

MINUTES OF MEETING OF CRASTER PARISH COUNCIL
Thursday 21st October 2021 – 6.00pm in the Hall

Councillors present:

Chair: Margaret Brooks

Parish Council members: Steven Bagley, Michael Craster, Michael Doherty, Alan Gregory and Elizabeth Pearson.

In attendance: 11 members of the public, County Councillors Wendy Pattison and John Riddle, Paul Jones (Director of Local Services, NCC) and Philip Bradley (Footpaths Officer, NCC)

Clerk: Adam Shanley

1. Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Cllrs Martin Smith and Mark Green.

2. Declarations of interest

None received.

3. Confirmation of the minutes for the meeting held on 16th September 2021

The minutes of the meeting held on 16th September 2021 were unanimously agreed as a true and accurate record of proceedings, subject to the amendment that the sentence "*At this point, Cllrs M Brooks and M Craster left the meeting*" be moved from item 10 to item 12 of the minutes.

4. Public participation

Marjory Taylor asked for an update on the proposed bike racks, discussed at a previous Parish Council meeting. The Clerk advised that the Parish Council has **agreed** that the funding from the donation boxes should go towards the funding of the racks as opposed to this being funded through the Parish Council precept. At present, the Council is awaiting sufficient funds being raised in order to purchase these racks. The Clerk reminded Members that the agreed location for the racks was the Tourist Information Centre.

Marjory Taylor also asked why Footpath 19 was not included in the Craster trail map in the quarry car park. The Chair advised that this has clearly been an oversight in spite of many hours spent producing the map. Cllr M Craster proposed a vote of thanks to the Chair for the many hours of work she spent on the map and this was **agreed** by the meeting. Cllr M Craster also suggested that members of the public submit any amendments they'd like to see to a future version of the map to the Parish Clerk.

Fyona Robson asked the Parish Council to contact NCC requesting that they look into the very deep gullies on the road between the Hockett and the cross roads at Craster Tower. Fyona advised that sections of the road are very dangerous. The Clerk advised that he would contact NCC about this and Cllr E Pearson advised that her husband has also already contacted NCC about this.

Michael Robson asked if the Parish Council and the County Council would condone a business operating out of the quarry car park, utilising a space in the car park to do so, employing 10 people and providing no car parking for staff. Michael advised that this was currently happening in Craster. Mr Paul Jones advised that there would need to be a change of use application submitted through the planning process for use of the land for business purposes.

5. Discussion with NCC Cabinet Member for Local Services Cllr John Riddle on Northumberland-wide and Craster parish priorities

The Chair welcomed County Councillor and NCC Cabinet Member John Riddle to the meeting and the following questions were put to Cllr Riddle with the following replies:

We understand that the upgrading of public toilets at key tourist areas in Northumberland is a top priority for the Administration. Our Councillor Wendy Pattison has been pushing for Craster's toilets to be upgraded which they are desperately in need of. Can you make these toilets a priority for NCC please?

***Response:** NCC has allocated £1m in its MTFP capital budget to undertake a programme of improvement and maintenance works at its network of 54 public toilets across the county. This programme has two strands – the first being those key town centre and also main visitor toilet facilities which will undergo refurbishment works to improve the overall standard and appearance of the facility in addition to addressing any backlog maintenance requirements; the second being a backlog maintenance programme whereby all outstanding maintenance issues associated with each facility as identified from survey works will be addressed so that all facilities are brought up to an acceptable baseline standard. The public toilet facility at Craster is identified as one of the key tourism facilities and will therefore benefit from additional investment over and above any backlog maintenance issues.*

NCC Estates are working with the Neighbourhood Services team to agree specifications and scope of works on a site by site basis, the sites will then be prioritised and where possible works divided into lots so that local contractors are able to tender for the work, which will help support local businesses and deliver VFM to NCC. This is a major programme of activity that will span both 2021/22 and 2022/23 and requires significant upfront programme planning – which is the phase we are still in at the moment. That being said we are aiming to start physical works at some facilities this autumn/winter and will be working with NCC Estates in the coming weeks to agree which site will be included in this first phase of the programme. As part of the programming consideration will be given to the need to avoid key sites being unavailable during the busiest visitor periods – wherever possible/practical to do so. Your request for Craster to be prioritised in the programme is noted.

How effective have the restrictive covenants on former Craster Council houses been in providing affordable housing in Craster? If they are not providing affordable accommodation for permanent residents, why are they being retained?

