

North Lodge Parish Council

Annual Report 2019-2021

This report covers the two years from the Council meeting in May 2019 to the meeting in April 2021. No report was presented in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic which began to cause great disruption and loss of life in this country in February 2020 and is still with us, albeit here in the UK at a much reduced level but continuing to rage in some countries around the world at the time that this report is being written in May 2021. Due to national restrictions on gatherings, there were no Council meetings in March, April or May 2020, following which all our meetings have been “virtual” and it is only now, in May 2021, that it is likely we will return to face-to-face meetings. Restrictions on being away from individual’s homes had the inevitable effect of preventing the Council from carrying out many of its usual duties. For instance, the play areas in the Parish were closed for several months and flower beds were not attended to. Despite all these difficulties, it will become clear from this report that the Parish Council has continued to have a positive effect in the North Lodge community.

Firstly, I wish to record the service to the community of two Councillors who resigned during the period. David Snaith had been a Councillor for six years during which time he had spent a year as Chairman of the Council. Colin Noble-Nesbitt had been a Councillor for no less than thirty-three years during part of which he had also been Chairman. The vast number of hours freely given in service to the Parish by Colin was a magnificent and selfless accomplishment by him.

In May 2019, Councillor Jackie Gregory was elected as Chairman and Councillor Dennis Hall was elected as Vice-Chairman. Under the Government’s emergency rules and regulations, these positions were carried over, without an annual election in 2020, to May 2021.

Crime and Community Safety

We are fortunate that crime levels remain very low in our Parish. The most significant crime was a spate of car break-ins by one male who was arrested by the Police. Otherwise, in two years there have been just single figure instances of graffiti, burglary, anti-social behaviour and fly-tipping. In 2021, we welcomed PC Ged Cooke to the Parish. We receive regular reports from the Community Speed Watch Team who monitor the main roads in the Parish. Portfolio Holder Councillor Jackie Gregory continues to provide an effective link between the Council and the Police.

Finance

Financial matters continue to be carefully planned, budgeted for and controlled by the Council and we received “clean” reports from our auditors in both 2020 and 2021. The Precept for both 2020/2021 and 2021/2022 remained at £31.53 per Band D equivalent house, now four years in a row unchanged. The Precept enables the Council to provide enhanced services, such as play facilities, flower beds and bus shelters, to those provided by Durham County Council (DCC) and also allows us to engage with organisations such as DCC on matters of importance to individual residents. In recognition of the difficulties caused by the pandemic to organisations relying on funding from the public, we made higher amounts than usual of financial donations over the two years. Organisations receiving a donation from the Council included the Great North Air Ambulance Service, Durham Cathedral, Police Activity Week, County of Durham School Benevolent Fund, Citizens Advice, St. Cuthbert’s Hospice, the Poppy Appeal and North Lodge Remembrance Group. We have installed four new noticeboards, three to replace old ones at North Road, Picktree Village and Picktree Lodge, the fourth being at a new site in Lombard Drive. A further new noticeboard is planned for Barley Gate. We are also considering a replacement bus shelter for the worn out metal-framed one on the west side of Picktree Village and we are in discussions with DCC regarding a possible new bus shelter at Barley Gate. With our County Councillor, we are also seeking talks with Sustrans regarding the possible re-painting of the bridge over North Road. We considered buying a laptop for each Councillor but decided that this would not provide value for money for residents. Councillor John Waugh is our Finance Portfolio Holder and he takes an active role in this central aspect of the Parish 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 Transport

Following the resignation of Colin Noble-Nesbitt, Councillor Jackie Gregory stepped in as Portfolio Holder for Highways with input from Councillor Patrick Driscoll. Many highways matters drew our attention, in particular the over-running Highways England work to refurbish the Sustrans Cycleway at the entrance to Picktree Lodge which at one point caused us to enlist the help of the MP to try to speed up the work. At last, after three years it seems that the work will be completed in the next few days! We have reported to DCC whenever roads and footpaths needed attention, completed the refurbishment of our stone-built bus shelters and liaised with the DCC Neighbourhood Wardens to have notices put on lampposts following complaints from residents regarding the number of incidents of dog waste being left on pavements. At Ambleside Court, residents brought to our attention a parking problem which is now being dealt with by DCC. We monitor the condition of

our bus shelters by way of an informal monthly inspection and other highways matters are reported by Councillors or the public for action whenever they occur.

Horticulture

The Parish Council takes pride in keeping North Lodge an attractive place to live and work. Horticulture is a key function of this as we enhance the work done here by DCC. An unexpected situation arose when, just at the start of the pandemic, our Gardener/Environment Caretaker resigned. We thank him for all he had achieved with the Parish Council over many years, his work was important in working towards our aims. The timing of the resignation, however, has meant that we could not hold interviews for a replacement Gardener so we have now contracted with DCC to carry out all our horticultural work for the next twelve months. During the period of this report, we took back responsibility for a flower bed in Picktree Village, Councillor Margaret Caygill has helped Park View School pupils to plant our flower tubs in Lombard Drive and we have arranged for the clearance of leaves at the entrance to Lambton Park which is an area under our responsibility. We thank residents and Councillors who have also cleared leaves there from time to time. Councillors Maureen May, Patrick Driscoll and Jackie Gregory met a representative of the DCC Clean and Green team to survey the trees along North Road, following which a plan of action was agreed. As well as the long established Christmas Tree in North Road which carries lights each Christmas, for the last two Christmases we have provided a locally grown tree with lights in Picktree Village and this has been welcomed by residents. Councillor Margaret Caygill and the County Councillor are currently in communication with DCC regarding the amount of debris left following the thinning of woodland alongside the A693 road. Thanks go to Councillor Maureen May as Portfolio Holder with assistance from Councillor Patrick Driscoll for this busy section of our work.

