



## **Skelsmergh and Scalthwaiterigg Parish Council**

### **Chairman's Annual report 2020-2021**

Although the Council endeavoured to maintain 'business as usual' throughout the trials and tribulations of the last year everything was overshadowed by outside forces. The first lockdown announced on 16th March, two days prior to our scheduled meeting, resulted in a decision by a quorum of three councillors to delegate functions to the clerk and to defer all other business in response to the emergency. Guidance on procedure was subsequently issued by national bodies which enabled us to reconvene in May on Zoom (with the expert support of Cllrs Moisl and Seddon-Roberts) and we were able to resume business virtually and remotely, but it was a strange experience at first to be chairing a meeting in a corner of one's own home.

Nevertheless, we all soon got the hang of things and the procedural aspects of all our subsequent Zoom meetings went smoothly. It was even possible to welcome a member of the public to one meeting!

At our first formal meeting of the year a vacancy had to be announced upon the resignation of Cllr Claire Maclaine who served the council so well during her terms of office. So far, her replacement has not come forward, despite our best efforts.

Thanks to Karen Little, a short resume of council business is published in the Church and Community News and on the website in an effort to keep residents informed but, inevitably, the last year has limited opportunities for personal contact. It is to be hoped that community activities will resume soon.

Only one litter-sweep took place but was well-supported, though a remarkably low number of bags were collected by the volunteers. In the Parish Woodland a number of days work were achieved by the limited permitted numbers and provided some welcome outdoor activity. Hazel coppicing resulted in a fine stack of hedge stakes, bean poles and pea-sticks, all of which found buyers and the cull of Ash in response to Ash die-back was continued and resulted in another load of firewood which was also sold.

During the litter-sweep it was noted that the parish highway sign at Watchgate had been demolished. Local inquiries revealed that a driver had lost control in the early hours in October 2020. Due to Data Protection, we are unable to trace the person concerned and therefore unable to pursue a claim for the damage to reimburse the council for its replacement. Insurance will only pay the balance over the excess meaning the careless motorist will get off scot-free.

A new notice board was commissioned from a local craftsman and installed at the Community Hall. Welcome packs were distributed to new households. It was reported that the final roll-out of B4RN in Garth Row is imminent, if not already complete. The stand-by generator grant-aided by the council will provide back-up in the event of power failures. Dan Robinson, to whom so much is owed in this massive venture, remains on hand to operate in emergencies.

Otherwise, the council devoted its time to issues and representations. It supported the efforts of Oakbank residents to seek abatement of industrial noise at unsocial hours from Croppers of Burneside. A forum representing both sides now meets periodically to assess progress, investment to address the acknowledged issues is taking place and the noise has been reduced. Reports of further progress are expected.

The perennial problem of highway maintenance and drainage continues to vex residents and councillors alike. Issues continue to be reported but with mixed results. One suspects that it is the same in every parish in the scramble for limited resources. The best we can say is that we do what we can when we can – and try not to be too disheartened. We are grateful to Cllr Stan Collins for his support in our dealings with Cumbria Highways.

Progress towards a revised Community Plan has stalled during the pandemic but the off-road link to Kiln Croft remains on the agenda. Following representations to the County Council Area Committee in 2019 which, sadly, failed to elicit a commitment, a new Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan has been initiated. A case for 'Kiln Croft' was put forward and strongly supported at District Council level by Hazel Hodgson. The case in favour remains a central theme of community planning in the parish and will continue to be stressed whenever opportunities arise.

At very short notice the council was consulted on the proposals for Local Government re-organisation to create unitary authorities. It was not possible to convene a meeting to discuss the matter but informal soundings disclosed an even balance of opinion between a unitary Cumbria and a Morecambe Bay authority combining SLDC, Barrow and Lancaster based geographically on the Health Trust area. As Chair, I felt that individuals were best left to make their own views known, should they so wish. Whatever is chosen will not disturb the lowest tier of local government at parish level, though the politics of competition for resources no doubt will create a challenge for the future.

That competition has been generously supported by our local district councillors, Pat Bell, Hazel Hodgson and Anne Hutton (though Anne had to retire). We are grateful for their interest in the parish and their wise counsel. Stan Collins is to stand down from the County Council at the coming election and I pay tribute here to his long-standing association with the parish, his regular attendance at our meetings and his advocacy of local issues at county level. It is to be hoped that his successor will be as attentive.

In conclusion, I should like to thank Lynda Barron for her ongoing support with the internal audit process and my fellow councillors, Hermann, Angela, Freyja and Danny for their continuing interest in representing local people and their concerns and for their support of me, as Chair. On behalf of all I especially thank Karen Little for her dedication to the role of

Clerk, without whom we would be unable to function. Although we are not yet in a position to say when open public meetings will be able to resume it is to be hoped that that day is not far off and that we can devise some positive community activity.

*John Chapman*

Parish Council Chairman 2020-2021

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