



## WEST RAINTON PARISH COUNCIL

### Annual Report 2015/2016

#### Introduction

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

#### Membership of the Council

2. The council consists of 11 elected representatives who serve for a term of 4 years. The last election was in 2013 and therefore the next election will be in 2017.
3. During the year we have had a number of casual vacancies resulting from resignations. If there is no request from residents to fill these vacancies through a by-election, the Council is able to appoint new members through a co-option process.
4. To ensure there is accountability and transparency in this co-option process, the Council has approved a fully documented co-option procedure and all the vacancies arising during the year have been filled using this procedure.
5. Parish Councillors resigning during the year were
  - Councillor Andrew Sowerby
  - Councillor Stuart Graham (following appointment in September 2015)
6. Parish Councillors co-opted during the year were:
  - Councillor Pam Lowrie
  - Councillor Iain Haddick
  - Councillor Peter Morson
  - Councillor Stuart Graham
  - Councillor Cynthia Cochrane (Acceptance of Office in 2016/17)
  - Councillor Maureen Boettcher (Acceptance of Office in 2016/17)
7. Other serving councillors are:
  - Councillor Avril Wallage (Chair)
  - Councillor Iain Clifford (Vice Chair)
  - Councillor Mark Gilbank
  - Councillor Susan Patterson
  - Councillor Elaine Bulmer
  - Councillor Andrew Swinburn

## **Employees (part –time)**

- Parish Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer, Kate Cuthbert
- Project Officer, Graeme Keedy

## **Main Activities**

8. The Council's 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 public parish council meetings
- To management and maintain the open cemetery
- To maintain the Heritage Garden
- To maintain the Parish Clock in St Mary's Church Steeple
- To liaise with Durham County Council and other public bodies, regarding the service provision
- To liaise with community groups and the Village Partnership to ensure that we can work effectively together for the benefit of the community
- To receive regular update reports from the Police and the DCC Neighbourhood Warden regarding their work in our area.
- To considering planning applications that may impact on the well being of residents and our environment and to raise any residents concerns with Durham County Council to aid their decision making process.
- To consider and provide financial support (in line with Parish Council policy) to voluntary organisations, charities and community groups that provide activities or services for the benefit of residents

## **Specific Activities during 2015/16**

### **Administration**

9. The Parish Council continues to improve and update its policies and procedures to ensure they are fit purpose and support informed decision making.
10. We continue to receive a high volume of correspondence and requests for information, some of which require responses under legislation within set timescales. Combined, these are onerous and take up valuable staff resources - impacting on the ability of the Council to move forward.
11. Following a period of instability in 2014 when we had no Parish Clerk, a number of one off project related tasks have been identified that could not be progressed as part of the day to day duties of the Parish Clerk.
12. In view of the above, when our former Parish Clerk, Graeme Keedy, advised us that he was stepping down from the post in September, the Parish Council approved the creation of an additional part time

temporary post of Project Officer to work alongside our new Clerk Kate Cuthbert.

13. During the year we have improved how we communicate with residents. Our Website has finally gone live providing easy accessible information about the Council and how to contact us. Special thanks to Cllr Clifford for making this happen.
14. The site will continue to develop not only as a site relating to Parish Council business, but also as a community website with links to other groups and organisations that work in our community for the benefit of residents. If you have any suggestions on how the site could be improved we would love to hear from you.
15. We now also provide a regular update in each edition of the Village Newsletter to alert you to anything coming up that we think will be of interest and you need to be aware of.

### **The Heritage Garden**

16. Having been successful in obtaining a grant award from the Community Chest Fund of £3,400 at the end of last year, we have improved the Heritage Garden making this a much more pleasant and welcoming area. A plaque has also been erected in recognition that the garden was provided to celebrate the mining heritage of our village.
17. The garden also provided a location for a village festive evening of, "Carols around the Christmas Tree", with Pitlington Brass Band and refreshments afterwards in the Jubilee Hall. Due to the very positive feedback, we plan to make this an annual event.
18. Regretfully, there have been a growing number of incidents of vandalism and anti social behaviour in and around the garden area, particular over the winter months. Hopefully by working together as a community we can ensure these issues are addressed so that the garden can continue to be enjoyed by residents and visitors throughout the year.

