

Corsenside Annual Parish Meeting

May 14th, 2018

Chair of Parish Council's Report

Good evening everybody and thank you for being here for the 2018 Corsenside, Annual Parish Meeting. Since we last met for our annual meeting we have seen a couple of changes to the make up of the Parish Council. After many years long service, about fourteen or fifteen, I think, Pete Saunders stood down from the Council at the end of the summer last year following his family's move to Scotland. We thank him for his hard work on behalf of our parish over these years not only as a councillor but also representing the council on various other public bodies, he will be missed but we wish him and his family all the very best in their new life north of the border. Following the statutory period of advertising and their being no call for an election, we were free to co-opt to fill the vacancy. In order to keep the distribution of councillors the same we looked first to Ridsdale, where Pete was from, for a suitable replacement. I am pleased to say that Carol Hawman was prepared to step into the breach and offer her skills and expertise and was duly co-opted as a Parish Councillor at the October meeting last year. I thank her for her willingness to get involved and make her contribution to the work of the council and the smooth running of the parish. Sadly, our other Pete, Pete Bilton decided it was, for personal reasons, time to stand down. Pete has been a stalwart councillor since late 2014 when he joined us as Margaret Rogerson's replacement. He has done much work as a parish councillor, making significant contributions to many of the areas we have been involved with in his time with us. He has also proved to be most diligent and has always been willing to apply his practical expertise and experience by readily and enthusiastically tackling much of the maintenance and repair type work we have had. Thankfully, Pete has indicated that he will still be willing to perform this role in his 'retirement' and we thank him very much for this and indeed for all his work, over the past four years, for our parish. We are now outwith the statutory period of advertising the vacancy and, having done so and there being no call for an election, we are free to co-opt to fill the position. We will seek to maintain the distribution of councillors and have begun the process by looking to East Woodburn, in the first instance, for Pete's replacement. On a happier note can I say a special thank you and congratulations to councillor Gillian Scott who has served the parish for many years now. Gillian and I joined the Parish Council, at the same time, after the local elections in 1999 and we are both now entering our twentieth year of service. Well done Gillian for all your work but especially for your staying power and fortitude, thanks again.

As I mentioned last year, being a parish councillor is much more than just turning up to a meeting every month and I would like to thank personally, and also on behalf of the parish, all the councillors who give up their time freely and without complaint to represent the parish at various different levels and on the various forums we have input to. Special thanks once again, to Dot Carrington who has carried out the role of Vice Chair most capably and conscientiously. She has attended extra meetings, with Northumberland County Council officers for example, to represent the parish and continues to provide our in-house first line audit checks. These checks are carried out routinely now, on a quarterly basis, in line with best practice guidelines. Thanks also to Andrew Harding for his on-going work and input as our representative on the steering group for the Reay Estate Wind Power Station and to Gillian Scott for her representation of the parish on the revitalising Redesdale Committee. These are just a few of the extra commitments your councillors take on to ensure that our parish is represented, has a voice and plays its part as a member of the wider community we live in.

Once again, my very sincere thanks also go to Karen Traill who has continued to develop and provide us with an outstanding service as Parish Clerk. Her diligent and conscientious work is essential to the smooth running of the parish and continues to ensure that we are properly informed and cognisant of the issues which concern us during these constantly and rapidly changing times. Most recently this has involved Karen ensuring we are fully compliant

with the new GDPR regulations which come into force later this month. This has not been a simple or straightforward task but her interpretation and understanding of such complex issues or her knowledge of where to seek guidance to assist in doing so is a particular strength and a testament to her undoubted ability. I believe our parish is extremely fortunate to have someone so enthusiastic, willing and capable as our clerk.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Anne Pender who, though no longer a parish councillor, organised the Christmas performance by the NTC in the Parish Hall once again this year. This is always a fantastic performance, enjoyed by all and. Anne has indicated that she is now standing down from this organisational role. Her contribution will be sorely missed but we thank her most sincerely for all of her input in this area over many years, it has been very much appreciated.

