

ANNUAL PARISH MEETING – 1 March 2021

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

This is the 1st day of the meteorological spring, and what a lovely day. I think we can allow ourselves to be optimistic at this time, even though we are constantly told there is a long way to go. This time last year we had no idea what was coming, the preparation was minimal and the advance warning non-existent. The Coronavirus pandemic created such chaos.

Council protocols and procedures did not cover holding virtual meetings and it took us until June to understand the regs around the pandemic, lockdown and holding meetings and putting in place the means for the PC to function as fully as possible.

Following the end of Lockdown1 we were becoming familiar with Zoom software, we had begun to put in place the required safeguards, paperwork etc. For that I must thank June Watson our clerk. She liaised with the NALC to purchase a zoom licence, organised the meetings so that they could be open to anyone but still comply with our existing rules. The protocols for meetings had to change inevitably but we still had to comply with our Standing Orders (our rule book for conducting both ourselves as councillors and the meetings which is reviewed and agreed at the beginning of each 4-year stint).

The business and responsibilities of the Council had to continue. While our Clerk managed the enormous volume of emails, individual councillors continued to check & maintain parish council assets, report problems with the local highways and footpaths, and monitor ongoing problems such as the investigation into the Hilton drainage system and deal with issues raised by residents (mainly relating to footpath access. Inevitably action by outside bodies slowed as the mantra of 'working from home' & 'no site visits until the regs allow' began to appear, and sadly that is still the situation we find ourselves in.

Social distancing requirements limited much of the work we could complete, even last summer when the covid rates reduced and we began to anticipate a bit more freedom. Fortunately our volunteers were always willing to help, often helping on a 1:1 basis with a councillor, or on their own (in the case of Nigel who kindly pointed the two bus shelters and for which I must thank him).

As autumn approached we were able to replace the noticeboard at Coupland Beck, but the renewal of restrictions has meant that the old noticeboard is still in situ – very frustrating but a sign of the times. We managed a socially distanced team effort to spread the gravel in the cemetery under the leadership of Cllr McDarren and his able team of volunteers. Derek & Peter Hogg cut the Top Green in Hilton for us as the strimming parties and village tidy ups had to be curtailed or cancelled. Jim Hardman and Alan Ormrod continued their grass cutting in Murton. So thank you to all these people on behalf of the Council for giving their time and effort.

Due to the pandemic, the cemetery has become so much more of a focus in the last year. Graveside family funerals were held within the cemetery, a solemn and moving experience as villagers lined the roads to show their respects and say goodbye to neighbours. Councillors have had some enquiries in recent weeks about placing memorial plaques within the cemetery. In the past any memorial plaques were attached to the walls, dotted throughout the cemetery. However the state of the walls make this inadvisable, and there are no immediate plans to rebuild them at this time as any grants must be price-matched and the cost is prohibitive.

Councillors have discussed some sort of structure within the cemetery in the past, but it seems fitting to create a memorial in this year of pandemic. Councillors will be discussing possible options for a plaque-bearing memorial stone or stone structure over the coming months, and any thoughts or ideas would be very much appreciated and welcomed.

Since Christmas the weather has governed council business – The extreme cold coupled with ice closely followed by heavy rain and frost have emptied our grit boxes and damaged our roads. As a council, we can apply what pressure we have to the Highways Dept but inevitably as a small fellside parish, far from Carlisle and with no priority roads we have limited effect and must rely on local residents reporting the problems as well. I don't know if I was heartened or depressed to read that Orton Parish Council have had similar problems particularly in securing refills for the grit boxes when it is needed. It is very frustrating but June our clerk will monitor the reported problems and liaise with the Highways personnel to underline the urgent need for action. Whether it be refilling grit boxes, problems with standing water, blocked drains or gullies, or potholes she needs a specific location as well as any reference numbers for specific problem areas because the Highways Dept need to know exactly where the problem is occurring. Without a map or GPS coordinates, June doesn't often know either.

In conclusion, this last year we have been in a holding pattern, not able to advance or make any plans but just keep things in the Parish on an even keel. Sadly until we finally come out from the pandemic and all the restrictions due to it, we can't make any plans. However, we can look forward with more optimism to a better year. Our next meeting in May includes the Annual Parish meeting or AGM of the council which is the beginning of the next year and we hope to see you then.