

WEST RAINTON AND LEAMSIDE PARISH COUNCIL

Chairman's Annual Report for 2024/25

Introduction

It is a statutory requirement that there is an Annual Parish Meeting and it falls to the Chair of the Parish Council (PC) to prepare and present an Annual Report to that meeting. This report, covering the period 1st April 2024 to 31st March 2025, summarises PC activities over the past year and its financial performance, including details of funding and expenditure.

Your Parish Council

The PC is an independent statutory body, comprising local councillors elected by local residents. Councillors are volunteers and receive no payment for their services. Our PC can have a maximum of 9 councillors and for part of the year at least, all 9 places were filled with following named members.

- Ian Diggory (Chair)
- Kevin Wood (Vice Chair)
- Avril Wallage
- Malcolm Massey
- Alan Langford
- Steve Corfield
- Bill Kellett
- Maureen Boettcher
- Peter Morson

Councillor Boettcher resigned from the Parish Council during March.

The PC employs Mark Ramshaw as its parish clerk. Mark is a paid part-time employee whose role is to administer PC business and act as the responsible financial officer. The Clerk also advises Councillors on procedural matters and is the main point of contact for West Rainton and Leamside parish council: clerk@westraintonandleamsidePC.gov.uk

What is our role?

The PC is here to represent the interests and address the concerns of all residents in our parish. To that end we provide a forum for residents to raise issues or concerns that are important to them, either in writing or in person at monthly PC meetings.

We promote actions and activities that enhance existing community services, often in partnership with other organisations. We also seek to identify and develop projects that improve local services, community activities and enhance our environment. Where appropriate we offer financial support in the form of grants to deserving causes and groups that bring benefits to the community in some way.

We have an obligation 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, accountability and transparency for our decision making, and protection of data.

How are we funded?

We receive no direct funding from central government. Instead, we are primarily funded through an annual precept agreed by the PC in January each year. The precept is determined by the amount of money we estimate will be needed for the next financial year and is decided after consideration of a draft budget detailing spending plans and forecasts of other income. The precept is collected by DCC as part of your Council Tax Bill. For specific projects, such as the outdoor gym, we seek funding from various 'pots of money' made available through a variety of agencies.

Financial position

A summary of income received and payments made in 2024/25 is shown in Appendix A along with an outline financial forecast for 2025/26. As is our normal procedure, in January 2025 the PC reviewed its current financial position and agreed a draft budget for the financial year 2025/26. Based on these figures, and given the financial pressures due to the cost of living which many of our residents are having to face, the PC decided there should be **no increase in the precept for 2025/26**.

Grant awards

Following our annual application process, in January 2025 the PC approved the award of grants totalling £5865 to be paid in April 2025.

How do we communicate with residents?

Some might answer 'not very well', but we do recognise the importance of communicating with residents and take steps to facilitate such communication. We have a monthly meeting to which the public are invited and there is always an agenda item for public participation. Meeting notices and agendas are placed on notice boards around the village. For residents who cannot attend in person, our website provides a facility to email questions to the PC via our Parish Clerk. We maintain a quite comprehensive and transparent website that contains information on all our activities, including policy documents and financial information. For social media fans in the community we maintain a Facebook page. We continue to report 'News from the Parish Council' in each edition of the Village News and maintain an awareness of the activities of various community groups through attendance at Village Partnership meetings.

However, effective communication is a dialogue and not a monologue so if you have concerns or issues you wish to raise, we encourage you to attend one of our monthly meetings, contact us via our website or email the Parish Clerk.

Observations from the last Annual Parish Meeting

Minutes of the last Annual Parish Meeting held on 9th May 2024 are available on our website. The following points are taken from that meeting:

- PC were encouraged by the increased attendance at the meeting.
- Representatives from Banks Homes gave an update on the Cathedral Meadows housing development.
- A representative from Woodside Group gave an update on the community hub development adjacent to the Cathedral Meadows development. He advised that after exhausting all options to create a commercial hub they are now considering applying for planning permission for the community hub area to become social housing.
- Some members of the public discussed their concerns around the parish cemetery and the policy of a lawned area. They were advised the PC was currently reviewing all policies relating to the cemetery.
- A resident requested that consideration be given to painting the cemetery gates. The Parish Clerk agreed to look into this matter.

