

Chairman's Annual Report 2019/2020

I write this report as the Parish, as with the rest of the Country, completes its sixth week of lockdown in response to the Covid-19 coronavirus. It is clear that we will have many more months ahead of us that are not normal.

The lockdown has affected residents in many different ways. Some have much more time on their hands, some are juggling childcare, teaching and new work-from-home arrangements, others continue to go to work in key services, or roles that require their presence. Whilst it is difficult for many, we can be grateful for our strong sense of community, access to open space, having amenities such as the pharmacy and Spar shop within reach, and local businesses adapting their models to provide doorstep deliveries and new services.

Whilst it is saddening to see the normal vibrant community activities in Escrick on hold, the community spirit is no less alive.

I know many people are informally providing support to neighbours, and additionally a call for volunteers to help with shopping, prescriptions, and errands has 79 people signed up to help, most of those signing up within hours of the request first being made. Although many have not had to be called upon, it is reassuring to know we have support in place – and indeed I have received messages from relatives of residents many miles away, expressing their gratitude that there is support in place for their elderly relatives in Escrick.

Parish Council activities have been impacted too. Normally, legislation requires that any Parish Council decisions are made at Council meetings, which must take place in person, with the public invited to attend. The law has now been changed to allow meetings to take place electronically, but this was too late for our April meeting which had to be cancelled. In the interim we have followed Government advice and regulations – for example closing the playground, and ensuring that our sub-contractors, such as grass-cutting, have safe working practices in place. We will review further at our meeting in May the impact on normal activities, and any additional roles the Council can play.

Parish Council

Prior to Covid-19, the Parish Council has had a busy year:

- Work has continued on our 'neighbourhood plan' (NDP). This initiative will create a statutory document setting out policies and guidance to be used by planning officers for development decisions in Escrick Parish. I am a strong believer that the Parish Council should act in the interests of residents collectively, and the NDP process has provided various surveys and public meetings that provide the evidence base to make such informed decisions. Inevitably, there are topics which are more tricky than others. In particular the role of the NDP in allocating sites for development of additional housing and business premises highlights where there are some quite different views held on how to proceed. Nonetheless, I firmly believe that the NDP process is helpful in giving the Parish Council an evidence base upon which to inform the decisions that it makes, and that completing the process and putting a plan to

local referendum for adoption, will strengthen our ability to influence planning decisions made by the District and County Councils.

- One initiative that we spun out of the NDP consultation, was a scheme to improve arrangements for pedestrians to cross the A19, and vehicles to exit Skipwith Road. This has been an area of long-running concern, and was overwhelmingly the most prominent topic raised in the initial NDP public consultation. It is not an easy problem to solve, as the road geometry and national standards ruled out all of what might seem like the obvious simple solutions. We worked with our County Councillor, Richard Musgrave, to get the highways team at North Yorkshire County Council to propose a solution to the stated problems, and in their view the only acceptable solution would be a full traffic light controlled junction between the A19/Skipwith Road. Something they had looked to implement themselves previously, before austerity budget cuts removed funding for enhancement schemes.

NYCC advised us that the scheme was both feasible and desirable, but that lack of capital funding meant they could not proceed without external funding for the implementation costs. They stated that they would be willing to adopt the scheme if we funded the implementation costs. As such last summer we consulted on whether the Parish Council should take out a loan to fund the scheme. We got consultation responses from just over half of households, with strong support both for the scheme itself, and for the PC taking out a loan to fund it.

Unfortunately since getting that mandate, progress has been painfully slow, and NYCC have moved the goal posts somewhat. They are now advising that they would not only want the implementation costs covered, but the full lifetime costs for ongoing maintenance and repair. This has pushed the costs and risks beyond what the PC can cover. However, in similar timelines, the national context changed. In particular the general election, and stated commitment to renewed investment in transport infrastructure, particularly in the North. As such we moved our focus onto getting the scheme onto the strategic agenda of the District and County Councils for national funding. Pre-Covid we were quite optimistic that this would be successful. Quite where we stand now in the context of the economic pressures that will follow the pandemic is impossible to guess. All I can do is assure you that the issue is well understood, and we will continue to use the evidence of local need and support to push for a solution.

