

WHEATLEY HILL PARISH COUNCIL

Chairman's Report to the Annual Parish Meeting 2021

I would like to start by saying that I hope everyone living in the parish, and all your families have stayed safe and well through what has been a difficult and challenging 2020. Nobody could have anticipated Covid and the devastating effect it has had on communities.

Throughout the pandemic the Parish Council has continued to work to meet the needs of residents and respond to local issues. Due to Government restrictions during the pandemic the Parish Council were unable to meet physically and had to adapt quickly to meeting virtually via ZOOM. These virtual meetings have been successful and have allowed us to continue to work to support the community.

Over the last year the Parish Council has continued to work closely with the Police, Neighbourhood Wardens, Durham County Council, County Councillors, community groups and local organisations on matters which affect the parish area.

I would like to thank all Members of the Parish Council for their continued support during the previous year. Sadly, I would like to pay tribute to the late Councillor Ed Goyns who passed away in 2020. Councillor Goyns was a valued member of the Parish Council who gave many years of dedicated service. I would also like to welcome Councillor Jack Huntington to the Parish Council.

I would also like to thank the County Councillors for their support during the last year.

As restrictions are gradually lifted, please remember that we are approachable and ready to help. Let us all work together for the continued good of the community.

J Miller
Chair to Wheatley Hill Parish Council

Despite Covid the Council has had an active and productive year. The annual report gives a small indication of some of the Parish Council's activities over the past year.

1. Precept

The Council's budget for 2020/2021 was set at £127, 507.

The Parish Councils budget is financed by a Precept which is part of the Council Tax that is collected from local electors via their Council Tax payment. The Parish council is also reliant upon Central Government grant support. The grant called the Council Tax Support Scheme is paid direct to Durham County Council who then redistribute the grant to parishes. The County Council is under no obligation to do this and since its introduction the grant the Parish receives has been reduced each year. Wherever possible the Parish Council uses reserves to keep the precept as low as possible for residents.

For the financial year 2020/21 Wheatley Hill Parish Council received a Council Tax Support Scheme grant of £14,766.

The Parish Council required £127,507 for the 2020/2021 financial year. It used £4,489 of reserves to provide a precept of £108,252 which together with a grant of £14,766 gave a total of £127,507.

2. Finance

The Council remains in a healthy financial position. Due to Covid the planned expenditure for 2020/21 was not as expected. One of the main areas was the funding earmarked for activities to be provided by Wheatley Hill Community Association and delivered at the Greenhills Centre. Due to restrictions the Centre was forced to close for extended periods of time. The main areas of expenditure include the Cemetery, grounds maintenance and floral arrangements, Section 137 donations and allotments.

3. Cemetery

The Cemetery was heavily impacted by Covid and during 2020 measures had to be introduced to adhere to Government guidelines. Protocols had to be introduced by the Parish Council to ensure the safety of staff working in the Cemetery and residents visiting.

The Cemetery is home to the Heritage Centre which houses a permanent exhibition of an East Durham Colliery Home as well as many artefacts and photographs which have been donated. Due to Covid the Centre was closed for most of 2020. The Centre is staffed by a team of dedicated volunteers and will continue to thrive during 2021.

The Cemetery is home to the grave of miners' leader, Peter Lee which is the only listed monument in the East Durham area. Also located in the Cemetery is the Thomas Kenny VC memorial stone and "The Last Shift" a miner memorial sculpture by local artist Ray Lonsdale.

4. Allotments

The Council owns and manages 23 allotments and stable blocks at Quilstyle Road.

Due to the isolated location of the allotments fly tipping can be a problem and gates have been installed at the site to prevent this. The Council works closely with tenants, the Police and Neighbourhood Wardens to tackle any criminal activity at the site.

The Parish Council is investing in improving the site and during 2020 new fencing was erected to 3 plots. The programme of repairs and improvement will continue in 2021.

5. Planning

The Council is a statutory consultee on all planning applications submitted to Durham County Council. This allows the Parish Council the opportunity to comment, object or support any application submitted from within the village. During 2020/21 the Parish Council was consulted on 9 planning applications within the parish area.

In January 2021 the Parish Council was consulted on the refurbishment of the former health clinic on the Front Street into 5 individual self-contained flats.

The Parish Council initially expressed concern that the Front Street suffered high levels of anti-social behaviour and low-level petty crime. Many of the properties in the vicinity of the former clinic were empty or boarded up which demonstrated a lack of demand for residential accommodation at this location. There was also concern related to the management and future maintenance of the proposed flats.

