

MAYOR of PONTELAND
ANNUAL REPORT 2014/15

22 March 2015

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1. INTRODUCTION

This is the seventh year that Ponteland has been a Town Council and I have pleasure in presenting the Mayor's Annual Report for 2014/15.

The annual report to the electors provides the opportunity to summarise the work over the last year. The report will be shown on the website and printed copies are available and therefore I will expand on some items that may be unknown to electors even though the content will be familiar to the Town Councillors.

For those that have not attended an Annual Meeting of Electors, Ponteland Town Council (PTC) has 12 Councillors, 3 for each Ward of North, South, East and West. A person is a Town Councillor for 4 years. If someone resigns, that triggers co-option or a by-election. A by-election for the Ponteland West Ward was held on 10 April 2014. Alan Varley was elected and it was a pleasure to welcome Alan as our newest Councillor.

In May the 12 Town Councillors decide who will be the Mayor for the following year and I became Mayor in May 2014.

The Town Councillors are unpaid volunteers and they all have the interests of Ponteland at heart. The Councillors ensure that decisions are taken democratically. Decisions are made by consensus or by vote. We agree on most things but not on all and there are times when a majority vote makes the decision.

Our decisions are implemented by paid staff and Ponteland benefits from having very good and loyal Town Council staff. There are four staff - one is full time, 3 are part time and their combined hours equate to 2.5 full timers. The staff action a range of tasks that are shown in this report within an annual budget of around £500,000.

2. SUMMARY

2.1 Vision and Aim

To continue to provide value for money services and support that will benefit the residents of Ponteland. The Council aims to deliver services and facilities that promote pride in Ponteland. PTC also encourages the residents of Ponteland to take part in making Ponteland a place where we all want to live.

2.2 Partnership Working

Regular readers of the annual report will know that much of our work is carried out in conjunction with others. This includes work in Ponteland Park (with the Friends of Ponteland Park), Community Cleaning (with the County Council), Youth Work at the High School, with Ponteland Community Partnership (on Pont News and Views), with Darras Hall Estate Committee (for the bridlepath and speed monitors) and the Civic Society.

We also give small grants to several local organisations that are listed below.

A major involvement for the Town Council is the Northumbria in Bloom competition. Ponteland won a Gold Medal in 2012, 2013 **and** in 2014 and the event was supported by several local businesses.

PTC thanks go to all residents who have helped to improve the quality of life in Ponteland. It is sometimes a number of little things, that when added together make a big difference.

3. WHAT WE DO

3.1 Councillors and Staff

The Town Clerk and Staff carry out many mandatory functions required by law such as the production of agenda, minutes and public accounts. Added to these functions are the daily tasks which make Ponteland a good place to live. A few examples are:

- (i) Litter picking /Dog waste bins
- (ii) Gritting of Merton Way and Broadway and other key paths
- (iii) Some grass cutting (on Coates Green and other areas within the village centre)
- (iv) Environmental activities (such as removal of graffiti and repair of damage)
- (v) Allotments
- (vi) Play areas
- (vii) Maintenance of the Park
- (viii) Christmas Lighting
- (ix) Public Conveniences at Thornhill Road
- (x) Prestwick Cemetery

And there are many other tasks too.

3.1.1 Ponteland Town Council Status and Role

Northumberland has 153 Parish and Town Councils and Ponteland is one of only 5 Councils in the County to have achieved Quality Approved and Accredited status.

Ponteland is one of the bigger Councils serving approximately 12,000 residents and this places demands on both staff and Councillors. During the year we have over 70 meetings through our Committees, Working Parties and Council. All these meetings require agendas, minutes and working documents as well as the implementation of decisions. There are also a number of ad-hoc meetings. In addition, the Council tries to send a representative to outside bodies such as the Airport Consultative Committee that influence life in Ponteland. The organisations are listed in Appendix C.

The Town Council holds a full meeting of Councillors on the second Wednesday of every month. Before the meeting starts there is a public question time where written questions are considered and answered, hopefully satisfactorily. The public are welcome to attend full Council meetings and also our fortnightly Planning Committee Meetings.

Quite often, residents ask for clarification on the difference between what is a Town Council responsibility and what is a County Council responsibility. It is worth noting that PTC is not responsible for things such as Highways, Schools, Health, Education and Social Services. These services plus many more are the responsibility of Northumberland County Council (NCC).

3.1.2 Website

The PTC duties are listed on our website. The Town Council updated the website in 2013 and the address is: www.ponteland-tc.gov.uk

A number of positive comments have been received from the public. The site includes Councillors details, minutes and agenda, copies of Pont News and Views, a list of local organisations, budgetary details and news. There is also a contact page which is well used. Thanks are due to Caroline Thompson for her work on updating the website.