Outcomes

- The community hub development is an ongoing source of discussion. An update is provided later in this report.
- Similarly, an update on the new cemetery policies is given later in this report.
- The cemetery gates have now been painted following that suggestion from a resident.

PC Commitments

The PC has a number of ongoing commitments including:

- Managing and maintaining the Parish Cemetery
- Maintaining the Heritage Garden
- Maintaining the War Memorial
- Maintaining Village Planters and the 3 village signs
- Organising Village Christmas Tree and illuminations and “Carols around the Christmas Tree” event
- Funding 50% of maintenance and repair costs for the public clock in St Mary’s Church Steeple.
- Reviewing potential impact on the parish of any planning and licensing applications.
- Using our media outlets to keep residents informed of activities in the parish.
- Liaising with voluntary groups to ensure we work together effectively for the benefit of our community.
- Providing financial support to voluntary organisations, charities and community groups that undertake activities or services for the benefit of residents.
- Monitoring ground maintenance works undertaken by DCC around the parish to improve the appearance of our green spaces and avoid excessive use of herbicides.

Planning Applications

The PC receives a monthly list of all planning applications covering our parish. Most of these do not require a response from the PC, but in 2024/25 there were two planning applications that did require intervention from the PC. Such interventions begin with a written response to DCC planning authority and in the case of more contentious applications, the PC will argue its case before a planning committee.

1. Russell Foster football centre

There was a resolution to this long-standing application for a site off Pit Lane in Leamside. Having been refused planning permission by DCC in July 2023, the applicant subsequently submitted an appeal to the Independent Planning Inspectorate in December 2023. The Parish Council, as well as a number of residents and our MP, Mary Foy, submitted letters of objection to the appeal. In May 2024 the Planning Inspectorate upheld the decision of DCC to refuse planning permission and rejected the applicant’s appeal.

2. Community Hub development

An area of land adjacent to the Cathedral Meadows development was designated a community hub in the original planning application for the whole site in 2015. The developer (Woodside) had approval to develop commercial premises on the land. However, the failure to secure any interest from the commercial sector led the developer to seek planning consent for the development of 20 affordable homes on the site. In October 2024 the PC submitted a letter stating it had no objection to the proposed development.

In March 2025 a group of residents submitted a petition to the planning officer objecting to this housing development and calling for it to be replaced with a convenience store. The planning committee met on 8th April and, despite a positive recommendation from the planners, voted to reject the application. The Chair of the PC presented an update of its views on this application stating that if no viable community related option can be found for the site, the PC would raise no objection to the application. The developer plans to appeal the decision arguing that they have tried, but failed, to attract any commercial enterprise to the site.

At our April meeting, following further representation from the authors of the petition, the PC agreed to contact potential retailers on behalf of residents in an effort to get them to consider opening a convenience store on the site. This is an ongoing enquiry with an update expected at the PC monthly meeting on 15th May.

Summary

Both these planning examples demonstrate the PC's willingness to support the concerns of residents. The Russell Foster and the Community Hub applications are, in their different ways, good examples of sectors of the community combining to resist what they regard as unwanted developments.

In the Russell Foster case, the majority of objectors were probably in favour of encouraging youth football, but were all convinced this was the wrong location - and the Planning Inspectorate agreed. The Community Hub case, which is still to be resolved, is more nuanced. We all appreciate the need for more affordable housing but many residents feel that we lack a modern convenience store for our growing community and the community hub is where it was designated to be.

Projects

During the course of a year the PC becomes involved in a variety of projects, some addressing resident's concerns and others aimed at improving our parish. The following examples illustrate this diversity.

New Website

With effect from 31st March 2024, Durham County Council withdrew support for hosting the PC website. A replacement host and developer were found and a new website developed. <https://westraintonandleamsidepc.gov.uk/> . We believe this new website is a significant improvement on the old one in terms of its accessibility, presentation and content. To some extent the site is still undergoing development and some information may still require updating. Our thanks to Iain Clifford for facilitating the transfer and continuing to update information on our new website.

Parish Cemetery

In 2023, work undertaken by the PC's grounds maintenance contractor under the direction of the PC had led to a number of concerns and allegations from some residents about a lack of consultation on PC policies, and questions about the long-term plan for the cemetery. These concerns carried through into 2024 and were raised at two PC monthly meetings by residents. The PC published a written response on its website detailing the reasons how and why the existing policies came about. At the same time, recognising the strength of feeling over this issue, the PC undertook a comprehensive review of all its cemetery policies, associated rules and procedures. This work has been completed and the new cemetery documents are now available on our website. People with an interest in the graves in the new burial area have been contacted to offer them the options available under the new policy.