To routine matters now, your Parish Council consists of seven councillors including a chair and a vice chair, elected annually by the rest of the council. I was re-elected as chair again and Dot Carrington was elected vice chair at our AGM last May. We continue to meet every month, apart from August where by nature of holidays and availability it is difficult to meet and be quorate. We usually meet on the first Monday of each month and usually in the Parish Hall in West Woodburn at 19:30, though in the colder winter months, usually December, January and February, we decamp to the warmer surroundings of the Bay Horse and we thank them very much for their willingness to have us and for providing a room separate from the bar to facilitate our meetings and at no expense to Parish Council funds and the public purse. Notices of meetings, along with agendas and minutes of previous meetings are displayed on the three PC noticeboards in West and East Woodburn and in Ridsdale. In the eleven meetings since the last annual Parish Meeting we have addressed ourselves to some 233 different agenda items, as ever, some simple and easy to resolve, others taking considerably more work and effort and some still on-going. This represents a small increase in the number of agenda items from last year, in the order of just under 1% (0.97% actual). Of these items, there were 7 planning matters for our comment, almost twice the number we addressed last year and whilst increasing in number this year, this is still much reduced to the number of planning matters we have seen in years pre-2015.

As ever all agendas and previous minutes continue to be available on line. On the website, you will also find contact details for your councillors, an events diary, a news page and information and links to local clubs, societies and groups.

We continue to work to the highest levels of financial scrutiny to ensure complete transparency and accountability and are confident that we adhere to the best possible practice. The annual audit system for all councils has changed this year and we are fully compliant with the new system as we are legally obliged to be. Our internal audit carries on as usual on a quarterly basis thanks to Dot and my thanks also go to Hazel Goodall, a parishioner who is a qualified accountant, who continues to provide annual internal audit services for us. Our external auditing procedures however have changed somewhat and are now scrutinised by the accounting firm PKF Littlejohn. The procedure now for all councils, with an annual turnover of less than £25000, is to prepare the accounts for scrutiny and advertise their availability in exactly the same way as previously but now we must complete and submit a certificate of exemption to the auditors and it is envisaged that further scrutiny would only occur in extremis or if randomly selected.

Each year of my tenure as chair I have mentioned in my report how frustrating it can be in dealing with Northumberland County Council. We try our hardest to expedite matters but fully appreciate that it may not seem so to the onlooker or if you have asked us to progress an issue. We will always seek to keep you informed of any progress or the reasons for the lack of it if we know them. The wheels within county turn extremely slowly and with ever tightening budgets this seems even more to be the case. Over the last few years departments have seen staffing levels greatly reduced resulting in the extremely long waiting times we often experience between request and action. Please be assured that it is not inaction on our behalf. Once we raise an issue with NCC we are in constant touch to keep reminding them until action is taken or a suitable resolution arrived at. Often it seems we

only see progress as a result of developing good working relationships with officers of the council or by the extra time and effort put in by the clerk and individual councillors in being persistent with their requests.

Foremost amongst our frustrations remains the issue of road condition and road safety within the parish. The problem of speeding persists especially along the A68 through both Ridsdale and West Woodburn and this has been constantly reported and highlighted to the proper authorities. I along with the clerk have now had many meetings and site visits with the NCC officer responsible for highways safety and a comprehensive list of measures to extend the safety features in place on the A68 to protect West Woodburn has been planned. Councillors were very disappointed however at the removal of the 'build out' features from the plan earlier this year following comments from haulage companies. These features would physically force traffic to slow down and we felt were a key part of the plan. We have indicated our objections to their removal as, in the experience of residents of West Woodburn, it is often the largest of vehicles which are the greatest offenders and would obviously have the greatest impact if they were to be involved in a collision. We have received assurances that speeds will be carefully monitored following installation and should the extensive raft of other measures prove unsuccessful, and drivers continue to break the law, then build out features can be re considered for installation at a later date. Despite initial assurances that these improvement works could be carried out by Christmas 2017 and then by the end of the financial year, here we are in May with still no signs of them being started. I was informed, when I telephoned the highways safety officer to chase progress last week. that costings are still being sought for some aspects of the plan and I have just found out when I phoned him again, today, that the works should be implemented during the school summer holidays. Hopefully these long overdue improvements will lead to the much higher levels of road safety, which we all deserve. For our part, we will continue to chase progress on this issue on until it is satisfactorily resolved.