3.2 Government Consultations and Legislation

Government continues to propose legislation and PTC replies to consultations. Recent examples at a Northumberland County level are our comprehensive replies to the Core Strategy and the

proposed changes to the County Planning System. At a National Government level, we recently supported the consultation on the prioritisation of developing brownfield sites.

3.3 Youth work

Excellent youth work continues in Ponteland with Ashley Brown. Activities range from “Lunch Time Drop In” sessions to trips and sports evenings.

3.4 Community Cleaning

This continues much the same as last year.

The main responsibility for the general cleanliness of the Community (grass cutting, litter removal, graffiti removal, etc) lies with the County. However in order to augment this work we have spent £15,000 on litter, dog waste collection and additional grass cuts from Northumberland County Council (NCC).

We have established good working relations with the NCC Neighbourhood Environmental Action Team. Litter unfortunately is a recurring problem and we need help to reduce its impact. The continued assistance of several residents including Geoff Heslop in picking up litter is greatly appreciated and if this voluntary work could be extended it would make an excellent contribution to improving the quality of life in Ponteland.

Some residents have taken the time to plant flowers and shrubs at road junctions. This cheers up many a road and corner and our thanks go to those residents who have brightened up the landscape for the Community.

Fly Tipping can be a problem; however there is a contact on the NCC website home page - “Fly Tipping”. Please report anyone you see dumping bags or rubble in the countryside to this website.

3.5 Community Halls

There are a number of Community Halls within Ponteland such as Dalton and the Memorial Hall. PTC provides essential cash support to these Halls and in addition, Councillors Shanley and Butcher are on the Committee of the Memorial Hall.

Merton Hall is now self financing and continues to grow its income. Trustees include Councillor Christine Greenwell who is the Treasurer and Hall Manager, plus Councillors Rawlings and Liz Thompson. Merton Hall has a Committee that runs day to day needs and the Hall attracts a large number of volunteers, over 50.

Village Halls provide cohesion to the community and we are pleased to continue this vital support.

Ponteland also benefits from four self-funding Church halls - St Mary’s, the URC, St Matthews and the Methodist Church.

3.6 Ponteland Park

The maintenance and improvement of the Park has continued to benefit from the help of the Friends of Ponteland Park (FOPP) and a dipping platform was recently created at the oxbow lake. The Park is our major asset and continual investment is required to maintain this much loved facility. The Council is currently recruiting an additional contractor to keep it in tip top condition.

3.7 Darras Hall Estate Committee

PTC continues to make a small contribution (£600) to the maintenance of the Bridle Path.

3.8 Environment Working Party (EWP)

The Environment Working Party is always busy trying to improve Ponteland's appearance. Particular efforts are made with floral displays and the 2014 display was special leading to a Gold Award in Northumbria in Bloom. Thanks must go to Councillor Joyce Butcher who co-ordinates the Council's entry. Our thanks also go to our contractors, Iain Clough and Michael Champion, our Town Clerk Kath Mavin and to the Chair of the Working Party, Councillor Robin Ramsay for his diligent inspections and photographs of our environment. Appendix F lists the achievements in 2014 -15.

3.9 Pont News & Views

Pont News and Views (PNV) is a popular read. It is now self-financing and distributed to all residents. We congratulate the Editor Chris Jennings who does a super job running the magazine.

3.10 Ponteland Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group

This group continues to consult residents and develop a Neighbourhood Plan for Ponteland. PTC thanks all the volunteers in the Steering Group including Alma Dunigan and Will Moses, the Chair and Deputy Chair of the Group.

Work is progressing and at some point a Plan will be ready for evaluation by an Independent Planning Inspector before a Ponteland Referendum is held on the Plan.

3.11 Grants

Each year PTC allocates a small amount of money to help local organisations in their work in Ponteland. This year the organisations we have supported include:

The Great North Air Ambulance
Ponteland Youth Service
Friends of Ponteland Park
Ponteland Memorial Hall
Dalton Village Hall
Community Action Northumberland
Holy Saviour Church, Milbourne
Party in the Park
Rotary Duck Race
Legacare UK Limited
Diamond Inn (contribution to New Years Eve fireworks display)
Ponteland Rugby Club's Beer Festival
ADAPT – Hopper bus service for Ponteland

3.12 Play Areas

PTC is responsible for Play areas at Callerton Lane, Twizell Place and Guardians Court. The Skate Park on Callerton Lane opened in April 2014 and it is proving popular with many but not all residents. It was closed for six weeks for noise measurement work during which time a petition was received signed by 400 people calling for the reopening of the facility. The skate park was reopened but a complaint to the NCC Public Protection Unit means that further noise survey work is expected to take place soon. The skate park is unfortunately an example of how in local government, it is difficult to please all of the people all of the time.

