

WEST RANTON AND LEAMSIDE PARISH COUNCIL

Annual Report 2023/24

Introduction

Welcome to this year's Annual Report from your Parish Council. The purpose of this report to summarise what the council has been doing over the last year and what it has planned for the year ahead.

Membership of the Council

Councillors serving during the year were:

- Councillor Avril Wallage (Chair)
- Councillor Ian Diggory (Vice Chair)
- Councillor Peter Morson
- Councillor Maureen Boettcher
- Councillor Bill Kellett
- Councillor Kevin Wood
- Councillor Malcolm Massey

There have been 2 vacancies all year which we are still trying to fill.

Employees of the Council (Part-Time 10hrs per week)

- Parish Clerk, Mark Ramshaw

Main Activities

The Parish Council's current main activities are as follows:

- To provide a forum for residents to raise concerns or issues that are important to them either in writing or in person at monthly parish council meetings
- To keep abreast of legislative changes to ensure compliance with the statutory framework under which we are required to work. This includes accounting and audit requirements; the need for transparency and accountability regarding how decisions are made and data protection. This requires on going training for officers and councillors
- To manage and maintain the open cemetery
- To maintain the Heritage Garden
- To maintain the war memorial
- To maintain the village planters and the 3 village signs
- To maintain the only public clock in St Mary's Church Steeple and fund 50% of essential repairs in accordance with a maintenance agreement with the Parochial Church Council.
- To liaise with DCC and other public bodies, regarding residents' concerns and improvement of their services
- To enhance the grounds maintenance work undertaken by DCC by carrying out regular strimming around in the parish to improve the appearance of our green spaces and avoid the excessive use of herbicides by DCC
- To liaise with community groups and the Village Partnership to ensure that we can work effectively together for the benefit of our community
- To consider planning and licensing applications that may impact on the well being of residents and our environment and to raise any residents' concerns with DCC to aid their decision-making process
- To provide financial support to voluntary organisations, charities and community groups that provide activities or services for the benefit of residents
- To alert you to relevant information and news through regular updates in Village News, on parish notice boards, our website and Facebook page.
- Provision of Village Christmas Tree and illuminations and "Carols around the Christmas Tree" event

- Develop projects to improve our community

Summary of Key Activities during 2023/24

The Parish Council approved an Annual Plan for 2022/23 setting a programme of work for the year.

As part of this Annual Plan, we have been considering a number of improvement projects to be funded from an earmarked Village Improvement Reserve and external funding opportunities that may arise.

A copy of the plan, showing the status of agreed actions is attached at Appendix A

Of particular note is:

The School Avenue Park Project.

The Parish Council has continued to work with DCC in developing a project to supplement the existing young children's play area by the provision of:

- a) A family seating area, consisting of benches, picnic tables and a tree seat
- b) An Adult Outdoor Gym with equipment designed for use by residents of all abilities and fitness.

The gym equipment would also be suitable for use by teenagers.

Grant funding for the Gym element of the project has now been secured by DCC who will be delivering an agreed design for the gym on behalf of the Parish Council. Grant funding has also been secured by the Parish Council to fund the street furniture elements of the project.

We are still awaiting a start date for the implementation of the Gym element from DCC. This has taken much longer than expected but it is understood a contract will be awarded shortly for the work to begin. The implementation of the street furniture element will progress once the specific site requirements of the Gym are finalised.

Grants to community organisations

Following an annual application process, the Parish Council approved the award of grant funding totalling £6390 in January 2023 for the following projects that took place during 2023/24:

- The Brownies - £250 Christmas pantomime
- The Village Partnership - £590 contribution to the Big Lunch
- The Village Partnership - £250 contribution to the Village Show
- Durham Area Youth Service - £5,000 contribution to service provision
- Because We Care Project - £300 hire of Jubilee Hall

(Payment made at the end of March 2023).

During 2023/24 a further 2 grant awards were made for urgent grant funding totalling £2800. These related to:

- Because We Care Project - £300 (Room Hire of Jubilee Hall)
- West Rainton & Leamside Community Association - £2500
(Annual running costs for the period Jan-March 2024; after which point match funding was expected for a further 9 months and a longer-term business strategy should be put in place to secure the financial stability and management of the Hall going forward).

In January 24, following an annual application for funding in 2024/25, the Parish Council approved the award of the following grants totally £4,470 that were paid in April 2024.

