

## **Wolsingham and Thornley Parish Council – Annual Report from the Chair, May 2025**

I have the honour of completing my first year as chair of this council following on from Councillor David Sugden who fulfilled the role of chair for eight years, I hasten to add not a record I'm seeking to beat!

David's dedication to public service and to the communities of Wolsingham and Thornley over that time is without question, I would like to thank him personally and on behalf of the council for his long-standing commitment. Whilst standing down as chair last year David has not stood for re-election this year, I wish him well in taking forward his well deserved retirement.

Another long standing councillor who has stepped aside in the last twelve months is Alan Vipond, his experience in practical terms will be missed indeed one of his last tasks during his spare time was to re paint some of the rooms at the St Anne's Hall, I wish Alan all the best for the future and again thank him for his public service.

Our parish clerk Mrs Sara-Ann Baxter has completed her second full year in the role and it is fair to say has fully established herself doing a fantastic job of keeping the plates spinning as we embarked upon a number of projects that had the potential to consume her time over and above her 'normal' day job, I would like to thank her for her sterling work. With that in mind councillors engaged in a job evaluation workshop late last year looking at the clerk role; it has clearly extended way beyond the job description and the council will need to evaluate how they intend to reconcile this in the future.

During spring and early summer last year the Parish Clerk's office moved from the Town Hall to the St Anne's Hall for a couple of reasons but primarily to facilitate better accessibility. The old office required visitors to negotiate a steep set of stairs whilst the new office is on the ground floor and clearly enjoys a vibrant and much greater footfall.

The St Anne's Hall was a facility that was in need of a spruce up and the clerk would be better placed to facilitate that if located in the same place. As such many of the rooms have been redecorated and new curtain prepared by the sewing club a great addition that I would like to thank them for. In addition, the facility was updated with the installation of Hive Heating controls to better regulate energy consumption, particularly important as our 'cheap' pre COVID energy contract was coming to an end.

An added benefit from moving the clerk out of the Town Hall was that we were then able to successfully rent out the free space to a local business, something that would not have been practical at the St Ann's Hall office.

As part of that move we also took the opportunity to remove the old telephone landline deferring to a mobile telephone to increase accessibility and used an alternative ISP router which also had the benefit of reducing the telephone and broadband costs to the council. Last year also saw the parish council introduce two new modern parking meters into our two car parks. This was a first in Demesne Mill which had previously been a free to use parking facility however the meter at the St Anne's Hall was so long standing that the parking meter itself was obsolete and spare parts were unavailable.

It was felt by the council that it was important that parents and carers should be able to use our car parks to drop off and collect school children to minimise congestion on the surrounding roads. As such we decided the first half hour of parking would be free, in addition we also felt it was important that residents were not unduly penalised and so we introduced an annual resident's parking permit to use in either car park.

The initial capital cost for the installation of the parking meters themselves was not insignificant however the council have already recouped that cost through the parking charges.

The parish council also undertook repairs to the road surface within Demesne Mill and our clerk was able to negotiate this with contractors at no cost to the council.

Meanwhile in the park work was under way, using local contractors, to convert a former storage building into a new public toilet facility adjacent to the children's play area. This goes back to a past public consultation where a need was highlighted and there was general dissatisfaction with the old County Council toilet facility.

The parish council were able to meet the cost of this project from council reserves, S.106 money from the Stanners Close development and a grant from Councillor Anita Savory who, in her county council role, provided money from her neighbourhood fund. I would like to thank Anita for her support.

The new park toilet facility is now open and whilst it will cost thirty pennies rather than one this has enabled us to use electronic locking facilities negating the need to pay wages for someone to open and close the toilets. The additional expenditure of the electric entry system will therefore have paid for itself through saved wages in a matter of months and will hopefully deter misuse.

Staying with public toilets it has been disheartening to see that the town centre toilets have been vandalised and misused on a number of occasions over the course of the year. The parish council have invested heavily in keeping them open however despite this we have had to reduce the opening hours or even close them temporarily to prevent or deter further damage. In addition our contractor has been faced with the mess and damage to clean up, a wholly unsatisfactory situation. The police have been involved and it will be for the new parish council to reflect upon the way forward.

We have appointed a company to build a new website for the council that will be more customer friendly, easier to administrate and will demonstrate better governance where the clerk is responsible for the administration not a councillor as was previously the case. Importantly we will also move to a [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk) domain name for the website and all councillors will be allocated a [gov.uk](mailto:gov.uk) e mail address. This is a driver from central government who offered a small price reduction to parish councils that signed up however the domain brings with it additional security reassurances which in this IT driven world are not to be underestimated. A small working group of councillors has been supporting this process including a volunteer resident, I am very grateful for their work in this regard.

A new website, it was felt, also deserved an updated Wolsingham Parish Council logo to adorn it, as such the council agreed to ask Wolsingham School if their pupils would like to prepare a design as part of their studies.

The parish council have undertaken extensive tree works using a local contractor following on from the last tree survey of 2023. All trees highlighted for urgent or priority work have been attended to indeed it was a relief to see that despite some horrendous storms last winter all of our trees remained standing. The importance of tree work cannot be underestimated the potential consequences of neglect are significant, as such given the high number of trees we have on our estate the cost to the council is and is likely to remain correspondingly high, the next full tree survey will be conducted later this year.

The parish council owned parking area in Thornley Woods suffered from significant vandalism to the fencing over the course of the summer months, the area has since been subject to a litter pick and the fencing has all been repaired.

The Market Place Christmas lights and the Christmas tree were installed on our behalf by Durham County Council (We are charged for this) and were well received, sadly one of the street lamp mounted lights broke in the storms, we also bought and erected some lights to adorn the exterior of St Anne's Hall.

The parish council have also explored the possibility of installing tree lights on the frontage of the park similar to those seen in Lanchester, however the cost is significant so other options are being explored.

Staying with Christmas festivities the parish council in particular Councillor Helen Yeulet arranged a Christmas Tree competition which despite a very stormy day was well supported in the St Anne's Hall, I would like to thank Helen for her work, she has aspirations to go bigger and better this year!

The parish council held their last meeting in April 2025 prior to the election of a new council in May.

The election process was uncontested so with the exception of former councillors David Sugden, Alison Hirst and Julie Bartram who stood down the previous parish councillors and one new councillor will commence the new council in May 2025, additional councillors are to be co opted into the vacancies.

I cannot let it be forgotten however, that as well as well as our clerk, councillors and our contractors this council would be much more challenging to run without the support of many volunteers. Be it allotment representatives, clubs, the WI, Wolsingham Wayfarers, people to open and close the park gates, litter pickers or even a wonderful chap who dutifully emptied the old parking meter for us.

I'm not going to mention names there are so many but for the record without your contribution however large or small and mainly unseen this council would be lost, so thank you.

**Councillor Iain Rodgers**

Chair

Wolsingham and Thornley Parish Council 2024-2025