

Blanchland Annual Parish Meeting
Held in the
Village Hall on 23rd May 2023

Present: Councillors: T Bowers, R O'Connor , M Kennedy, M Forster, C Horncastle (NCC), Clerk: C Asquith, Helen Savage (BCDO), Neil Easton (NCC Transport) plus 20 members of the public

Apologies: Councillor David Kelly, Michael Evans – Savills

The minutes of the previous meeting on 24th May 2022 were approved

Matters Arising: Neil Easton from Northumberland County Council was invited to the annual meeting to discuss the ongoing issue of a regular bus service between Hexham and Blanchland. Neil was happy to have an open discussion and we shared the information from a Facebook Survey undertaken in May and some of the comments regarding requests and support for a regular service. The main concern was that the Council do not want to undermine the 773 service which runs daily to Consett and that service needs to remain as it is a lifeline for some of our residents. The Department are happy to consider other options. Neil asked what days of the week the service could run, how many people would use it, how many return trips would be required and preferred routes. The possibility of diverting the Slaley bus was touched on; however this will make the journey longer and therefore less appealing for current users. The meeting also discussed using the school bus, which has worked in the past, Neil agreed that this is something that the council would be prepared to look at. The Adept Bus visits the village on Tuesday's, it is a bookable service, but it was felt that the times of the bus and the return journey are not ideal. One resident asked about the 773 route and asked was it guaranteed to continue in the future. Neil replied that the currently the route is secure as the council have committed to it and have been supported by government funding. There seems to be some support for a trial bus service from and to Hexham, which may also be used by visitors from Hexham who may want to visit Blanchland. This part of the meeting was concluded with an agreement to further discussions and looking at identifying a trial service during the summer, this is yet to be confirmed and the Parish Council will continue to work with NCC and local residents to work on this.

Chairman's report 2023

Welcome

Thank you for coming, thank you to Avril and to Neil for coming along this evening to contribute to our AGM.

Last year we had a successful Jubilee event with over 80 people participating many in large family groups, the weather was excellent and big thanks to Ian for the use of the front of the Tea Rooms, Also thanks to Ian and Diane for the non-stop disco and to Helen Ridley and Jennifer for the games and making it a fun day. The tables all looked amazing and the floral displays worked very well in the Abbey after. Well done to Jacqui and Julie Dart who won the best Jubilee display award and The Silver Salver and to Diane Redpath who won the Jubilee Rose Bowl for her hanging basket, window or container display. We were awarded a £500 grant for the event and the remainder of this is being used to create the metal and stone plaque for the memorial seat on the Show Ground, which will be finished at the Show this summer.

The Parish Council are working with NCC to improve the riverside footpath which is often in a very poor condition. This is not going to be a quick fix but we are hopeful that we may see some improvements in 2024.

The Parish Council kept the precept at the same amount as the past 2 years £1400. Some of this has been used to purchase 3 large salt/grit bins which are currently in storage but will

be brought out in the winter and will be located in or near both car parks and on Shildon Road.

As you may have noticed we had to remove all the old benches and tables from the Show Field as they were unsafe to use. We would like to thank the O'Connor family for their very kind donation which meant that with their help 2 picnic benches could be purchased and both will be placed on the Show Field in early summer.

After the issues caused by Storm Arwen in November 2021, The Northern Powergrid Foundation established a fund for organisations to access grants to ensure that if such a disaster happens again, there will be access to a warm safe place for residents in rural communities. Blanchland Parish Council secured funding and over the next few weeks a generator will be installed at the Village Hall. If you would like to offer your assistance as a Generator steward/caretaker please let us know as ideally people in the village will need easy access at all times in case such an incident was to happen again.

Questions Raised:

Resident from Bridgend House asked about a wall that needs repointing and a tree that needs sorting at the rear of his house near the riverbank.

Response:

This will come under Savills/Trust and the Parish Council will pass on accordingly.

Blanchland Community Development Organisation 2022-3

The BCDO met four times during the past year: 29 June, 14 September, 16 November and 8 February. There was also a special open meeting on 29 March.

We are grateful, as ever, to the Lord Crewe Charity for funding from car park fees. This has enabled us to provide a new noticeboard under the Gateway Arch and to subsidise fireworks and the village Christmas tree. The fireworks were wonderful and the village carols, held inside the abbey after the lights were turned on, better attended than ever and followed by soup and World Cup football in the Felons.

