

Annual Report 2018/19

This will be my last report as Chair of Burton Agnes Parish Council and, as in previous years, is a personal reflection and not a statement of the considered views of the whole Council.

I have done the job for the last 5 or so years (mainly because no other member of the Parish Council was sufficiently deranged to take it on) and have decided that there has to be more to life (and 'retirement'!) than bashing my head against brick walls, trying to push water uphill and various other similarly non-productive activities like wasting time commenting on 'consultations' and planning applications where decisions had clearly already been taken elsewhere in advance. It's time for a fresh pair of eyes.

The past 5 years have been a very mixed bag. The Parish Council has achieved a number of things: we now have a website; we secured grant funding for a much-needed bus shelter which has been installed on the A614 Burton Agnes to Bridlington road; thanks to a generous donation from the Lions Club we have installed waste bins in the lay-by outside Thornholme and at the bus stop in Burton Agnes which have significantly reduced unsightly litter; a defibrillator has been installed, again with grant funding, at the Ee-Why service station in Thornholme; the Play Park, which had been un-inspected for a number of years, is now subject to an annual inspection regime; a Youth Club has been started with support from the Parish Council at the Sports Club in Burton Agnes; we have continued to support Driffield School's Twilight Bus which has enabled successive cohorts of students living in the Parish to attend extra-curricular activities and be sure of getting home afterwards, and we have managed, in collaboration with Rudston Parish Council, to recruit an excellent Parish Clerk and in so doing have significantly reduced the costs and increased the effectiveness of administering the Parish Council.

Rather less visible to residents has been the considerable amount of behind the scenes 'housekeeping' work we have needed to do to ensure that the Parish Council is compliant with the ever-increasing raft of legislation applying to it. We now have Standing Orders and Financial Regulations, a Health and Safety policy and a policy on Data Protection. Significant improvements have been made to record keeping, and the Parish accounts, thanks to the efforts of our Treasurer, are now complete, fully compliant and audited. Paperwork from the last 5 years is on file and organised according to topic and thus retrievable.

I have sought to represent the Parish interests on a number of consultation exercises undertaken by, inter alia, East Riding of Yorkshire Council and the NHS, on topics from planning consultation and landscape categorisation to bus services and emergency health care, ploughing through seemingly endless documents. It seems to be a matter of honour with originating bodies that no consultation paper

can be under 40 pages in length, and that's before you get to the annexes which can easily double it! Designed to discourage the faint-hearted or the time poor? Who knows. To be fair to ERYC, although lengthy, their documents have been clear and jargon free.

I have had the pleasure of being a panel member for the Lissett Community Wind Farm Fund, which has been something of an education. The fund has supported a large number of small organisations - village halls sports clubs, scout and guide groups, schools etc- in parishes which would not have had a hope of securing the funds otherwise. That is the very positive. The rather less positive has been the administration of the fund which has, frankly, left a great deal to be desired, and which I have heard variously described by people trying to interface with it as 'hopeless' and 'unbelievable' (those are just the printable ones), and led to a lot of frustration. It has, at times, been difficult to see how the administration fee levied against the fund could be objectively justified.

Personally I have, in this role, frequently found myself between a rock and a hard place. The rock has, more often than not, been some personnel at Officer level within ERYC, whose attitude at times has verged on 'when we want your opinion we'll tell you what it is'. Not all, happily, subscribe to this mantra and most have been helpful well over and above the call of duty. On occasions I have seen what could politely be described as schizophrenia even within departments - for example a request we made for a traffic survey, following complaints from some residents about speeding, was turned down flat, but, a couple of months later when we enquired about the Parish Council itself funding luminous signs to remind motorists of the speed limit, we were told by the same department that this could not be progressed without a traffic survey... The traffic survey has at the time of writing still not been carried out as the ERYC quota from the organisation contracted to do them had been exhausted. This in itself is an indication of the scale of the problem in communities across the East Riding. We were offered the opportunity to pay for a survey (presumably from the same organisation) but declined, on the grounds that we could not justify spending scarce resources on something which was being provided free to others albeit not in a timely fashion.

I have lost count of the number of times this Parish Council has raised issues based on local knowledge and local experience to have them completely ignored by someone sitting at a desk 20 miles away armed, I am guessing, with Google Maps. Very recently the Parish Council was invited to put forward suggestions for topics for scrutiny. We duly did. One was ignored completely. The feedback we received on the other, a suggestion that the Committee might look at equality of access to health care, seemed to suggest that because the issue of equality of access was so important, and our concern mirrored that of the Sub Committee across a raft of topics, they would not scrutinise the one we suggested (where, it follows, we had identified a particular problem) but would adopt equality of access as a 'golden thread' for consideration in all the areas they did elect to scrutinise. The healthcare

issue was, thus, neatly kicked into touch. Maybe something got lost in the translation, but is it any wonder that you ask yourself why you bother?

