

Shincliffe Parish Council

Annual Report 2014-15

This report covers the work of the Parish Council from 2 April 2014 to April 2015. During this period there were twelve monthly meetings of the Council – eight in Shincliffe Primary School, High Shincliffe, and four in St. Mary's Church Hall, Shincliffe Village – as well as the Annual Parish Meeting (May 2014), and regular meetings of the Horticultural Committee chaired by Councillor Angela Lee. In addition, there was an Extraordinary Meeting on 27 January 2015 devoted solely to setting the precept for 2015-16.

The Parish Council consists of five councillors representing High Shincliffe, one councillor representing Shincliffe Village and one councillor representing the Bell ward. The Parish Council has benefitted immensely from the expertise and involvement of County Councillor David Stoker. We have several times also called on the expertise of Stephen Ragg of the Durham Association of Parish and Town Councils at County Hall.

1. Conduct of the Council

In 2014 councillors agreed that a rotating chairmanship of the Council was desirable, not least because it would both reflect and foster a collegiate and co-operative spirit. Consequently, there have been three chairs in the space of twelve months.

Nonetheless, the Parish Council has on several occasions used the procedure of the named vote where there have been marked divisions among councillors and contested majority decisions, so that collective and individual responsibility can be acknowledged.

The terms of the involvement of members of the public has also been addressed. Instead of members of the public only being able to speak at the end of Parish Council meetings, it was felt that Council decision-making would be enriched by knowing what fellow residents felt before councillors took any decisions. The item 'Issues Raised by Members of the Public' has therefore be moved to the start of the agenda. Public attendance has been sporadic and sparse (only one meeting attracting as many as thirteen members of the public), but always very welcome.

On several occasions this year, councillors have had to make a fine judgement about whether matters raised are properly the business of the Council or private matters in which the Council ought not to become involved.

2. Accounts

The total income of the Council in this period was £19,984.97, and the total expenditure £22,716.48. In March a balance of £9,267.36 has been carried forward into 2015-16. In January 2015 it was resolved that the 2015-16 precept should be raised by 8% to £15,300, reflecting additional costs to the Parish Council in relation to election expenses, bench maintenance and tree maintenance. Discussions this year were complicated and delayed by uncertainty about the cost of a possible

Traffic Regulation Order, which on a rough estimate from the County Council at that point comfortably exceeded the annual budget of the Parish Council by around £10,000. After much discussion, councillors decided to proceed on the assumption that the 2015-16 precept should be set on the assumption that the Parish Council would be bearing no part of the cost of a possible TRO in that year.

The Clerk has also introduced detailed monthly breakdowns of the budget position, based on all items of actual and estimated incomes and expenditures. The councillors are very grateful to the Clerk for this valuable innovation, notably concerning the legal status of a delegated Traffic Regulation Order implemented and paid for by the Parish Council.

Councillors also experimented with a system of criteria setting and prioritising of suggested spending as a tool for making the best possible use of scarce resources.

3. Requests for Financial Assistance

The Parish Council made grants of money to a number of bodies ranging from £50 to £400 to the Co. Durham School Benevolent Fund. There was some difference of opinion as to how much could be given to any one body, and what the right criteria for financial assistance should be (for example, should we help only our own community or be open to helping other communities). This led to named votes in a number of instances.

The Parish Council has also sought to help worthwhile bodies, such as the Junior Football Club, in other ways – in this instance, by trying to help them secure decent playing and changing facilities.

4. Crime and Police Responsibilities

In some months, no crimes were recorded; in others, reported crimes included minor assault, and break-ins into houses, garages and sheds. Periodically there have been parking problems up at the school at ‘school run’ times. A police presence has had a salutary – if temporary – effect on these occasions.

5. Planning Applications

The Parish Council usually receives one or two planning applications per month, and in most cases there have been no objections. In one instance the County Council was contacted to ensure that the application had been considered by the Conservation Team. In another instance, councillors felt it was important to establish precisely why planning officials had defined front and back elevations as they had.

6. Horticulture Committee

The main focus of the Parish Horticulture Committee has, for the second year, been increasing sustainable planting and enhancing the existing beds. Following the success of the enlarged sustainable, perennial bed at Thropton Close, two more such beds are in progress for 2015-16. The entrance beds into High Shincliffe have been cleared of weeds and planted with spring bulbs. These

will be summer-planted in a similar way to the highly colourful bed at the entrance to Shincliffe Village.