### **Cemetery Improvements**

19. We have considered a number of issues relating to the management and development of the cemetery. These included visitors concerns about the general appearance and upkeep; uncertainty over how much burial space is left and the need to review our policies, procedures and records. We have therefore appointed a specialist cemetery development company to carry out a site burial survey, produce new burial plans, design layout and landscaping plans for new burial space identified and provide a management brief for a financial administration plan and an annual maintenance programme. This work is now in progress.

## Grant and Donations to Community Groups and Organisations

20. We have implemented a new grants and donation policy. The purpose of this policy is to encourage and support activities and projects which benefit residents within the parish. Funding available each year is limited and carefully managed. The policy aims to help the Council prioritise requests to ensure that funding is used to support those activities in most need and which will result in the greatest benefit for residents.

21. Grants and donations awarded during the year were as follows::

<b>Funded from 2015/2016 Budget</b>		
<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Amount</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
West Rainton Football Club	£513	Grant to fund the cost of Durham County Council Pitch Fees
1 <sup>st</sup> Rainton Gate Rainbows and Brownies	£250	Donation contribution towards Dec 2015 pantomime trip
Pittington Brass	£100	Donation in lieu of fee for playing at the Christmas Carol Evening
<b>To be funded from 2016/2017 Budget</b>		
St Mary' PCC	£200	To hire 2 portable toilets for Big Lunch 5 June 2016)
West Rainton F C Club	£500	Grant to fund the cost of Durham County Council Pitch Fees
West Rainton and Leamside Partnership	£250	Grant to provide environmental improvements – plants/tubs
West Rainton Primary School	£1000	Grant to subsidise the cost of pantomime tickets for the entire school

From its' mainstream budget, the Parish Council has also continued to fund the Citizen's Advice Bureau drop in sessions held in the Jubilee Hall (1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Thursdays 12.30pm – 1.30pm).

## Opencast Mining Appeal

22. Following a public meeting in September 2013 the Parish Council, together with other neighbouring local councils, took the decision to oppose the opencast planning application for the site at Field House. Durham County Council refused planning permission but the applicant, Hargreaves, appealed resulting in an Appeal Hearing that began 29 September 2016.

23. We have continued to help support resident concerns about the impact of this proposal by working with the Stop the Opencast in Pittington and West Rainton (STOPWR) Community Action Group to fight the proposal. This involved working with STOPWR to raise awareness by distributing information leaflets and hosting a public meeting in the Jubilee Hall at the beginning of September. This was very well attended, reflecting the level of opposition to the proposal. This resulted in a number of residents coming forward to present personal statements of objection at the hearing and helped informed the Parish Council's submission.

24. Regretfully, despite numerous written representations opposing the scheme, from individual local residents and interested parties, many of whom presented their statements in person at the hearing, the Planning Inspector announced his decision in January to agree to the appeal and grant planning permission. In his decision notice the Planning Inspector acknowledged the considerable local opposition to the proposed development, (and that there had also been some support), but advised that this is not in itself a ground for refusing planning permission. The proposal was therefore determined in accordance with the National Planning Policy Framework, with which the scheme complies.
25. On a more positive note, although planning permission has been granted, STOPWR has not been disbanded. The planning permission is valid for 3 years and given the current demand for coal and falling coal prices, work is unlikely to start any time soon. The Parish Council continues to work with STOPWR to monitor how and when the development proceeds and compliance with agreed planning conditions. We will keep you informed of any developments.

### **Financial Position**

26. It has been a busy year for the Parish Council and there are some significant projects emerging, particularly in relation to the development of the Cemetery and the Parish Plan, which has necessitated the engagement of specialist consultants. Despite this additional financial commitment, I am pleased to report that the Parish Council took the decision not to increase the precept when considering its draft budget for 2016/17 in January. Consequently, as last year, there will be no increase in your council tax bill as a result of Parish Council spending plans for next year. A breakdown of where your money was spent in 2015/2016 is attached as Appendix A.

### **Looking ahead - Development of a Parish (Village) Plan**

27. We are committed to lead on the development of a parish (village) plan to set out what actions residents would like to see to improve services and our community over the longer term. To help us do this we have been awarded a £5,000 grant from the Community Capital Investment Fund and work has started to identify what needs to be done to get this project underway.
28. To support the Council through the development process, we have engaged the specialist services of Durham Community Action. The first step in the process is to hold a launch event to explain why we have decided to do this and how you can get involved and have your say. This will take place immediately following the Annual Parish Meeting.

**Cllr Avril Wallage, Chair**

**May 2016**