

North Lodge Parish Council

Annual Report 2023-2024

This report covers the year from the Council meeting in May 2023 to the meeting in April 2024.

At our AGM in May 2023, Councillor Patrick Driscoll was elected to the Chair. This followed two years as Chair by Councillor Dennis Hall who was thanked for many successes including increasing our level of engagement with the local community. Councillor Craig Martin (also our County Councillor) was elected Vice-Chair.

In July, John Waugh resigned as a Parish Councillor. The Chairman thanked him for all the valuable years of service he had given to the Parish Council.

The work of the Parish Council is divided into various Portfolios and a summary of each one follows.

Communications and Media Development

Visits to the Council's X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook pages have increased over the year as has the number of posts which have included a wide variety of local and national topics such as mental health, fire safety, dog fouling, bogus callers and many more. In September the Portfolio Holder, Councillor Chris Veitch, was given authorisation to access the Facebook page along with the Clerk and this streamlined the posting of messages to both Facebook and X. A major and enforced change regarding the website was the outcome of the County Council (DCC) ceasing to provide hosting of the site. Much work went into the selection and appointing of a new service provider and this was awarded to Madhouse Media Ltd who have an office on the Drum Industrial Estate. The Parish Council always looks to support local businesses wherever possible and it was pleasing, therefore, to be able to show this support in a practical way. The move to Madhouse will also lead to a newly-designed website in the near future. The website continues to be updated at regular intervals by the Clerk. Council Minutes, Agendas, dates of meetings, financial information and items of interest and information are contained on the site. Like many organisations and individuals, we have experienced a number of bogus/fake emails. It is important to remain alert and curious about the source and content of emails to minimise the chances of falling victim to fraud. The Council's annual Newsletter, this time with a theme of the King's Coronation, was again well received in 2023. The theme for 2024 will be D-Day 80. The Newsletter, collated by Councillor Maureen May with our grateful thanks, is delivered by Councillors to each household in the Parish. The Council thanks all who contribute to its production and distribution. The Newsletter can also be accessed via the Council's website.

Social media is an important part of the Council's approach to enhancing contact with the North Lodge community and we thank Councillor Veitch for his work in ensuring our posts are interesting and relevant.

Crime and Community Safety

In September, we received a helpful and informative presentation from Graeme Carr of County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service. We continue to experience very low crime levels in our Parish. There have been just a few minor instances of anti-social behaviour such as graffiti, fly-tipping and dog waste not being picked up. On this latter point, we approached the DCC Neighbourhood Wardens for their help to change attitudes of the small number of dog walkers who create such an unpleasant environment for others. Of note, however, was a "ram-raid" of a house which was left uninhabitable and this, of course, necessitated a Police investigation. An unauthorised "For Sale" sign was reported to DCC as were two advertising boards. Portfolio Holder Jackie Gregory accompanied the Police Community Support Officer to observe any inconsiderate parking outside Park View Lower School at school leaving time. Councillor Gregory continues to monitor the frequency of attendance of the police speed camera in Blind Lane and we have advised the Police that the continued presence of the camera, from time to time, is necessary and important. We also continue to seek clarification regarding air pollution monitoring in the Blind Lane/North Road area. Councillor Gregory's reports to Council meetings always contain much useful and helpful information from the Police and Fire Service. Portfolio Holder Councillor Jackie Gregory maintains a close link between the Council, the Police and other agencies which greatly contributes to the low levels of crime in the Parish.

Finance

Following the resignation of John Waugh, Councillor Chris Veitch kindly agreed to accept the Finance Portfolio. Financial matters continue to be carefully planned, budgeted for and controlled by the Council and we again received a "clean" report from our auditors. We were again able to maintain the Precept for 2024/2025 at £31.53 per Band D equivalent house, last increased in 2018/2019. It is an essential part of our duties that we provide best value for our residents and we believe that we are achieving that. The Precept enables the Council to provide enhanced services, such as play facilities, flower beds and bus shelters, to those provided by DCC and also allows us to engage with organisations such as DCC on matters of importance to individual residents. Organisations receiving a donation from the Council included the Poppy Appeal, the Great North Air Ambulance Service, Cestrian Flower Club, the Police Market Activity Week and St Cuthbert's Hospice.

Councillor Chris Veitch, as our Finance Portfolio Holder, takes an active role

in this central aspect of the Council's activities. The Parish Council always welcomes suggestions from Councillors and residents for project ideas which might provide lasting benefit to the Parish.

Highways and Community Assets

Councillor Patrick Driscoll is our Portfolio Holder and he makes regular informal inspections of the bus shelters and public seating. Through DCC, we also arranged for a condition survey of all our nine bus shelters. Regrettably, there were several instances of vandalism to the display cabinets in the bus shelters and this led to a decision not to replace them but to seek an alternative solution if possible. A smashed clear panel at the northbound bus shelter in Picktree Village was replaced. Councillor Chris Veitch has organised several community litter picks around the Parish, with some residents and Parish Councillors joining in. The Council thanks all those who have taken part as this helps greatly to maintain the Parish to a high standard. Councillors Jackie Gregory and Patrick Driscoll, with a representative of DCC, visited various sites around the Parish to discuss the need for road marking improvements and several requests were agreed for inclusion in DCC's 2024 schedule. There have been concerns expressed regarding the speed of traffic through Picktree Village. Councillor Suzanne Brown and the Council have been liaising with the Police who have carried out speed monitoring checks. The outcome of these is awaited.