During 2014-2015 the Horticulture Committee secured funding for a number of projects:

- Through Parish Paths Partnership funding, the Committee was able to replace the worn information boards in Shincliffe Village and High Shincliffe, showing the local Parish walks.
- Funding from Councillor Stoker and the Parish Council has enabled the Committee to begin a programme of restoring the Parish benches over a two year period.
- Funding from the same two sources has also enabled the Committee to restore Love Lane as a wild flower haven. This involves clearing Love Lane of overgrown bushes and small-scale fly-tipping of garden waste. Following this, children from our local primary school will be planting wild flowers in the lane.
- The Committee secured Project funding from Durham County Council (as part of the Royal Horticultural Society's 'It's Your Neighbourhood' scheme) to engage Shincliffe Primary school children in planting species of English wild woodland flowers and other native species, in the Old Mine Site.

Competitions during 2014-2015 included the Parish Spring and Summer Front Garden Competitions which again highlighted some stunning gardens which were much appreciated by many of us as we walked around our villages. The Beautiful Durham Competition took place in July, with Sherburn Hospital being awarded a Merit in the Best Sheltered Accommodation category and High Shincliffe was the overall winner for Best Village. The prize money has been spent on spring bulbs, as part of our continuing commitment to sustainable planting.

Plans for 2015-2016 include further planting in Love Lane and the Old Mine Site, engaging residents in planting some edible herb beds and continuing to develop more sustainable perennial beds.

7. Area Action Partnership (AAP)

Cohncillor Stoker has regularly kept the Parish Council informed of the routine activities of the Durham APP.

8. Traffic Issues in Shincliffe Village and High Shincliffe

One standing issue on the agenda throughout this year has been whether a Traffic Regulation Order or some other measure might solve traffic problems in the Village. Discussions with the County Council have been protracted and, in some respects, frustrating (the issue is fully documented in the monthly minutes). Briefly, many - though by no means all - residents of the Village are concerned that in the mornings High Street and Low Road are being used as a 'rat run' by motorists impatient about the lights at the top end of the village. Not only has this caused serious inconvenience, resulting in several residents contacting the police, but there is a credible concern that a far more serious incident might result from this irresponsible practice. It is fair to say that the County Council has been reluctant to act, but a series of meetings with Highways, Stephen Ragg, the Legal Department and the police has finally spurred the County Council to produce a detailed, 14-page report with several costed options presented ('Unc 27.20 High Street/Low Road'). The final report was literally sent to parish councillors on the day this annual report was compiled. Making a 'final' decision on the basis of this thorough report will be the task of the next Parish Council meeting(s).

In addition, there have been other traffic issues which have proved less difficult to address. For instance, speed reduction measures have been effected at High Shincliffe in a number of stages.

9. Paths, Grass Verges and Grass Cutting

The Parish Council received a number of letters alerting it to the poor or dangerous state of paths. Issues of ownership and responsibility in the parish tend to be complex and tangled. Investigation often reveals that the parish and/or county do not have a responsibility to maintain particular paths or particular stretches of paths. Sometimes services are provided by virtue of custom rather than direct responsibility. It is often wise not to seek to question these arrangements, as one possible outcome might be their cessation. As with paths, too often with areas of grass.

Concerns were raised on several occasions about the deterioration of grass verges as a consequence of high volumes of cars parking on them or the failure to maintain them regularly and properly. The County Council's advice was sought as to the legality of care parking and how this could most effectively be addressed.

Litter, fly tipping and debris have periodically also been problems, which the Parish Council has tried to address partly through consulting the County Council and private companies, and partly through co-operation with local residents and groups (in the case of clearing debris from Love Lane, with the Avenue Football Team). Councillors Lee and Hudson have also co-ordinated very successful litter picks.

10. High Shincliffe Park

The renovation and revitalisation of High Shincliffe Park represents a stunning achievement by the Community Association and its leading lights. The Parish Council has tried to help where it can, and the Association has kept the Council informed of its plans.

Finally ...

May I thank: the Clerk; all fellow councillors, and especially Councillor Angela Lee, the chair of the Horticulture Committee; County Councillor Stoker; and fellow residents for their contributions throughout the year.

Councillor Andrzej Olechnowicz
Chair
May 2015.