***Response:** Assuming the query is about section 157 covenants, it is very difficult to say for sure how effective the covenants have been in terms of providing affordable housing, for the following reasons:*

- The purpose of a section 157 covenant is not specifically to provide affordable housing; it's to restrict the potential purchasers of a property so that only someone who has lived or worked in Northumberland for at least three years can purchase it (unless the Council agrees otherwise, which generally only happens in exceptional circumstances).*
- So long as a purchaser meets the criteria of living/working in Northumberland for three years, they can pay whatever they like for the property. The covenant doesn't restrict the sale price, nor does it give people on lower incomes priority for these properties. For example, a multi-millionaire who happens to live/work in Northumberland would still be able to buy a property subject to a section 157 covenant, so it's not a true "affordable home" in that sense. The covenant simply prevents people who have no connection to Northumberland buying these properties (unless the Council consents).*

- *It is likely that the presence of a section 157 covenant could reduce the value of a property, because it restricts the market and pool of potential purchasers. It would require expert valuation advice in each case to say exactly how much the covenant affects the value of each particular property. Perhaps for some properties, the market value is sufficiently reduced to make the property truly "affordable" but it's hard to say without having consulted a surveyor/valuer.*
- *Since these properties were all sold at different times and many by Northumberland County Council's predecessor councils, not all properties have a title restriction. For more recent sales, we do try to include title restrictions but for older properties this wasn't always the case. Consequently, there are some former Council homes that have section 157 covenants but no restriction on the title, which means that technically the owner can sell in breach of covenant and we might never know about it. By definition, we have no way of knowing how many times the covenants might have been breached without our knowledge.*
- *Even in those cases where we were made aware of the sale, we won't necessarily have details of what the property was sold for, because that's not relevant to a section 157 covenant. All we do is check that the purchaser has lived/worked in Northumberland for at least three years and, if they have, we have to consent to the sale (regardless of the sale price).*
- *In response to the second part of the question (why the covenants are being retained), ultimately, it's a political decision whether or not the Council wants to enforce these covenants. They are not an ideal way of ensuring affordable housing, but they are better than nothing, and for properties that have already been sold they are all that we have. If the Council decided not to enforce these covenants at all, it would mean that anyone could buy these properties and we would have no control over who the purchasers were. As things currently stand, the Council can at least ensure that those who have a connection to Northumberland have priority for these properties and the covenants may have an impact on value, which could help to some extent in keeping prices down (albeit that this is difficult to quantify).*
- *In addition to the section 157 covenants, most former Council houses are also subject to a covenant preventing use for any purpose "other than that of a private dwellinghouse". We have successfully argued in the past that this covenant prevents holiday lettings, but unfortunately it does not prevent the property from being used as a second home or holiday home for the owners themselves (so long as they do not let it out for other people to holiday in). Recently, there has been a couple of cases involving properties in Craster where the Council took action to enforce compliance with this covenant. In one of the cases, the owner wasn't actually using the property for holiday lettings, only as a second home, but in the other case the owners were using the property as a holiday let and they agreed to cease that use. The difficulty is that the Council isn't always aware of breaches of the covenant. Generally speaking, we can only act if someone brings a breach to our attention. There may have been cases where properties were used as holiday lets in breach of covenant and we were not aware of this and so we were unable to take any action.*

Do you share this Parish Council's concerns over the growing numbers of holiday lets in Northumberland and will you lobby Government to do something about this? Such as changing the Use Class of holiday lets so that they require a change of use planning application from a C3 household dwelling.

Response: *We are setting out to Cabinet the issue of rural housing & second homes holiday lets in a full position paper next week and this document will be published in due course. This will enable a gap analysis – ie it will identify what we cannot tackle via planning policy, decisions*

on applications, S106, neighbourhood plans etc etc – and that gap will need to be filled by direct intervention.

From planning policy – the new local plan (eta Jan) allows for restrictions in areas where the evidence justifies it. The Government Inspector looks like agreeing to our ask – that in parishes that have 20% or more non-primary residence use of houses (holiday lets or second homes) that any NEW homes will be restricted to primary residence only. The 2021 census results will be timely

When we sell houses, sell "council houses", deliver affordable housing from s106 etc we can attach more rigorous title-deed restrictions on primary residence only. At the moment we have experienced problems enforcing some the historic restrictions put in place (as these were to cover asset value claw back etc as well) but will be taking legal advice to improve the enforceability of the covenants going forward.

There is a serious issue along the U3014 road in Dunstan in that the road allows for water to gather and this is now freezing in the cold weather and proving extremely treacherous for local residents, not helped by the steep typography of the road. The Parish Council has been pushing for over a year now with NCC Highways (Alistair Miller) but this issue is still not yet resolved. Would you be able to support us with this?

