

SKELSMERGH AND SCALTHWAITERIGG PARISH COUNCIL

Annual Report 2025-26

As we complete the third year of the current life of this council it is still a matter of regret that, despite attempts to attract new people to be co-opted to join us, business has had to be sustained with two unfilled vacancies. Thanks to the dedication of Tim Maggs, Mick Crozier, Angela Brand-Barker and Chris Loynes this has not interfered with the meeting programme but it does make us vulnerable to unexpected absences. Therefore it would be encouraging to think that two additional members could be attracted to take part – especially as 2027 will be an election year when the council will be reconstituted and some prior experience of council business might be thought useful.

The council is not and never has been a closed circle, having always found space in the meeting agenda to welcome members of the public to attend and take part in the opening 20-minute session (extended whenever necessary at the Chair's discretion). The public are able to make representations on issues of concern such as planning applications and applications for grant aid towards local activities and infrastructure. Thus an application by the Churchwarden for assistance with the purchase of a lawnmower for the churchyard and burial ground was approved and representations relating to three planning applications were heard.

In the case of a proposed access onto A684 opposite Toll Bar, councillors endorsed the objections from the occupants of the dwelling opposite. In response to the application to change the occupancy conditions at Dodding Green in favour of The Well, the arguments of the local objectors did not persuade councillors, although in their response, councillors did invite the planning authority to apply conditions requiring close liaison with the local community. There has so far been no indication that occupation has commenced.

The third planning application to provoke significant local concern was for a much expanded, business park at Meadowbank. Whereas an earlier application had been for a site identified in the Local Plan following public consultation and statutory procedures, this application not only exceeded the development boundary but encroached on Skelsmergh parish in an area previously set aside for landscaping and itself also containing a fine example of a post-glacial drumlin field. For this and reasons associated with local amenity, including unsatisfactory traffic management proposals, the council agreed to recommend refusal.

Since the first Parish Plan in 2009 recorded the high value the community placed on the landscape they inhabit the Council has sought to emphasise that concern amongst the various local bodies it has had to work with and to lead by example in relation to conservation activities and in relation to a local council's general duty towards the environment.

This year will see the completion of the initial planting on the land near Gurnal Bridge, licenced to the council through the generosity of the Stephenson Trust, which I mentioned in last year's report. Thanks to the enthusiasm of Cllr. Chris Loynes and to our partnership with Kendal Conservation Volunteers, the main field has been transformed by the introduction of all of the 370 trees to represent our residents and many more to fill gaps. Managed with care

they will make a significant contribution to the local mosaic of riverside woodland along the Sprint and to the land in the parish devoted to landscape and nature conservation. At the Parish Woodland the thinning programme has continued in tandem with chain-saw courses and produced a modest income from firewood sales but the hoped-for return of Selside Primary pupils did not come about. Nonetheless the Woodland does offer an ideal site for teaching Forest School principles. Coldharbour, on the other hand, due to its difficult access, is only suitable for small adult parties to practice coppicing or observe wildlife (volunteers to carry out surveys of any kind on any of the land would be most welcome.)

In September we received a presentation by Chris Fawcett and Beki Winter representing the interests of rural, affordable housing providers who emphasised the need for rural local authorities to be alert to local need, Beki having identified a potential site locally. Given its limited resources the Council is not in a strong position to lead on such initiatives though supportive of the principle.

Other environmental issues include the perennial problem of litter, which the voluntary Litter Sweep tries to keep in check but never entirely resolves, and highway drainage, the solution to which seems always to elude the highway engineers whenever and wherever it is reported. The continued non-attendance of Cllr. Jama deprives us of direct representation at Westmorland and Furness level on these and similar issues of what should be shared concern.

Each year the council has to set a precept in order to fund its activities for the ensuing year, for better or worse a substantial part of its budget (£5851.62) is taken up with purely administrative expenses, such as clerk's salary, insurances, Hall hire, website costs etc. The remainder, is made up of a 'best guess' amount to allow for expenditure discretionary items such as grants to local organisations and minor improvements to local facilities (e.g. the church lawnmower.) If there is an unspent balance it goes to reducing the demand for the ensuing year. After these expenses there will be £1982 available to distribute in grants.