- The Brownies - £630 pantomime and contribution to room hire
- The Village Partnership - £590 contribution to the Big Lunch
- The Village Partnership - £250 contribution to the Village Show
- Durham Area Youth Service - £3,000 room hire

The King's Coronation Celebrations

To help celebrate the Kings Coronation in May every child in our primary school received a commemorative coronation coin, funded by the Parish Council, as part of the school's coronation celebrations. Bunting was also hung in a number of public places around the parish.

New Village Planters

8 additional hexagonal planters were installed to replace the old black square planters that were showing their age, with some being damaged and in need of repair.

New Waste Bins

8 additional black general waste bins were installed around the parish where a need had been identified by residents; 5 were provided to replace red dog waste only bins and 3 were additional bins.

Bulb Planting

Twenty thousand spring bulbs were planted on the large public green space adjacent to the Old Durham/Sunderland Road to complete bulb planting in the area started in 2022/23.

Financial Position

In January, the Parish Council reviewed its current financial position and agreed a draft budget for 2024/25. Due to a number of potential funding pressures, inflation and a reduction in annual grant from DCC, the Parish Council considered that a 5% increase in the precept would be necessary for next year. This increase added £2.59 onto the Parish Council precept element of your Council Tax bill for 2024/25 in a band D property. The increase was lower for band A, B & C properties. A breakdown of income received and payments made in 2023/24 (and 2022/23) is attached as an Appendix B.

A revised budget for 2024/25 reflecting the outturn position as at 31/3/2024 will be prepared once the financial accounts for 2023/24 have been finalised.

Major Planning Applications

The Parish Council has continued to support resident's concerns relating to the proposed relocation of the Foster Football Centre to a site off Pit house Lane, Leamside. DCC refused planning permission in July. The applicant subsequently submitted an appeal on this decision to the Independent Planning Inspectorate in December. The Parish Council, as well as a number of individual residents and our MP, Mary Foy, has submitted a letter of objection to this appeal. A decision on the outcome of the appeal is pending.

We continue to monitor progress on the housing developments in progress at Benridge Bank and Station Road.

Unregistered Public Footpath

Following residents' concerns regarding the status of an unregistered public footpath, between public footpath No 2 (from the Dene) and Footpath 21 (the red rack that runs from Mark's Lane to Rainton Meadows Nature Reserve), the Parish Council has submitted a formal application to DCC to have this path registered as a Public Right of Way on its, "Definitive Map". A decision on the application is pending. This may take some time due to the high volume of applications submitted to DCC from across the county.

Cemetery Complaints

In March, the Parish Council undertook maintenance work in the cemetery to top up and grass seed a number of sunken graves. These graves were a mixture of newer graves, in the current “lawn” burial area to the rear of the cemetery that had fully settled and older graves in other parts of the cemetery, which had badly sunken over time and where it was practical to make good.

This work required the co-operation of those persons with exclusive rights of burial (referred to as grave owners) to remove tributes placed on graves to allow the grass to be established. Once established, the Parish Council’s grounds maintenance contractor will cut the grass regularly.

This work has led to a number of concerns and allegations from some residents who have questioned the justification, unfairness and the lack of consultation of council policies, relating to the rules on the installation of memorials and the placing of tributes on graves in different parts of the cemetery. Concerns about the lack of permission or agreement for this work to be undertaken and about what the Parish Council’s ultimate long-term plan was for how it wanted the cemetery to look like in years to come were also raised.

The Parish Council takes all residents concerns about the management of the cemetery seriously. A written response detailing the reasons why the current policies were approved has been provided and is published on our website; concerns raised about the unfairness of these policies is to be considered as part of a comprehensive review of all cemetery policies, associated rules and procedures. This work is in progress.

LOOKING AHEAD TO 2024/25

We will:

- Monitor and review an Annual Plan setting out our priorities and objectives for 2024/25
- Promote the May 2025, 4 yearly Parish Council Election.

.We will continue to:

- Work with DCC on the implementation of the School Avenue Park Project
- Seek to fill any councillor vacancies to ensure maximum community representation on the Council
- Seek to improve how we engage with residents.
- Work in partnership with the Village Partnership/community groups, DCC and other public bodies to maintain and/or improve existing activities and services and help identify the need for others.
- Develop further projects and initiatives to improve our community.
- Identify and explore potential external funding opportunities.
- Monitor the implementation of approved planning developments
- Review all new planning applications to assess their potential impact on our community.

CLlr Avril Wallage