Following a tendering process a new grounds maintenance contractor has been appointed and will begin work in May. It is worth noting that the cost of maintenance in the cemetery is significantly greater than the income generated from burials, and will remain the case into the foreseeable future. However, the cemetery is a valuable community asset and the PC continues to make investments that will maintain its appearance and safety for the benefit of all.

School Avenue Park Project.

This project has taken a long time to come to fruition but is now close to completion. Working with DCC, the PC has designed this project to supplement the existing young children's play area and develop an outdoor community space that we hope will appeal to many residents.

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

The project will be completed by the erection of a metal fence around the whole area in the same style as currently encloses the children's play area. The large boulders currently on the border of this site will be transferred to another part of the village.

Grant funding for the outdoor gym element of the project was secured by DCC who installed the equipment to an agreed design on behalf of the PC. Grant funding was secured by the PC to fund the street furniture elements of the project.

Threat to Jubilee Hall

Following notification of the resignation of its long-serving principal volunteer in January, the Jubilee Hall was in imminent danger of closure. The PC were approached for assistance in preventing the closure of this key community asset. Following discussions with various interested parties the PC set up a working group with the remit of establishing a management team to ensure the long-term future of Jubilee Hall. This is an ongoing process but progress is being made and the initial response has been encouraging. The closure threat emphasises the need not only for the various voluntary groups in the parish to collaborate, but also for individuals to come forward and support this vital community asset.

Unregistered Public Footpath

Following residents' concerns regarding the status of a much used but unregistered footpath, between public footpath No 2 (from the Dene) and Footpath 21 (the red track that runs from Mark's Lane to Rainton Meadows Nature Reserve), the Parish Council submitted a formal application to DCC to have this footpath registered as a Public Right of Way on its "Definitive Map". A decision on the application is still pending but the landowner has reportedly objected to this path becoming a public right of way.

Tree Planting

Following a request from the PC, the Green Group conducted a survey looking at options for the type and location of trees that could be planted to enhance the appearance of the parish. In a separate project there is a potential for additional trees on land belonging to Believe Housing. Durham County Council would also need to be consulted if any planting was proposed to be carried out on their land. The Green Group has now presented its findings to the PC. By its very nature this will be a long-term project so the PC will need to carefully consider not only the initial capital cost of purchasing and planting trees, but also the ongoing maintenance costs for the trees.

Cathedral Meadows development

The construction of 150 dwellings by Banks Homes on this site, adjacent to Station Road, is well underway. The community does receive a financial benefit from these types of development in the form of Section 106 monies. Avant homes development of Allenson View was another case in point where Section 106 monies came to the parish. Some of the Banks Homes money S106 monies are allocated to the school, some to the doctors surgery and other amounts can be applied for by local charities.

Local Elections

In the Spring edition of the Village News the PC published details of the boundary changes that will affect electors in our parish in the upcoming May elections. Although the parish boundary will not change, we are now part of the newly created Lumley and West Rainton division that will elect two county councillors to represent our interests. In the same publication the PC appealed for candidates to come forward to contest the 9 parish council vacancies.

Annual Plan

In 2017 residents were invited to contribute to the development of a Parish Plan, in which many actions were identified and gathered under the following 7 themes:

Theme 1	Maintain the parish's rural character and existing amenities, whilst encouraging sustainable development
Theme 2	Improve road safety
Theme 3	Continue to improve the appearance and management of the parish cemetery
Theme 4	Maintain and improve our public parks and open green spaces
Theme 5	Improve community engagement and cohesion
Theme 6	Maintaining good governance
Theme 7	Effective management of the parish council's resources and assets

Over subsequent years these actions have formed the basis of our Annual Plan. This plan is regularly updated and used by the PC to define some of its objectives and to set a programme of future activities. A copy of the Annual Plan, indicating the status of agreed actions is available on the PC website.

