

Chairman's report 2018

Reflecting on recent events and some of the difficult issues we have dealt with as a parish council over the last 12 months, I think it's fair to say it's been an interesting year but definitely not one in which everything has turned out the way we would have preferred.

However, there is little point on dwelling on past disappointments – particularly where the outcome has been beyond our control. We simply have to learn from these experiences and try to look to the future with a positive outlook and measured optimism.

Looking back over the last year there are two issues which stand out as having major implications for the character of our parish.

The first is the amount of housing development which is likely to be taking place in and around the parish over the next year or two.

The second is the impending closure of our village school.

On the issue of housing, there is now planning consent in place for three residential property developments in Acklington village.

In addition to the long-standing but as yet unrealised plans for the Pearson's garage site, we now have approved applications for housing at the east end and west end of the village.

Compared to the scale development which is taking place in Amble and other towns around Northumberland these are relatively small scale projects.

But this is a small parish with fewer than 250 households and the combined impact of these developments will inevitably change the shape and character of the village, not just visually but in terms of the population.

While these design and scale of developments have generated mixed and sometimes passionate views, there is a wider benefit if the creation of new homes adds to the diversity and vibrancy of the community. I very much hope that it will.

I am also hopeful – but not excessively so – that planning officers will show a little more willingness to involve the parish council in discussions on s.106 agreements. This is arguably one of the most frustrating aspects of the planning process.

As regards the closure of the school, it is very hard to find anything positive to say as the loss of such a fundamentally important part of the community is clearly a loss in so many ways.

But you can't have a school without enough children to make it viable – regardless of its importance to the community – such is the reality of public service provision based on limited resource.

Perhaps the best we can say is that children who attend the school – and those who would have done so as part of future generations – will benefit in terms of educational achievement and wider social contact by attending other, larger schools in the area.

It is tempting to speculate on whether the school would have stood a better chance of survival if the proposed developments around the village had taken place 10 years ago – but that is a moot point.

Putting aside these two issues, the parish council has continued to grapple with the perennial issues of irresponsible dog owners, drivers who look upon speed limits as entirely optional and the appalling condition of roads and paths around the parish.

On the latter point, I don't think I've ever known the condition of some of our roads to be quite as bad as they are in the moment. And while I recognise the county council is applying finite resources to an almost infinite problem, I very much hope we see some improvement in our local roads in the very near future.

In terms of the parish council's own position, I'm pleased to say that we have reached the end of another year in a good financial state in spite of our relatively small precept and a multitude of outgoings.

While there are undoubtedly things we could spend money on – everyone has their own pet project - we cannot impose a further burden on household finances without having very strong justification for doing so.

Somewhat unusually, we reach the end of a financial year with a vacancy for not one but two parish councillors.

I very much hope we can fill these vacancies in the near future but finding people who are willing to devote the necessary time and effort for absolutely no personal gain is not easy. For this reason I am grateful for the ongoing support of those around the table this evening.

I am also immensely grateful for the support of our county councillor Jeff Watson, and of course our clerk, Elaine Brown who keeps us on the right track. We are very lucky to have them both.

I am therefore confident that whatever challenges the parish council is obliged to deal with over the next 12 months we have the mixture of commitment, optimism and wisdom to see us through.

Jeff Newton
Chairman
Acklington Parish Council

15 May 2018