Portfolio Holder Councillor Patrick Driscoll also voluntarily carries out general cleaning and tidying of the bus shelters and seating which helps greatly in presenting the Parish in its best light.

Horticulture

During the year, Councillors Jackie Gregory and Chris Veitch resigned from the Horticulture sub-group. The Council thanks them for all their work and time given to the sub-group. It is vital that we do everything we can to keep North Lodge an attractive place to live and work so Horticulture is an extremely important function of the Council. There are over 20 flower and shrub beds planted up around the Parish and these are given regular care and attention by the Council garden contractor, Makepeace Landscapes. At the entrance to Picktree Lodge, long-awaited new beds were planted by DCC to replace the ones removed when work was being carried out there to the Sustrans cycle route. The maintenance of these beds will become the responsibility of the Parish Council in early 2025. Additional spring bulbs were planted. The two North Road shrub beds were revitalised with new planting, this being financed by a Neighbourhood Budget grant from our County Councillor for which we record our thanks. During a meeting arranged by the County Councillor and attended by the DCC Woodland Creation Officer, to discuss tree planting on the Picktree Lodge Baffle Bank, Councillor Jackie Gregory stated the position of the Parish Council. As well as the long

established Christmas Tree in North Road which carries lights each Christmas, we have again provided a locally grown tree with lights in Picktree Village. Unfortunately, high winds blew down the Picktree Village tree (without any harm being caused except to some of the lights) but this was re-erected shortly afterwards by our contractor. We expect to have this year's tree installed to a more robust standard.

The work of the Horticulture sub-group (currently consisting of Councillors Maureen May, Margaret Caygill and Suzanne Brown), both in making recommendations to the full Council and carrying out various individual tasks, has been of enormous benefit to the Council and our thanks go to the sub-group members for all their valuable work.

Thanks also go to Councillor Maureen May as Portfolio Holder for this busy section of our work.

Meetings of Partnership Organisations

Portfolio Holder Councillor Elsie Forrester continues to provide regular and important information from the Area Action Partnership (AAP) and from the County Durham Association of Local Councils (CDALC). Councillor Forrester attends numerous meetings on behalf of the Council and her feedback ensures that all Councillors are kept up-to-date on matters affecting local government and people in Chester-le-Street and the County. Topics discussed included such diverse ones as Mental Health, Holiday Activities with Healthy Food and grants awarded by the AAP.

We thank Councillor Forrester for keeping us up-to-date on many local and County-wide matters.

Planning

Following the resignation of John Waugh, there is not at present a Planning Portfolio Holder. However, the Clerk updates all Councillors weekly with advice of every new planning application in the Parish and these are discussed, where necessary, at the regular meetings of the Council. During the year, we commented to DCC, which is the planning authority for the County, on several applications including for a new logistics warehouse at Drum Industrial Estate and for tree removal at Barley Mow. Of major concern, to numerous residents and to the Council, was the installation by Virgin Media of telecommunications cabinets at Longdean Park. The strength of feeling by residents was such that many of them attended Council meetings to hear about our plans to challenge Virgin. In our opinion, the site chosen by Virgin was most inappropriate despite there being a suitable site very close by. The extremely low level of consultation by Virgin with residents was seen as unacceptable. Led by Councillor Dennis Hall, the Council made representations to Virgin Media, Gateshead Council and DCC. In addition, the MP obtained comments from Virgin Media. None of the replies received, both to our initial messages and to several follow-ups, were considered to be

satisfactory responses to our points raised and have not produced any movement by Virgin Media. We now await the outcome of a complaint by residents to the Ombudsman against Virgin. Our thanks go to the residents who have invested much time and energy into this matter and to Councillor Hall for all the time and expertise that he has brought to this case.

Play Areas

The two play areas in the Parish are extremely important for the welfare of residents. The Merlin Drive play area is owned by DCC whilst the Low Flatts play area is Parish Council owned. Portfolio Holder Councillor Margaret Caygill monitors both, and liaises with DCC on any issues that arise. The refurbishment of Low Flatts was completed in June. This up-to-date and inclusive play area, designed for two to five year olds, has been welcomed by families and is being well-used. We thank DCC who were the project managers on behalf of the Parish Council. A health and safety complaint regarding one of the new pieces of play equipment was resolved by the DCC Outdoor Facilities Co-ordinator. New seats have been installed at both play areas, and an existing seat re-sited at Low Flatts, this work being financed by a Neighbourhood Budget grant from our County Councillor who we thank for his help. There were a few instances of anti-social behaviour at Low Flatts. A metal detectorist had been digging holes which were very kindly filled back in by Councillor Chris Veitch, two youths were reported to the Police for firing a rifle at wildlife and a goal post was damaged beyond repair, probably by vandalism. The cost of replacement of the goal post was met by our insurers. A site visit at Low Flatts included the DCC Neighbourhood Warden who put up notices regarding picking up dog waste. Our thanks go to Councillor Caygill for overseeing what has been a busy year at the play areas.