The hard place has been the complete lack of any interest from residents - unless it has been to promote their own particular concerns, planning applications or to further their business interests. Inevitably this means that the Parish Council operates in a bubble, albeit we are, all of us, residents of the Parish. We have been carrying a couple of vacancies for a while now. When we invited an individual who had brought an issue to us (and who seemed to have the sort of qualities from which the Parish Council could benefit) to join us, the individual, with no hint of irony, declined on the basis that Parish Councils had no power. I am aware that in terms of engagement, our Parish is not alone and that it is common across the East Riding. This does not on itself make it a good thing, neither does it bode well for local democracy - but then, watching the antics in other places, one could be forgiven for wondering if perhaps democracy itself were a dying concept.

The lack of interest also appears to extend to the Police as we have seen neither hide nor hair of our 'new' PCSO since the previous incumbent, who was a regular and welcome attendee at meetings, was redeployed about a year ago. This is disappointing particularly set against a 12% increase (four times the 2019 Q1 RPI) in the Police and Crime Commissioner element of the 2019/20 Council Tax demand.

I have witnessed acts of great generosity, such as that from a small businessman in Thornholme who offered the Parish Council a home for its defibrillator, even declining our offer to pay for the electricity used to power it - and the polar opposite from a much larger set-up much closer to home. I have seen great public spiritedness from an individual who takes it upon himself to grit the hill outside the school on the Rudston Road at silly o'clock on winter mornings, and engage in a perennial fight with Beverley to get the salt bins replenished, and who also regularly picks up litter when out walking in the village. At the other end of the scale are those who consider it acceptable to discard litter, vandalise post boxes, break into and vandalise the sports club, daub graffiti on play equipment or fail to pick up after their dogs.

I had hoped early on in my tenure of this role, that it might be possible to forge stronger links with surrounding Parishes. We all face similar issues and perhaps could have put up a stronger fight united. For this reason I welcomed the initiative from our Ward Councillors to host meetings between Parishes and ERYC officials, which resulted in some very positive outcomes, not least, for Burton Agnes, the rectification of a long standing issue of subsiding road drains on the A614 the noise from which resembled heavy artillery fire when lorries crashed over them.

I very much appreciated the assistance of Carnaby's Clerk in the early days of doing this job, and it was with Rudston that we engaged a joint Clerk. It very soon

became clear, though, that there was, in the background in some quarters, a very real 'dog eat dog' approach and there was little prospect of meaningful collaboration. This was thrown into stark relief when this Parish Council was successful in securing grant funding for a bus shelter. A neighbouring Parish sent in a formal letter of objection to the fund administrators expressing their annoyance - on the grounds that the previous year a similar request from them had not made the cut. The fund giving the grant operates on an annualised basis. Unsuccessful bids are not carried forward to the next year, and the Parish making all the fuss had not actually made a repeat application in the year in question....

I have had huge support from our Ward Councillors, particularly Jane Evison for whom I have immense admiration. I just do not know where she gets the energy from. Had it not been for her ready advice, tireless support, and willingness to intercede with Beverley and help fight our corner, I would have thrown the towel in years ago. It would, in my view, be a great pity if the disgraceful goings on in Westminster were to induce this Ward to throw out highly competent Ward Councillors who genuinely have the interests of residents at heart just to deliver a (some might say well-deserved) kick to the National party.

I have experienced aggression from people banging the table at meetings, and over e-mail, in pursuit of their own interests. I have been telephoned on a Sunday evening by a resident of part of the Parish which does not have a representative on the Parish Council, and which has not responded to efforts to recruit one, over issues which were not within the control of the Parish Council - or even, at that time of a Sunday night, within its immediate or peripheral sphere of influence. The Parish Council was presented, by an individual newly arrived in the area, not with an offer of help or collaboration, but with a list of tasks and demands of things - all un-costed - that this person thought we should be doing, coupled with some helpful advice as to how I should conduct our meetings. Quite inappropriately and discourteously, we have been formally invoiced for activities for which the Parish Council, whilst having been prepared to support them with a modest donation, has no formal responsibility or duty. An odd way of requesting a donation in the absence of any formal entitlement to funds. Finally (and this one takes the biscuit) I have been personally attacked by a fellow resident, in the context of a disagreement on an issue not remotely connected with the Parish Council or anything which could, even in the broadest interpretation, be construed to fall under its remit, who accused me of considering that because of my role on the Parish Council I considered others to be 'the little people'! If this did not display such a worrying level of ignorance of the role and working constraints of a Parish Council it would be funny.

I do regret that there is so little sense of collective community interest in the Parish. On the rare occasions that there has been a suggestion as to what 'someone' could be doing, it very soon became evident that the 'someone' being invoked was 'someone else'. The Parish Council has, for a number of years, operated without

representation from Gransmoor. The two public meetings we called (and leafleted every house) to inform residents about a major development which was being proposed on the outskirts of the village were very poorly attended. Attendance at the awareness training session we organised for residents (and hand-delivered invitations to over 200 houses) following the installation of the defibrillator was, in the words of one resident who did take the trouble to come along, 'pathetic'. Only four households, excluding members of the Parish Council itself were represented.

How has the experience been? Well - a bit of a curate's egg really. It has certainly been an eye opener on the health of local democracy. Will I miss it? Answers on a post card...

I wish my successor all the very best.

Sue Burt