Work has been done in conjunction with the Abbey 6 A's Project on a new website; we discussed the Charity's Place Making Scheme and considered a proposal (ultimately unsuccessful) to house a refugee family in the village.

The biggest activity has been the Abbey 6 A's Project, which began in November and is shared with the Parochial Church Council. It was successful in receiving a grant of nearly £100,000 from the National Lottery Heritage Fund with a further and very generous £20,000 from the Lord Crewe Charity. It is managed with skill and an astonishing attention to detail by Yvonne Conchie and supported by a large team of volunteers.

Perhaps the highlight so far has been the archaeology in the Abbey in February, which attracted many new volunteers and very many new visitors. Our volunteers are truly wonderful and can't be too highly praised. We have also undertaken an ambitious and spectacular acoustic survey of the building and innovative recording of graffiti on the woodwork of the Abbey and stone of the village, all assisted by Durham University's Archaeology Department. The project has also been delighted to support the excellent and rightly popular Artisan markets held this year, most recently in April, organised by Carolyn and David Asquith. A rich variety of arts events is planned for the coming months. The current phase of the project is due to end in March 2024 and a bid for further work will form part of this.

In November Helen Ridley joined the trustees and in February Alice Ellison and Sara Murray both resigned from the Board. George Ellison also signalled his desire to retire as honorary secretary. I cannot begin to thank Alice (also treasurer), George and Sara enough for their work on behalf of the BCDO since its founding. Without them it would surely have folded years ago, but their involvement has not just been as trustees, it has also included the warmest hospitality of their home at No 2 The Square.

At the open meeting on 29 March, Lesley Ogle, Jackie Dart and Julie Medlen all agreed to offer their services as trustees and Helen Ridley was confirmed as treasurer. They join Denise Herdman, Michael Forster and Michael Kennedy. I shall be stepping down as Chair in October at my retirement from my role as Vicar of the Moorland Group of Parishes.

The Blanchland Project Management Group unites members of the PCC and BCDO: Helen Savage, Alice Ellison, Denise Herdman, Lesley Ogle, Barbara Wheatley and Philippa Buswell, with Yvonne Conchie in attendance.

Helen Savage, 23 May 2023

Questions Raised:

None

Report from Michael Evans, Savills for Lord Crewe's Charity

Placemaking

NCC have included a sum in their 2023/2024 budget to produce full specification plans of the proposals and put to tender. This will then inform the next steps but it is hoped that, all going to plan, the works would be scheduled for 2024/2025. You will appreciate that, as much of the proposals relate to the public highway, the timing etc is largely dependent on NCC and their budgets. However, their commitment of funds in 2023/2024 is certainly a positive.

The Byres

You will hopefully receive notification of the planning application shortly. The current proposals are for conversion to holiday accommodation with the rationale being the project will have to be economical and deliver a return if the building is to be brought back into use. Timings will be dictated by planning.

River Paths

There are a number of woodland blocks along the river path that need to be felled as they are beginning to blow, with the only feasible extraction route likely to be along the river track. We are currently looking at proposals which will include significant upgrading of the path following the felling operations. Timing is likely to be the late summer 2023.

Baybridge Drainage

I have not heard anything from Glen Harrison

Donations

Commitment of £200 toward the cost of the coronation party/event. £100 from LCC and £100 from Savills.

Questions Raised:

1. Will the telephone box/kiosk get refurbished and the area around it as it needs a tidy and clean up.

Response: ?

2. Would it be possible to have a gate fitted on the green, as it opens onto the road and residents are concerned for the safety of animals and children?

Response:?

3. The Placemaking scheme has concerned residents, who query the action of narrowing the road on the Square which will cause accessibility issues for village residents and also hotel guests. Residents queried that there has been no consultation and residents should have parking spaces. There should also be parking for deliveries at the Crewe and the Post Office. Residents said that The Lord Crewe Staff continue to park on The Square which causes issue for residents who need to park near their homes. Could staff use the village car parks? Concerns that the Post Office and Village Shop will shut if people have to park in car park and walk to the shop. Concerns over the gravel in the Square and whether it could be replaced as it is inaccessible for buggies, prams, wheelchairs and other users.

Response:?