Policy and Governance

Councillor Dennis Hall, as Portfolio Holder, has kept the Council informed on many matters affecting our sector of Local Government including information from central Government, the Local Government Association and the National Association of Local Councils. Topics included a wide range such as virtual meetings, collaboration with police and political parties, a code of practice for wireless development network in England and pavement parking. Councillor Hall led on our input to the Boundary Commission on proposals for changes to Parish boundaries in County Durham and we received final confirmation that the Commission had agreed that this Parish should be unchanged. The Council's Donations Policy was reviewed and amended. We thank Councillor Hall for keeping us informed on so many wider issues affecting Parish Councils.

Project Development, Business and External Relations

The Portfolio Holder is Councillor Craig Martin who also being our County Councillor is in an ideal position to guide the Council on these matters. A major and substantial project in development at present is the commissioning and eventual installation of an artwork at the entrance to Lombard Drive to become a focal point for the community. Currently being developed by the North Lodge Remembrance Group with the help of Councillor Martin, it is anticipated that this project will soon be adopted by the Parish Council which has previously resolved to support the project. The artist for the project, Graeme Hopper, attended a meeting of the Council to discuss ideas and subsequently Councillors Jackie Gregory, Craig Martin and Chris Veitch and the Clerk visited the workshop of Graeme to gain understanding of his methods and designs. It is recognised that Councillor Martin has already given much time to this project and we thank him for all his efforts to date.

Meetings and Events Attended

During the year, Councillors have represented the Council at many external meetings, workshops and events. These include meetings of the CDALC Chester-le-Street and District Sub-Committee, CDALC Smaller Councils Forum, the DCC Area Action Partnership, training events, meetings with representatives of Park View School and meetings with officers of DCC. At the greatly appreciated North Lodge Remembrance Group event on 11th November at North Road, arranged by Councillor Chris Veitch, several Councillors including the Chairman, who laid a wreath, were in attendance together with many residents, the Clerk and representatives of local businesses. At the Remembrance Day Service on 12th November, the Chairman again laid a wreath on behalf of the Council. The Parish Council thanks all those Councillors who have represented the Council in these many and various matters. This is a function that is of great importance in establishing and presenting the views of our residents.

Other Community Matters

To celebrate the Coronation of King Charles III, Councillor Hall, on behalf of the Council, gave a speech and presented lapel badges to each student at Park View Lower School. Councillors attended the school to present prizes to the winners of the Council's Community Arts Awards, the theme of which was the Coronation of the King. Winning posters were displayed in the Council's bus shelter display cases, noticeboards and in the Lambton Worm and Wheatsheaf pubs with their kind assistance. For the 2024 Awards competition, the theme will be D-Day 80. As part of the Council's D-Day 80 commemorations, we have bought two Lamp Lights of Peace.

We have been contacted by residents on many varied matters and have responded in, we hope, a manner that encourages such contact. We expect to deal with all contacts in the speediest and most effective way possible.

Residents can contact the Council by using the contact link on the website <https://www.northlodgeparishcouncil.gov.uk/> or by telephoning 0191 3892516 or in writing to 21 Lyndhurst Avenue Chester-le-Street DH3 4AR or by contacting any Councillor directly. Our noticeboards are situated at North Road (near the Lambton Worm pub), at the entrance to Lombard Drive from North Road, at Merlin Drive play area, at Picktree Village alongside the stone-built bus shelter, at Picktree Lodge estate (between numbers 28 and 30) and on Vigo Lane at the west entrance to Barley Gate.

Working with the County Councillor

The Parish Council considers it extremely important and beneficial to have a good working relationship with the County Councillor and such a relationship is well established with Councillor Craig Martin. The Parish Council will continue to seek a strong and positive relationship to provide the best service to our residents.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the Chairman (Councillor Patrick Driscoll), Vice-Chairman (Councillor Craig Martin) and all Councillors who have contributed so much time and effort to the achievements of the Council. Thanks are also due to County Councillor Craig Martin for his close involvement and interest in the Parish. The Parish Council values its relationships with the County Council, our MP, the Police and Park View School, all of whom show that they share our aim of improving North Lodge for the benefit of our residents and for the benefit of those who work here.

Finally, there are two seats available on the Parish Council for any residents interested in serving their community. Please contact the Clerk or any Councillor if you would like more information. We always welcome the involvement of residents and local businesses in Parish matters and we will continue to strive for the improvement of North Lodge Parish.

David Murrell
Clerk, North Lodge Parish Council

7th May 2024