile numbers and both are happy to continue to be a confidential point of contact for those who may need support.

12. **IDEN GREEN PAVILION** – Bill Lewis

The current Pavilion has been in existence since 1994 and remains an attractive, sought-after venue.

There are 8 trustees, all volunteers and an employed cleaner.

The Pavilion Trust was fortunate to receive financial government support during Covid.

The paving has been re-laid, electrical work undertaken, new double glazing and new furniture.

There is a need for younger trustees.

13. GIBBON AND BUCKLAND

The Charity made 25 grants to students and presented Bibles to each of the leavers from Class 6 of the Primary School; a grant has also been offered to the Primary School for the Library project. Mrs Julie Lewis was reappointed as the Parish Council's nominated Trustee. The Charity's income derives from ownership of the old School House, which is leased to KCC. The Lease was due to be revalued in 2014 but it was only this year that agreement was reached on the increase and made the back payments due (KCC have also taken responsibility for the professional fees incurred). The Charity has also been obliged to serve an Interim Schedule of Dilapidations in the face of years of failure by KCC to meet the Lease's obligations for maintenance and decorations. Some emergency work was started but has not been completed; despite expressions of intent to commission works in 2023, no firm specification has yet been drawn up.

14. BENENDEN ALMSHOUSES – Robin Dalton-Holmes

The Benenden Almshouse Charities is grateful for the support and recommendations of the BNDP to increase its housing, which are exempt in perpetuity from the right to buy.

The demand for low-cost housing continues.

The Charity receives no endowments and £100,000 has already been spent working on the requirements of the Local Authority to develop new almshouse units. The process has been slow but the Charity hopes to proceed with its plan.