It was subsequently brought to the attention of the Parish Council that once refurbished the flats would be offered to former homeless people and rough sleepers. Whilst the Parish Council had empathy for the homeless and sympathised with their situation it was felt that the Front Street was not a suitable location for such a facility. There was also concern related to the transparency of the application and the lack of public consultation. Many of the properties directly consulted were found to be empty at the time of the consultation.

The Parish Council objected to the application and asked that it be referred to the Area Planning Committee for Elected Members to consider.

The Chair of the Parish Council and County Councillor Hovvels attended the Planning Committee and spoke against approval of the application.

The Police had initially supported the Parish Council and objected to the application. They subsequently withdrew their objections and supported the application. Without the support of the Police the Planning Committee had no grounds on which to refuse the application which was approved.

6. Front Street

The Parish Council continues to work with the Police, Neighbourhood Wardens and Durham County Council to tackle problems on the Front Street and in the vicinity which includes anti-social behaviour, absentee landlords and empty and boarded up properties.

7. Anti-Social Behaviour

There has been an increase in the level of anti-social behaviour in Wheatley Hill. This has been an increase in youths setting fires on the grassed area to the rear of the Community Centre. The Parish Council is working closely with the Police to tackle the problem.

8. The Greenhills Centre

The Parish Council wants to provide activities and events for children and residents in the village. However, with no staff to deliver on a large scale it works in partnership with Wheatley Hill Community Association.

The Parish Council provides the funding for a wide range of activities and events which are delivered by the Greenhills Centre. During the 2019/2020 financial year the Parish Council funded a programme of activities costing £15,000. It was proposed to do the same during 2020/21.

However, due to Covid the Greenhills Centre was forced to close its doors and cancel its planned activities and events. Once the centre can fully re-open the Parish Council will be looking to fund a similar programme of activities during 2021/22.

9. Section 137 Donations

During 2020/21 the Parish Council provided grants and donations to local groups and charitable organisations. Due to Covid the number of requests received throughout the year was lower than previous years. All requests for assistance are made in writing to the Council. Listed below are the groups and organisations who received financial assistance during the 2020/21 financial year in line with the budgeted allocation.

Citizens Advice Bureau	100.00
Village Foodbank	51.78
Haswell and District Mencap	100.00
Great North Air Ambulance	100.00
2nd Wheatley Hill Scout Group	360.00
Durham Cathedral	50.00
Wheatley Hill Community Nursery	100.00
Wheatley Hill History Club	300.00
TOTAL	1,161.78

10. Dodds Close

During 2020/21 Wheatley Hill suffered on-going problems related to off-road and quad bikes damaging the grassed area at Dodds Close.

The Parish Council has been working closely with Durham County Council, Believe Housing and the Police to prevent further damage to this area. The only way to prevent unauthorised vehicular access to the grass is to fence the entire area.

Section 106 funding was available for use in Wheatley Hill and an application for £30,000 was made to Durham County Council to fence the area. Believe Housing had agreed to a financial contribution of £4,000 towards the project.

As the land is owned and managed by Durham County Council it was agreed that the County Council's Clean and Green section would submit the application and undertake the work. This includes the installation of 1 anti-motorcycle barrier and a boom gate for machine access to maintain the land.

The application for funding was successful and it is hoped that work to fence the area will commence in June 2021.

11. Community Defibrillator

In 2020 the Parish Council purchased 2 community defibrillators. A defibrillator is a life saving device that can help save the life of someone experiencing a sudden cardiac arrest.

An internal defibrillator is located at the Greenhills Centre and is available to residents when the Centre is open. An external defibrillator is installed in a locked cabinet on the outside wall of the Heritage Centre located in the Cemetery. This defibrillator is available 24 hours a day to anyone who needs it and can be accessed by ringing 999/112 for the code.

12. Pit Pony – A181 Roundabout

In 2020 an attempt was made to steal the pit pony located on the A181 roundabout. Due to the help from quick thinking residents the pony was recovered. The Parish Council is looking to have the pony refurbished and re-sited on the roundabout.

13. Dog Fouling

As in previous years the Parish Council provided free Poop bags to all residents living in Wheatley Hill. To combat dog fouling and encourage responsible dog ownership it is proposed that the provision of free bags, for residents living in Wheatley Hill, will continue for the foreseeable future. Dog bags are available from the Heritage Centre, Wheatley House and the Community Centre.

For further details please visit our website www.wheatleyhill.parish.durham.gov.uk

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