

Hedley Parish Council – Chairs’ report 2019-2021

I have had to go back through pages of notes, minutes, and reports to be in a position to write this and present my first report as Chair to my fellow parish councillors and to the villagers we represent. It has been a long time since we had a meeting, never mind an AGM and although that has been a time none of us would hope to repeat, it did bring a much clearer sense of community and an acknowledgement that we are exceptionally lucky to live where we do.

The fact that there are 3 new PC members here today is partly due to this rekindling of village spirit and partly due to the better understanding of what a PC does: that we offer our time freely and willingly for the good of the village and the people who live here, looking after the environment and safeguarding it for now and the future. The PC has been a force for community good during the 2 lockdowns we have had, from organising shopping deliveries, prescription runs, coordinating a list of willing helpers and very many small acts of kindness that made such a difference to the lives of people in Hedley. Our sincere thanks go to Dick Penny, Doug Rodgerson and Susan Celino, who as PC members for almost 60 years between them, spent many an hour in the service of Hedley village and gave their time, considerable expertise, and good spirit willingly. The village is a better place because of them! I should also like to thank our excellent clerk, Monica Anderton, who throughout the whole lockdown period was always at the end of a phone or email to provide advice, action requests and generally mop up everything that needed to be done, whilst we could not meet. She and I have had many varied exchanges over everything from drains to hedges and from Japanese knotweed to mossy paths and it is entirely fair to say that she has never failed to offer good counsel and wise words for the last 2 years that I have been chair – it would simply have been impossible to have continued village business without her.

Looking back through the last two years’ worth of paper, I note several issues that have seemed to dominate our time and energy:

- The hedge, at the Prudhoe Road junction, which was causing many villagers problems from as far back as 2018, was finally cut back to the boundary by NCC in early April, just 3 years late! This was a constant safety concern and took a significant amount of time from PC, NCC and residents to resolve it. It was made particularly difficult by the householder’s failure to engage at all. As a PC we can only hope that this has made NCC appreciate that we are ‘on the ground’ dealing with residents’ concerns, for the good of everyone, and that swifter intervention by our ‘next level up’ would be greatly appreciated.
- The proposed development of Hedley East Farm is another long-term project which seems to have stalled and re-started several times. A further failure to engage – this time from the land agent ‘handling’ the development – has made this a time-consuming and frustrating process. The PC and village are behind the initially proposed development of the agricultural buildings, allowing the farmer to move his herd and operations out of the centre of the village, but have not been able to secure a usable piece of land for the village in exchange for the part of the village green needed to access this new development. Indeed, it is possible that the initial planning permission may have lapsed in the time it has taken the land agent to formulate many plans – the latest of which is to acquire the whole village green and build a new ‘estate’! As a village, we have very little communal space and would not wish to lose any of it. Councillor Douglas and I have determined the dimensions of a piece of land that would provide sufficient space for village events and access etc from the road at the west end of the village. We will await the response but hope – as each year

comes and goes – that there may be some progress on this soon. Our county councillor has committed to spend some money on Hedley, which we want to take advantage of as soon as possible.

- The offer of strategic planning, to write a village long-term plan, by NCC is something we should probably consider seriously now we are back to meetings. To be able to have goals to work towards means that we can apply for funding streams, consider loans, and decide how we can move the village on. Bearing in mind, we have no amenities in Hedley, it would be ideal to take up the suggestions our Village Action Group recommended to us, some years ago – to have a play area and a village hall seem small fry to other areas of the country, but here, where we do not even have decent broadband, or mobile signal, these 2 acquisitions could potentially be massively important to us as a community. It is certainly worth exploring.
- As a PC, we spend most of our income on keeping the village looking good and, as such, we have taken on a new gardener/contractor to cut the grass, maintain the verges and weed kill where appropriate. After 2 cuts, the feedback has been very positive, and we are grateful to Simon and Matthew, for taking us on and who are doing sterling work so far!
- The creation of a village WhatsApp group has had many benefits, with it proving to be useful as a way of finding tradesmen, asking for and receiving help, sharing photos and events. It may be well-worth considering the creation of a Facebook page to further reach villagers and beyond, and further reduce isolation/exclusion by keeping everyone informed.
- Harnessing the momentum of the 'lockdown spirit' seems appropriate. The village has benefited significantly from, to choose a few, the VE day celebrations of May '20, the pumpkin trail last Hallowe'en and the village tidy up at the end of Feb '21. It would be amazing to see this continue and if we could secure some village land, hold events for everyone to enjoy. Cllr Rodgeron has assured me that he is keen to contribute further to village life by organising more environment-enhancing events, keeping an eye on maintenance etc. and likewise, Cllr Penny has agreed to become long-term custodian for the defibrillator outside the pub, which is also hugely helpful.
- It is also entirely correct to recognise and offer our thanks to the Feathers Inn family, who have embodied 'community spirit' over the last year, providing provisions, takeaways, a Saturday morning bakery, and a place for us to gather when restrictions were eased. Their kindness and generosity made a real difference to Hedley and the bouquet of flowers we send them last July, on behalf of the village, was a small token of the special place they hold in Hedley. They also provide us with a meeting place, as the only building that is accessible to the public for us to meet legally, and so without them, we would struggle as a PC too!

So, with new members to welcome, and a renewed interest in village life thanks to Covid restrictions, I feel very positive about the future for Hedley. We are a unique community, living in a place we all love and feel proud to belong to. I, for one, feel privileged to serve my community as a parish councillor and hope that the year to come offers us many opportunities for making life even better for the parishioners of Hedley on the Hill.

Thea Watkins,

May 2021