Response: *Some improvements to this issue have already been made recently as a result of our FCERM team advising one of the private landowners of their obligations to address drainage issues on their land. The landowner has responded positively to this and water is no longer discharging from their property onto the highway. The remaining issue to address is surface water flowing down the private access road onto the highway, due to the existing ACO interceptor drain either being blocked or overwhelmed. In the first instance the highways team will arrange for the ACO drain to be cleansed, whilst also looking to see what scope there is to improve the highway drainage system at this location.*

Cllr S Bagley advised that he lives on the private road and advised that the present situation is that water comes down from as far as Proctor's Stead, the water runs down the West side of the U3014 road and the channel drain becomes overwhelmed with no alternative drainage for the water to go down. Cllr S Bagley advised that, if the Highways team is having to come and reprofile the road, this would be a good opportunity to resolve this issue once and for all and connect the drain into the main drainage system. Cllr S Bagley asked if this could be possible. Mr Paul Jones advised that he would be happy to ask the team to investigate this further. Cllr S Bagley advised that he understood that the works were scheduled to take place before the Winter.

Cllr S Bagley also advised that the residents of this road had received a rather stern letter from Mr Miller advising them what actions to undertake. Cllr S Bagley advised that he felt that the residents had followed through on these actions but there has been no action taken by NCC on this issue.

Ms Jackie Reeves advised that this issue has been going on since 2019 and she had personally reported this to the Council at that stage, with no action having been taken from Highways on this issue. Ms Jackie Reeves advised that NCC resurfacing this road had led to the issue in the first instance and the drainage needs to be addressed.

How serious is ash dieback in Northumberland and what actions are NCC taking to resolve this please?

Response: *The Woodland Trust estimate that we are going to lose around 80% of our ash trees in the UK, though some trees appear to be tolerant of the disease meaning the population will hopefully recover over time it is likely over the next 50 years that huge amounts of trees will fail and require attending to.*

It is difficult to quantify how many ash trees there are in Northumberland due to our geographical size and the volume of trees in the county but the Council's tree and woodland team are undertaking routine inspections of trees around play areas and other high-risk locations and are working up proposals to expand this inspection program. Highways Inspectors also look for signs of tree disease as part of their routine Highway Inspections.

Many ash trees are very large and depending on when they fail, they will present a high risk of injury to people and damage to property, ash dieback is a growing problem for us but currently we are still able to respond to the volume of reports and enquiries we are receiving and if urgent work is required, we are able to complete that work within our target of 7 days.

The Council's Tree and Woodland Strategy is currently being reviewed and will address how the Council aims to respond to this growing challenge in the coming years.

We would ask members of the public to report any safety concerns they have about specific trees through the Council's contact centre.

6. Report by County Councillor Wendy Pattison

Councillor Wendy Pattison presented her written monthly report to the Parish Council. In addition to this, Councillor Pattison advised that next year is the Queen's Jubilee and NCC may be able to provide funding for some celebrations to take place across the county.

7. Consideration of draft letter to NCC Highways team on Experimental TRO in Craster

The Parish Council agreed the following letter to NCC Highways on the Experimental TRO in Craster:

Dear Mr McCartney,

RE: Craster Experimental Traffic Order

I trust this letter finds you well.

As you are aware, Craster Parish Council recently commissioned the services of an external consultant in order to review the Experimental Traffic Order which NCC installed to Craster village earlier this year. I attach a copy of this report for your information.

The Parish Council has had the time to consider this report and would make the following observations:

- The road layout to the entrance of the village does appear to have some impact in terms of encouraging vehicles into the quarry car park. There is still some abuse of this system but it is clear that no Traffic Regulation Order can avoid this.
- It is clearly the responsibility of the Police to enforce this Order but we now know that the Police were not asked for comment on the Scheme before it was introduced. A spokesperson for the Police subsequently declared the Order "unenforceable".
- The legality of the signage is not something that the consultant was able to comment on. The Parish Council is disappointed that these signs confirm that enforcement is in operation when villagers are aware that minimal enforcement is in fact taking place.

- There is a clear issue at Dunstanburgh Road with cars going down this stretch of road seeking a parking space. Our consultant is clear that this could be combatted by either a “no through road” sign or the introduction of an RPZ to Dunstanburgh Road.
- An RPZ would complement the scheme and would also allow for more enforcement to take place. This is dependent upon Police resources. If sub zones were to be considered, the Parish Council strongly suggests that Dunstanburgh Road and Heugh Road are considered as top priorities.
- The size of the signage at figure 2 of our consultant’s report should be increased.
- The Parish Council would ask that the County Council considered either the introduction of a box junction near the entrance to the quarry car park or else the introduction of a keep clear sign, in the interests of highways safety.
- The Parish Council would ask that a raised table be introduced to the entrance to the quarry car park to allow for safer pedestrian movements into and out of the car park. You will also note that the Parish Council has listed pedestrian safety measures to the car park in its Local Transport Plan (LTP) submission this year.
- Even if all the above suggestions were included in a revised Scheme, it would only be supported by the Parish Council if it is seen to be effectively enforced.