Planning and Development

With three new housing developments being built in the Parish together with the usual planning applications made by residents, we are grateful to Councillor John Waugh for overseeing this Portfolio, having stepped in following the resignation of David Snaith. We have submitted comments to the DCC Planning Department on each of the three developments, at the former sites of BOC, Arizona Chemical and Pelaw Grange Cottage whilst Councillor Waugh and the County Councillor met the Planning Officer for the Arizona site at County Hall and expressed concerns regarding the development. We also submitted comments on several other planning applications and asked for the intervention of the DCC Planning Enforcement Officer on two matters. Councillor Waugh monitors all new planning applications in the Parish and advises these to all Councillors so that any

opinions or comments can be gathered quickly.

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. It was disappointing that a hoped for new play facility at the Arizona site development did not materialise despite our strong support for one. At Low Flatts, a replacement waste bin was installed, a dog waste sign was erected and a new seat installed, this being funded by the County Councillor from his Neighbourhood Budget. We gave support in principle to a DCC proposal to upgrade Merlin Drive play area. The pandemic has had a great effect on the play areas with both being closed to the public for several months. When they recently re-opened we obtained advice from DCC on matters such as cleaning of the equipment. Our thanks go to Councillor Caygill for overseeing this Portfolio during a difficult time.

Policy and Governance

Councillor Dennis Hall, as Portfolio Holder, has kept the Council informed on many matters affecting our sector of Local Government including a Transport Planning Society guide which was circulated to all Councillors, a Planning for the Future consultation and updates regarding legal proceedings concerning a return to face-to-face meetings. A template for Councillor reports to Council meetings was trialed, Councillor Hall and the County Councillor held a meeting with the DCC Deputy CEO regarding communication and liaison between the two Councils. Councillor Hall raised the most concerning and important matter of the high number of deaths from Covid-19 in care homes, asking the County Councillor to continue to raise this with DCC and to rigorously question DCC's policy on this. Councillor Hall stepped in as Acting Clerk during the Clerk's absence due to illness and the Council and Clerk thanks him and all Councillors who provided essential cover during this time. The Clerk thanks the Chairman and Vice-Chairman for ensuring that the Council's duty of care to the Clerk during his illness was carried out with consideration and sympathy. Policies introduced by the Council at the suggestion of Councillor Gregory were a Donations policy, a Co-option policy and a Management policy. The address of the Parish Council website was changed to <https://www.northlodgeparishcouncil.gov.uk/> and Parish Council email addresses were provided for each Councillor and the Clerk. The Council congratulated Councillor Hall on his Local Government Lawyers Lifetime Achievement Award.

Publicity

When Councillor Elsie Forrester stepped down as Chairman in May 2019 she

retained this Portfolio and continues to provide regular and important information from the Area Action Partnership 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. The Parish Council's annual Newsletter was again well received in 2019. However, due to Covid-19 enforced restrictions, it was not produced in 2020 but we expect that the 2021 edition will go ahead. The Newsletter, collated by Councillor Maureen May with our grateful thanks, is delivered by Councillors to each household in the Parish. The Parish Council thanks all who contribute to its production and distribution. The Newsletter can also be accessed via the Council's website.

Website

The website continues to be up-dated at regular intervals by the Clerk. Council Minutes, Agendas, dates of meetings, financial information and much more are contained on the site which has also included Covid-19 updates and information, as have the Council's noticeboards. Recently on the website, we offered our condolences to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II on the death of her beloved husband Prince Phillip, Duke of Edinburgh.

Meetings Attended

Throughout the two years, Councillors have represented the Council at many external meetings and workshops although many of these have by necessity been virtual ones. These include meetings of the CDALC Chester-le-Street and District Sub-Committee, CDALC Smaller Councils Forum, the DCC Area Action Partnership and training events for topics such as VAT and social media. At both the Remembrance Day Services, the Chairman 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 throughout the two years. This is a function that is of great importance in establishing and presenting the views of our residents.

The Council in the Community

Over the two years, we have received enquiries and concerns from residents on many matters including overgrowing trees and hedges, dog waste on pavements and in play areas, light pollution, planning matters, the possibility of using Low Flatts play field for football training, a request for goal posts on open space at Picktree Lodge and litter, debris and fly-tipping. We expect to deal with all such 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 and at Picktree Lodge estate (between numbers 28 and 30). Before the pandemic, when we were still holding face-to-face meetings, visitors to our meetings included the Head of Park View Lower School, the Acting Police, Crime and Victims Commissioner for Durham, and a member of the North Lodge Remembrance Group. We have consulted with residents on matters such as the Christmas Tree and lights in Picktree Village and the problem of leaves at the entrance to Lambton Park. We supported Park View School in its application to DCC for grant funding to refurbish the toilets at Lower School and we are currently seeking consultations with Sustrans regarding the re-painting of North Road bridge and a possible new or improved access point to the Cycleway at Low Flatts.

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. There is an election being held today and although all Parish Councillors have been returned unopposed, we wait to see who will win the election to be the County Councillor for North Lodge Ward. Whichever candidate is successful, the Parish Council will continue to seek a strong and positive relationship to provide the best service to our residents.

Acknowledgements

Despite the pandemic, this has been a busy two years and thanks are due to the Chairman (Councillor Jackie Gregory), Vice-Chairman (Councillor Dennis Hall) and 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 four seats available on the Parish Council for any residents interested in serving the 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

6th May 2021