- A significant part of Parish Councillor time continues to be devoted to planning matters in and around the Parish. There are major schemes proposed for both former mine sites; an application for the resumption of clay extraction to the north and west of the former brickworks quarry; an application for an extension of in-fill activities adjacent to the former tip site; in addition to numerous individual residential and business applications. I'm proud of the positive and professional approach the Council takes to these. Responses are structured in the manner that planning officers must apply to evaluations, referencing national and local policies, and wherever possible taking a positive 'these are the changes that are required to make the application acceptable' as opposed to simply saying 'no'.

- At a more tactical level, the Parish Council continues with day-to-day matters. We have concluded the programme of additional streetlighting initiated in 2016 to address some of the darkest spots in the village; we have put in place arrangements with a local contractor to allow us to easily call off additional pavement sweeping and minor maintenance; we have invested in a vehicle activated speed sign deployed on Skipwith Road; we have made adjustments to grass cutting and hedge cutting arrangements in response to feedback; and dealt with ad-hoc issues such as the no vehicles sign for the Carrs Meadow – Main St footpath.
- Following ongoing personal and health issues, our previous Clerk resigned in the summer. We had quite a number of candidates interested in the role, and have appointed Sally Look, a qualified Clerk who already manages North Duffield. Much of 2018 and 2019 was difficult for the Council, balancing its role as a responsible employer, with its responsibilities to local Council taxpayers. With Sally now in role, we're bouncing back to providing the level of service we aspire to.

Councillors

Cllr Michael Luscombe stood down during the year – Michael has made a huge contribution over the past 7 years, (since securing more votes than any other Councillor in the 2013 elections!). We thank him for his time, and sure we'll still work with him in his many other roles around the community.

We welcome Ian Reynolds back to the team, and welcome Nigel Bartle and Terry Chambers on board. We still have two Parish Councillor vacancies.

We are lucky to have a varied mix of Councillors:

- Councillors at various life-stages (with pre-school children, primary, secondary, and those that have left home);
- Councillors who drive HGVs, work in horticulture, through to retired management consultants;
- Councillors whose families have lived in the village for generations, through to those that moved in last year.

It might be easier to chair the meetings if Councillors were all friends with common opinions, but it is the mix of backgrounds and viewpoints that actually challenges us to think about and represent the community as a whole.

Remember your local Councillors all live in the Parish, and are your local voice, speaking up for local issues on your behalf. In a year where Brexit and social media have provoked heated debates, and created a lot of animosity towards elected officer holders, it is perhaps not surprising that in places some of that sentiment has spilled over into local politics. I'd encourage people to engage with their Councillors as local residents working on your behalf, as opposed to berating them for being part of the state system that you may have frustrations with.

Village

Outside of the Parish Council it is great to see the contributions from the various other groups around the Parish. At the risk of overlooking some, I'd like to particularly mention:

- The Escrick Heritage project for the ongoing work to open-up Escrick's history, along with improvements to the Church;
- The weekly tea-shop to provide valuable social time for many residents;
- The Village Green Association for hosting Dinner of the Green, supporting the 10k, Christmas tree lighting and ongoing maintenance of the green;
- The Playing Fields Association for the ongoing safety checks, maintenance and fund raising for the playground;
- The Escrick 10k, as the Parish's single largest fund raising event, which returned in 2019 supported by St Teresa's Athletics club;
- The Village Hall and the Club continuing to be vibrant hubs for the community;
- The Yorkshire Countrywomen's Association for activities including organising the now annual scarecrow festival;
- The Tennis Club - which has stepped up a gear with regular coaching sessions, and increase in activities for younger members.

Thanks is also due to the various other groups and those that undertake various ad hoc roles, be it planting flowers in front of the village signs, mowing the grass around the fountain, or simply maintaining the verge outside their house (and apologies for any groups that I have failed to mention).

The Year Ahead

It is harder than usual to plan for the year ahead – there will be new challenges and priorities that we have not yet foreseen. Now is a time to be agile, and apply our focus as needs dictate.

I am aware of the struggles that some of the voluntary groups in the village are already having, with their normal sources of income cut-off. It is a personal priority that we ensure that we ensure our local groups and amenities are still here for the community beyond the pandemic.

In many areas it may be business as usual – planning applications still need reviewing; work on many aspects of the NDP can continue, providing we can find effective means for public input and consultation in the absence of public meetings.

Thank you for the many people that have provided support through the year, and the continued opportunity to serve to local community,

Cllr Richard Rowson
 Chair, Escrick Parish Council
 May 2020