Looking Ahead to 2025/26

After local elections on 1st May 2025 there will be a new parish council in place along with two new ward councillors. It is likely a number of existing parish councillors will remain in post but it is for this new parish council to draw up its own programme of activities. The current parish councillors have contributed to the following list of 10 areas of ongoing activity:

- Work with DCC on completing the School Avenue Park Project.
- Support the Community Association to secure the future of Jubilee Hall.
- Seek to fill any councillor vacancies to maximise community representation on the PC.
- Seek to improve how we engage and communicate with residents.
- Engage with new residents moving into the parish.
- Identify and develop further projects and initiatives for the benefit of all residents.
- Identify and explore potential for external funding opportunities.
- Review all new planning applications to assess their potential impact on our community.
- Monitor the implementation of any approved planning developments.
- Review and update our Annual Plan.

Whatever the constitution of the new PC, it is anticipated they will continue to work in partnership with community groups, DCC and other public bodies to maintain and/or improve existing activities, services and facilities for the benefit of all residents in the parish of West Rainton and Leamside.

Ian Diggory
Chair, West Rainton & Leamside Parish Council

Appendix A. 2024/25 Financial Summary and 2025/26 Financial Forecast

Sources of Income	Income 2023/24	Income 2024/25
Precept	£36,690	£39,618
LCTSS Grant	£2,582	£1,302
S106 Grant Award School Avenue Park Project	£0	£3,772
Bank Interest	£877	£1,951
Test Deposit	£5	£0
Cemetery - Burial Income	£2,127	£1,544
Cemetery - Memorial Tree	£1,224	£0
VAT included in memorial leaf income	£245	£0
Recoverable VAT (From previous year)	£8,046	£2,921
Total income	£51,796	£51,108

Expenditure Items	Expenditure 2023/24	Expenditure 2024/25
Staff Salaries	£7,241	£7,467
Learning & Development	£0	£10
General Administration/Office Expenses	£2,106	£374
Subscriptions	£573	£596
Room Hire	£144	£190
Insurance	£1,544	£790
Accountancy and Audit Fees	£760	£835
School Avenue Paly Park Furniture	£0	£3,772
Cemetery grounds maintenance	£5,098	£5,144
Cemetery - Replacement Notice Board		£1,110
Other grounds maintenance	£4,184	£4,605
Memorial leaf & inscriptions	£936	£0
Purchase and installation of memorial tree	£378	
Bulb Planting	£1,950	
Village Clock Servicing/Repairs	£185	£185
*Grants	£2,800	£1,470
British Legion Donation - Wreath for War Memorial	£20	£20
Kings Coronation	£537	
Supply & Lighting of Christmas Tree & Carol Evening	£2,972	£3,244
*Youth Service	£0	£3,000
VAT Payable	£2,923	£3,001
Bank charges	£58	£145

Total expenditure	£34,408	£35,958
Surplus / Deficit to transfer to general reserves	£17,388	£15,150

Reserves Balances Carried Forward	2023/24	2024/25
Village Improvement Plan	£20,000	£20,000
Election Reserve	£4,000	£4,000
General reserves at start of year	£25,407	£42,795
General Reserves at year end	£42,795	£57,945
Total Reserve balances carried forward	£66,795	£81,945

NOTES

2024/25 Figures are yet to be audited (31/03/25)

*Grants of £2800 for 23/24 were paid in March 2023 and relate to projects approved in 2022/23
(Jubilee Hall Running Costs = £2500. WRLVP 'Because we care' project = £300)

*Grants of £1470 paid in 2024/25

(Brownies - Hall Hire and Pantomime = £630. WRLVP Village Show= £250. Big Lunch = £590)

Grants of £5865 were approved In Jan 2025 to be paid in April 2025

(DAY Hall Hire=£4000. Big Lunch=£590. Village Show=£250. Brownies - 50% Hall Hire and Pantomime=£725. 'Not a Statistic NE'=£300)

FINANCIAL FORECAST (2025/26)	2025/26
Precept	£41,483
Other	£7,309
TOTAL Income	£48,792
Estimated Spend	£52,433
Deficit for year	- £3,641
Start of year	£57,945
End of year	£54,304
Village Improvement plan	£20,000
Election reserve	£4,000
Reserve Balance	£78,304

Funding pressures 2025/26

Potential for additional traffic calming measures

Clock Repair - 50% funding agreement with Church for public clock

Stress Testing of headstones in the cemetery

Increased cemetery maintenance costs. (New contractor & reducing burial income)

Further support for Jubilee Hall

Commitments carried over from 24/25:

DCC invoices of £7700 outstanding for street furniture & bins installation
(Cfwd from 2023/24=£5570. School Avenue=£2200)