A major area of concern which developed during the year was the potential closure of West Woodburn First School following consultation on proposals for a reorganisation of education in the west of the county. Following several meetings with the Head of School and conversations with governors, many parents and other stakeholders, it became clear that there was overwhelming support for the school and the maintenance of the three-tier education system for this part of Northumberland as the only system which mitigates against the impact of long travelling distances for our children at a young age. Corsenside Parish Council submitted a response which objected to these proposals and strongly supported the continued existence of the school as a vital part of our community and also supported the maintenance of the three-tier system of education. A new proposal has now been put forward which would see the maintenance as West Woodburn school but as a Primary School under a two-tier system. The adoption of this new proposal would lead to the closure of Bellingham Middle School I September 2019. This proposal is now within a statutory consultation period after which NCC will decide upon its implementation. This is likely to be a contentious and emotive issue due to the disruption and impact of travel times on young children, the limiting of parental choice and inequalities of treatment which sees Hexham schools maintain the three-tier system. Unfortunately, the future for our schools is still somewhat uncertain.

Jan Bilton, Pamela Lawson and Karen Traill, in West Woodburn, and Steve Carrington in Ridsdale continue to be guardians of our community defibrillators. They carry out fortnightly checks to ensure the serviceability of these vital lifesaving machines and report on them to the Stephen Carey Foundation who manage the service. My thanks to them for their efforts and commitment to this work and whilst, to my knowledge, thankfully the defibrillators have yet to be used operationally, we are secure in the knowledge that they stand ready for use should the need arise.

It is pleasing to be able to report that thanks to the hard work of Andrew Harding and the rest of the Reay Estate Wind Power Station Steering Group, that the community fund is now partially open for applications. There is a fund of some £270,000 per annum to be allocated. A Community Interest Company has been set up by the Steering Group, to administer, deal with applications, ensure that monies stay within the local communities impacted by the development and also to work towards the establishment of legacy funding at the end of the 25-year lifespan of the

development. Initially, however, during the establishment phase of the Community Interest Company, £100,000 of the total will be available for grants via the Community Foundation and it is this which is open for application now.

The problems with street lighting and the random nature of the replacement of the old light polluting sodium light bulbs has now hopefully been resolved. NCC had problems with the original contractor which led to a somewhat random distribution of new lights with several old ones being left in various locations. Happily, a new contractor has now been appointed by NCC and all lights should be upgraded to the new standard very soon.

It is also good to report that the memorial to Old Hemp has been restored. You may recall I reported, last year, that due to a manufacturing defect the interpretive board had been removed. Thankfully it has been fully restored to its former glory and my thanks go to the Telfer family, who originally installed the monument, for organising this.

My thanks also go to the new Parish Hall Committee whose hard work and dedication have seen our hall enjoy major improvements to its structure and infrastructure and has seen a welcome increase in its use. The parish council lost its representative on the hall committee when Pete Saunders moved away, and I am mindful of the need to remedy this. Present councillors do not feel they have the extra time to commit to this additional responsibility however, we are able to appoint a non-councillor as our representative who would then report to us. Could I encourage you to mention this to anyone you think may be interested in taking on this role and ask them to contact either myself or the clerk who will discuss the matter further with them.

I would also like to thank all present here tonight, all of the officers and all those involved with the clubs, societies and organisations you represent. It is your willingness to get involved and make things happen which makes our parish of Corsenside so inclusive and the vibrant community which it undoubtedly is. Please keep up your good work, it is very much appreciated.

Finally, may I, once again, say a huge thank you to all the Parish Councillors, on your behalf and also from me personally, for all the amazing work they do on behalf of the parish, for giving up their time, entirely free of charge, and for their willingness to serve the wonderful parish of Corsenside. It has been, as ever, a privilege to serve and work alongside you all.

Thank you.

Carl Hamilton

Chair - Corsenside Parish Council.

May 2018