Report from Colin Horncastle NCC – South Tynedale 2023

Councillor Horncastle committed that it was lovely to see such good support from residents and how he always loves coming to Blanchland for Parish Meetings. He explained which areas NCC are responsible for, including Social Services, Adult Care, Education, Highways, Fire Services, buses etc. Councillor Horncastle went on to discuss changes in NCC including the new Chief Executive Helen Pattinson in February 2023 and changes to the management structure which are ongoing and hope to save £7m per year. Earlier this year NCC managed to avoid a firefighters strike, which was very good news. NCC are also affected by the same issues as domestic residents with high energy prices, which affect running costs at schools, depots and the County Council buildings.

The Council had to overcome a massive shortfall of £17 million last summer, which they have managed to achieve with help of a government settlement and restructuring. They have made no cuts to front line services and no redundancies. All rubbish that can be burnt goes to South Tyneside and this has generated a £5 million bonus through the electricity company. Prices have gone up for births, deaths and marriages and tourist parking charges at the coast has gone up slightly. There have been no cuts to highways and an extra £2,750,000 has been invested. School budgets have been ring-fenced. The Police precept has gone up by £15 per household this was out of the Council's hands, there are now 615 officers in Northumberland in total with a promise of a further 134 new front line places over coming years. There has been some restructure of the county reducing from a 3 tier system to a 2 tier model. Berwick has had £40 million invested in a new school, leisure centre and special needs facilities.

With regard to County Hall, Councillor Horncastle said there are still a lot of council workers working from home, this is working well with greater output, less travelling for staff and Council workers can make their workday suit their needs, most workers go in to the office once a week.

Councillor Horncastle mentioned Blyth and how important it is to the region with big companies like JDR cables making massive investments. The Newcastle to Ashington railway line is due to reopen soon will be a huge bonus for the area. The Council have invested in new Fire and Rescue services. Large parts of County Hall are currently empty and the Council are looking at attracting new businesses to use these empty work and office spaces. Plans for a green crematorium are still underway in Hexham.

The Council are also piloting a pothole scheme, whereby new potholes which are reported will be cut out to make a rectangle and filled which makes the repair last far longer than the current system. Anyone can report potholes in the County by accessing "Fix My Street", using "What 3 Words" as a location or postcode and description.

Questions Raised:

Does the County Council still send out road sweepers to clear/clean streets, as Blanchland is looking very untidy with debris and moss alongside roads, pavements and in gutters.

Response:

Road Sweeper should come out once a year, Councillor Horncastle will contact the department and instigate a call out.

Avril Forster: Chair of Blanchland Community Buildings, including the Village Hall, Felons, The Show Ground, Car Park and Play Area.

Avril came to the meeting to inform the residents and council about the future of Blanchland Community Buildings. A number of the Committee are retiring at the AGM in September, many of them have served for a large number of years and many no longer live in the village. Avril now feels that the time has come for the BCB to be run by residents who live in the village and there will be 6 places on the committee to fill in order for it to continue to run in its present state, if there is no longer a committee, BCB will go back to the Estate and she felt that if it was to go back to the trust it would be repurposed and will never be replaced. Avril explained that the committee needs to be a minimum of 8, and 3 posts need filling, Secretary, Treasurer and Chair, and that volunteers need to be prepared to sign up an commit for at least 2 years. The BCC have a number of commitments, such as coffee mornings, Terrier Show, Bonfire Night, The Scouts and volunteers will be needed to help out at these events, preparing food, serving, cleaning etc. The BCC is registered with the Charity Commission and it is as such answerable, i.e. Accounts etc. have to be done each year. Felons is the Trading Arm of the Village Hall and has its own committee, this is separate from BCC and it is more appropriate to have separate individuals on both committees. Avril called out to the meeting to ask for volunteers or people who have an interest to come forward and she and other committee members will be more than happy to support anyone who is interested in taking over through the transition process. The AGM is in early September and Avril hopes that anyone who is interested will speak to her before that date and then join them at the AGM to help the BCC in the future.

Questions Raised:

Could the information (what jobs need to be covered etc.) be written up so interested parties could find out more.

Response:

Avril suggested it would be far easier to meet with the Chair, Secretary and/or Treasurer and run through what has to be done and welcomed any interest at the end of the meeting.

Meeting Closed: 8.30pm