

Escrick Parish Council - Chairman's report 2021-2022

This is my final report as Chairman and Parish Councillor, having been a Parish Councillor since 2015 and Chairman since 2016.

The past 12 months has been another unconventional period, as Covid has continued to affect our lives. It has been nice to see the gradual resumption of most community activities.

Key topics locally this year have included:

- The Selby District Local Plan and associated proposals for a new settlement of 'Heronby' to be built in the west of the Parish. The Parish Council held an extraordinary meeting to hear views from residents, and submitted an extensive consultation response to Selby District Council. We expect to hear in the summer if Selby District Council have selected this as a preferred site.
- More locally, work on the Parish's Neighbourhood Development Plan has concluded, and the final draft has been submitted to Selby District Council. Since its inception in 2018, this extensive project has held several rounds of consultation with the community and other bodies, and engaged professional planning consultants to produce an evidence base, policies and plan. This will be submitted to public referendum later in the year, and if supported will become a statutory guide to the Planning Authority when considering planning applications in the Parish. I must acknowledge Cllr Rees' resilience at persevering with the NDP, an initiative which is both very regulated in approach, and often brings out diverse and sometimes heated opinions from contributors.
- As part of the NDP consultations, many residents expressed the desire for a new village shop to be established to replace the general store and post office that closed in 2014. Cllr Hawes has been exploring how best this can be facilitated and is close to having a tangible and feasible proposal. In parallel Cllr Rees has liaised with the Post Office to trial a mobile post office presence in the village, which we expect to start in the summer.
- The Parish Council has co-funded, with City of York Council, the installation of bus shelters for both bus stops on the A19, and for improvements to street lighting on the route to the bus stops.
- The Escrick 10k raised around £3000 for the playing fields, and around £1000 for the Village Green, despite a reduced capacity due to Covid restrictions. As much of the playground equipment is now reaching end of life, this will provide a valuable contribution towards replacement equipment. The Village Green invested in additional lighting for the ever-growing Christmas tree.
- It is nice to see that for the first time in many years the playing fields are now being regularly used on alternate Saturdays for under 9s football training, justifying committing more effort to improving and maintaining the pitch, despite the attempts of moles and rabbits to do otherwise!

I am grateful for the work of the many other community groups, such as the Village Hall, Escrick & Deighton Club, Tennis Club, Church, Escrick Heritage, Tea shop, Playgroup, Yorkshire Countrywomen, Young Farmers, Escrick 10k, newly formed Jubilee Gardens group and many others. Many are supported directly or indirectly by the generosity of the Escrick Park Estate.

Several Councillors have stepped down this year, including Nigel Bartle, Lilian Coulson, and John Reader. All have been very active contributors to the Council, and I am very grateful for their

contributions. I'm equally grateful for the five Councillors who have chosen to continue to serve. We now have more vacancies (six) than Councillors (five), which puts a lot of work on those that remain.

Major changes are happening to Local Government this year, with District Councils being abolished, and a new North Yorkshire unitary authority taking over services throughout North Yorkshire. We bid farewell to Richard Musgrave who has been our County Councillor for the past five years, and will bid farewell next April to Neil Reader as our District Councillor. Both have been closely involved with local issues and regular attendees of our Parish Council meetings.

At a time of such change, and with six vacancies on the Parish Council, I would strongly encourage others to consider standing as a Parish Councillor. As an indication of the sort of impact that you could help bring about if you stepped up to the role, I would like to reflect on some of the initiatives that the Parish Council has led or supported in recent years:

- In 2015 Cllr Goode led the work to obtain grant funding, buy and install the village defibrillator, providing a potential lifesaving amenity to residents.
- In 2016 a survey of residents by the Parish Council highlighted concerns about poor streetlighting and led the Council to install an additional 6 lighting columns in the village, and one at the business park bus stop.
- In 2017 the Parish Council purchased three grit bins for the village, and committed to filling these each winter.
- In 2018, in response to resident feedback, a dog waste bin was installed on the footpath alongside the beck at Skipwith Road, and later bins were relocated on the village green.
- In 2019, a vehicle activated speed sign was purchased and installed for Skipwith Road, along with data logger to capture evidence of speeding issues on the road. The evidence gathered justified the installation of a 'village gateway' in 2022.
- In 2020 Cllr Chambers led the work to persuade Arriva to move the bus stops to the dedicated laybys, and co-fund the installation of bus-shelters with City of York Council.
- In 2022 dropped kerb crossings were installed at the Parish Council's request to ease movement for wheelchair users and those with pushchairs.

In isolation each is a relatively small initiative, but cumulatively they all contribute to the services and amenities of the Parish. Additionally, there are a number of long-running themes:

- Highways and road safety: The Parish Council does not have powers to change speed limits, ban motorbikes nor implement physical changes such as speed humps. However, the Parish Council does make sure that the Highways Authority is aware of local concerns.
- Planning: The Parish Council is not responsible for determining planning applications, but is a statutory consultee responsible for providing the Planning Authority with local context on applications. It is an area where there are very different views in the community (and the Council!). The Council's 'planning working group' typically reviews and provides input on 10 – 20 planning applications and other consultations each year.
- Amenities: The Parish Council oversees the village green and playing field leases; procuring insurance, and ensuring requirements such as health and safety checks are undertaken; tendering for activities such as grass cutting and ad hoc maintenance.

I recognise that in many areas more can be done and the Council needs to evolve with changing expectations of the community. As a community we are not short of ideas, but a key challenge in recent years has been a decline in volunteers for the various community groups and initiatives. In parallel questions are asked such as why Escrick relies upon volunteers and fund-raising events for

things such as its playground or tennis courts, when Councils elsewhere would fund such facilities through Council tax. It may be that we now have a demographic that has less time for volunteering, but greater tolerance for increased taxes and more provision by the Council.

The imminent changes to the Local Government structure may result in more responsibilities being delegated to Parish Councils, with proposals to transfer some of the responsibilities of the former District Councils, such as street cleaning, to Parish Councils.

These, and many others, will be issues that future Councillors will need to consider whilst steering the Council through its next chapter of evolution.

I recognise that Parish Council is a quirky organisation, with strange ways of doing things. Decades of Local Government legislation create requirements quite unfamiliar to those used to working in commercial businesses. Nonetheless, I would encourage all residents to support those Councillors that remain, and to get involved too. Take the time to understand what a Parish Council can, and cannot do; what it is responsible for (and what is the responsibility of other authorities); and understand the constraints that as local government body it must operate within. Parish Councillors are all local residents, unpaid, and have legal responsibilities to act in certain ways. Whilst it is right, and important, they are held accountable, this should be to the community as a whole, not just a vocal minority. It should be done in an appropriate manner that doesn't cross the line into harassment. All the time spent dealing with relentless issues raised by a few, is time that isn't spent on providing better services and amenities to the majority.

I would like to thank everyone that has supported me, and the Council, during my tenure as a Councillor, and wish the best of luck to those taking over at this point. There's lots more that I would have liked to have done, and hopefully at least some of that will be taken forward by the new Council, along with some new fresh ideas.

Richard Rowson