As you are aware, the introduction of this Order has been highly contentious in our community and we must stress to you our real concerns at the way in which this scheme was introduced. Our community was led to expect the introduction of a residents permit parking scheme following a consultation with local residents and a majority of those who responded to this consultation voting in favour of a permit parking scheme for Craster village. We feel that the scope of this consultation was fully agreed with NCC officers and at no point was a threshold of 70% specified to us and we were surprised to see this Order presented as a *fait accompli* to us by officers at our January Full Council meeting.

We hope that the County Council will consider the above action points in respect of the scheme but would welcome the opportunity to meet with yourself, your team and other key stakeholders – including third party landowners and businesses in Craster – so as to take any and all action possible to resolving the parking issues in our village.

End of letter

In agreeing this letter, the Parish Council also **agreed** to submit an FOI to Northumbria Police to ask how many parking fines have been issued by their officers in connection with this Order.

8. Report from Embleton Joint Burial Committee representative

Cllrs E Pearson and M Brooks presented the report from the Embleton Joint Burial Committee.

Cllr M Brooks advised that there had been no meeting of the Committee since the Full Council meeting in September.

Cllr E Pearson advised that she visited the cemetery last week and commended the Committee for keeping the cemetery in such a lovely condition.

Cllr E Pearson also advised that a health and safety assessment of the site is due to come forward next month.

9. Report from Craster Community Trust representative

Cllr M Craster reported that a number of the regular group users have now returned to using the Hall though not all have as some users are still very concerned about Covid-19.

Cllr M Craster also advised that the Hall was very happy to welcome 32 pilgrims recently.

Cllr M Craster also advised that the Trust has sadly had to cancel the pantomime this year due to the Covid-19 situation.

Cllr E Pearson commended the Trust on a very good repainting of the Hall.

10. Update on footpaths issues

The Clerk advised that he had been in contact with the footpaths officer at NCC and landowner on the reported issues at Harbour Lights (Footpath 19). The Clerk advised that the latest email he has sent to the both parties was an offer that the Parish Council would fund a structure of some form to make the path easier to walk and the Parish Council would take on the liability in case of any trips or falls and subsequent claims.

The Clerk proposed that some informal steps be installed in the area to make the path easier to walk.

The footpaths officer advised that Parish Councils do have their own powers on Rights of Way but this does need the consent of the relevant landowners.

The footpaths officer also advised that the Parish Council will need to consider the ongoing maintenance costs for this.

The footpaths officer also advised that the County Council has never received any report of anyone complaining about or falling on this path.

The footpaths officer advised that NCC would remove any signs as proposed such as "walkers use at their own risk".

It was **agreed** that the Clerk should check on insurance and the footpaths officer would check with his legal team as to whether the Parish Council can take over the liability for the path.

11. Planning Matters:

Update on 21/02775/FUL | Construction of 2no houses for rent with associated landscaping | Dunstan House C74 Dunstan Village Main Road Dunstan NE66 3SY. The Council agreed to maintain its objection to this application. The Council also **agreed** that the Clerk should speak on behalf of the Council at the County Planning Committee as and when this is put on NCC's Agenda.

12. Preparations for Remembrance Sunday

The Parish Council **agreed** to lay a wreath at the Memorial once again this year. Cllr M Craster agreed to organise the wreath for the service on Remembrance Sunday. The Clerk asked Cllr M Craster to send him the invoice for payment.

13. Planning an official opening of the Craster Trail event

The Parish Council **agreed** to host an official opening of the Craster Trail on Thursday 18th November at 11am. The Clerk advised that the opening ceremony would commence in the quarry car park where Lord Howick will be asked to unveil the information board and there will then be a walk from the car park to the Stable Yard, where the Chair advised, the owner has kindly agreed to host attendees and provide teas, coffees and cake.

The Clerk advised that Lord Howick would be asked to say a few words at this event.

Cllr M Doherty **agreed** to arrange a large Union Jack for the unveiling of the information board.

It was **agreed** that those involved in the Craster trail project should be invited to attend this event.

14. Items for next Agenda

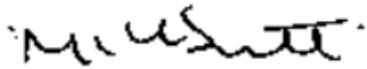
The Chair reminded Members to contact the Clerk for any items they'd like to add to the Agenda in November.

15. Date and time of next meeting

18th November 2021 in the Craster Memorial Hall

There being no further business, the Chair thanked all for their attendance and participation and closed the meeting.

Signed,



**Chair of Craster Parish Council
(18th November 2021)**