

Annual Report 2023-24; Wolsingham & Thornley Parish Council

1. This was the first full year of new Town Clerk, Sarah-Ann Baxter. There was much to learn, and many adjustments have been made as the year progressed. I, as Chair, have been happy to work with her, and we have made several changes of emphasis along the way.
2. Our new Clerk has directed substantial effort at improving maintenance and up-grading of all our facilities, and this has proved expensive. However, this investment will continue to benefit users of our facilities for years to come. Situations which may have been neglected or not recognised have been attended to.
3. Reviewing the minutes to write this report, one is struck by the persistent attempts to disrupt council processes by Cllr Jeff Bell, and repeated insults and allegations, mainly aimed at the Chair. This led to unanimous decisions by council on 10 May 2023 to refer Cllr Jeff Bell's persistent complaints to the Monitoring Officer. Much detailed evidence was requested, both from our Clerk and from Cllr J Bell and eventually a decision was received on 2nd April 2024. The detailed consideration runs to 15 pages (and is available on our website), but the conclusion was;
 1. "The Governance Lawyer has decided that local resolution is required in respect of this complaint. The Subject Member (Cllr Jeff Bell) should receive GDPR training and Code of Conduct training with a specific focus on the respect provision. The training should be delivered within 3 months of the date of this decision notice."
4. Sadly, despite that clear conclusion and recommendation, Cllr Jeff Bell continued with his hostile and disrespectful behaviour at the April meeting, and this has been referred to the Monitoring Officer for further guidance.
5. The Kiosk at St Anne's centre has proved successful, popular and effective, so the contract has been renewed, with improved provision and revised contract terms. It was well used through the summer months and much appreciated.
6. As councillors had been using their personal emails, which is not secure, in September we decided to create dedicated secure email addresses. An early offer to set up a server based system proved very expensive, so our Clerk created a system using Gmail which is controlled by the clerk and gives adequate data security, at no cost.
7. In September we were informed that the Steelworks building has been purchased, with a view to creating a community hub with café and office spaces. Whilst any development is welcomed, Wolsingham already has several under-used community halls, which may make the project difficult.
8. After several years of rather disappointing Christmas lights in the Market place, new Christmas lights were initiated, with a dedicated power supply and tree provided and run by DCC. This included seven new decals for the street-lights, and was mostly funded by Cllr Savory from her county council budget. A switch-on ceremony and fair was held at the Town Hall, which was well attended.
9. Progress towards new toilets at St Anne's play area has been slow. This provision was the most requested development in our consultation in 2019, with 42 people

requesting better toilets there. It was difficult to find suitable contractors, partly due to the covid disruption, and partly due to opposition to the planning process by Cllr Jeff Bell, but the work has now started. In an effort to reduce possible vandalism we have decided to charge for use, so secure doors will be installed. If this method of control proves effective, we shall probably make a similar arrangement at the Angate Street Toilets to reduce damage there in due course.

10. A Complaint by Gordon Dobson, about an error in the accounting process for Mazars, the external auditors, had been made to the council and to the Monitoring Officer. It is acknowledged that an error had been made in the process, but the accountants were satisfied and no further action was needed. The Monitoring Officer recommended further training on the process, which was undertaken, including an update in April 2024, as the process can differ from year to year.
11. Councillors Trish Willis & Owain Gardner raised their concerns about traffic, especially in Uppertown. They began gathering data and seeking public support for traffic limits, which would have to be made by Durham County Council. It was soon clear that this was not legally possible, but they asked for a public meeting to seek opinions. We arranged that meeting.
12. On 19 September 2023 a public meeting was held, to seek views on concerns about traffic in Uppertown. 120 people attended a meeting which allowed all opinions to be weighed, and the traffic needs of local businesses and farmers was considered to outweigh the inconvenience and noise caused by vehicles. A 20mph limit will be sought in Lydgate Lane, and the possibility of 40mph lead-in limits at each end of the village would be explored.
13. Cllr Trish Willis and Cllr Owain Gardner resigned in November.
14. Cllr David Jones also resigned from the council in November, due to health concerns, but would continue to assist us with his knowledge and experience.
15. Councillor Pam Dobson resigned in December 2023.
16. Council agreed to create a 'caretaker' for St Anne's Centre, rather than the existing 'cleaner' contract. This would give better oversight and control of the building and improve access for users. This has included also providing secure access to the building for regular users.
17. It has been clear for some time that the old 'parking meter' at St Anne's was no longer reliable, and could now not be repaired as it was over 20 years old. We had to seek some new system, and after investigating options, including ANPR systems, we find that the most cost effective was to buy new meters and manage the system ourselves. We also agreed to introduce charges for the Demesne Mill, as this is well used and needs surface repairs which will be expensive. This system came into effect on 1 May 2024, and includes an 'annual parking pass' for residents to use at both sites.
18. In January 2024, after prolonged confidential negotiations, the council, on the advice of our insurers, agreed to remove trees from the Allotments adjacent to Mr Pybourne's wall. Mr Pybourne can now repair his wall, and our insurers may make an appropriate contribution.
19. In February, following our proper formal procedure, we co-opted four new councillors to replace those who had resigned, J Bartram, A Hirst, S Bittlestone, H Yeulet, I look forward to working with them, and welcome the experience and knowledge which they bring.

20. Councillors have agreed the possibility of moving the Clerk's office to St Anne's. The advantage is that it is more accessible as it is on ground level. It also has adequate parking, and makes good use of an 'office' which was designed into the building. With the change to cheaper 'mobile' broadband and mobile phone, the office can be moved at will, probably in May.
21. Personally, I have been clear each year since I was 75 that it would be better if a younger person takes over the Chair of the Parish Council, but I have not found any willing taker. This will be the last year of this council, before elections in 2025. I will not be offering for election in 2025, so it would be good 'succession planning' if a new Chair could be in role through this year. I would be happy to give them my full support. In the absence of any such offer, this will be my last year as Chair.

David Sugden (Chair of Wolsingham & Thornley PC)