3.13 Highways Working Party (HWP)

The Highways Working Party continues to lobby NCC to implement various measures to improve road surfaces and to mitigate the impact of traffic. Poor road surfaces remain a main area of complaint by residents. The NCC Highways Department is short of funds and this meant that only part of Middle Drive was resurfaced in 2014. Residents will however be pleased to learn that the rest of Middle Drive is scheduled for repair in 2015.

NCC has been praised for the recent resurfacing of the car park behind Merton Way.

Appendix G lists the achievements of the Highways Working Party and thanks are due to Councillor Christine Greenwell for chairing the HWP and to Jeanette Dodd, the Deputy Clerk, for administering the work.

3.14 Planning

The PTC Planning Committee meet every two weeks. The number of planning applications that the Town Council is consulted on is increasing. Ponteland has a high number of applications each year (average 192) and our Planning Committee takes the role of examining each application very seriously, only making objections with material planning considerations. Over the last four years, PTC's objection rate is 8%. The table below shows the figures.

YEAR	APPLICATIONS CONSULTED	OBJECTIONS BY PTC	REFUSED BY NCC
2011	183	16	5
2012	194	9	3
2013	185	12	6
2014	205	21	5
AVERAGE PER YEAR	192	14 (8% of applications)	5 (3% of applications)

Residents often ask about the planning procedure. It should be noted that Ponteland Town Council is a Planning Consultee, it is not the Planning Authority and it does not make the planning decision. PTC observes comments and sometimes objects.

The current process is that if we object we can go to the West Area Planning Committee where we are allocated 5 minutes to present our reasoning, plus 5 minutes for any other objectors. If required another 5 minutes is available for a County Councillor to speak. After that, the applicant has 5 minutes to put their case and then neither party may speak as the NCC Committee carry out their deliberations.

They then vote either to Grant, Refuse, Defer or Agree to visit the site.

NCC have been criticised for slow decision making on planning and the current procedure described above is under review. PTC has replied to the NCC consultation and on 1 April 2015 NCC will have decided whether to change the current system with the aim of speeding up decision making on planning.

3.14.1 Development in Ponteland

Proposed development is a concern for many residents who feel that protection of the Green Belt is a very important issue as demonstrated by the number of signs in Ponteland. Residents reply to NCC consultations in large numbers and Green Belt protection features strongly in public meetings and submissions.

Ponteland is a popular area with developers. During the last year:

- NCC approved up to 263 houses on the site of the former Police HQ.
- PTC and NCC objected to a developer's proposal to build up to 280 houses on Birney Hill. The developer appealed against the NCC decision and it went to a Public Enquiry in 2015. A decision from the DCLG is expected on or before 29 June 2015.
- PTC and NCC objected to a development proposal in Ponteland Park for 18 dwellings but in March 2015 the Planning Inspectorate ruled in an appeal in favour of building.

The Town Council is of the view that Ponteland's infrastructure has not kept pace with the growth in housing numbers. At the time of writing, 589 additional dwellings have been built or approved to be built in the Town Council area since April 2011.

The PTC Planning Chairman, Councillor Elizabeth Thompson, the Assistant Clerk Christine Holleyman and the rest of the Committee are to be congratulated on their dedication, integrity and common sense reviewing the increasing number of applications received.

3.15 Redevelopment

There is no news on the regeneration of Merton Way and it is sad to say that no progress has been made since last year. The area is under consideration by ARCH, the development company of NCC and the Town Council has little involvement.

3.16 Crime

We are fortunate to live in an area where recorded crime is amongst the lowest in England. However anti social behaviour and inconsiderate parking by a few residents remain concerns. Our local police continue to communicate and hold surgeries at Merton Hall, Waitrose and the Co-op on Broadway. There is also a regular meeting of the "Local Multi Agency Partnership Solving" Group (LMAPS), which has provided a useful venue for reviewing problems.

We continue to monitor traffic movement via the CCTV system which is used regularly by the police. We also have speed indicator signs that remind motorists that there is a speed limit on local roads and there are plans to expand the number of signs in permanent locations.

3.17 Meritorious Service Award

The effort required to make Ponteland a success cannot be achieved by the Council alone. PTC thanks all those residents who put in time as individuals or through organisations to enrich the quality of life in Ponteland. In the Council office, there is a board that lists the recipients of the Council's Meritorious Service Award.

3.17.1 PC Rob Anderson

This year the Council's Meritorious Award goes to PC Rob Anderson, the Ponteland Neighbourhood Beat Manager. Rob has been a PC in Ponteland for a number of years. He has an air of authority and is known for a direct but fair manner. He is an approachable policeman who communicates well and he works hard to keep Ponteland a safe and pleasant place to live. Although he does not look old enough, we are told that it is time for Rob to retire as a policeman. It is people like Rob who contribute time and effort that make Ponteland a desirable place to live and so it therefore gives the Town Council great pleasure in presenting this small token of appreciation to Rob Anderson.

3.18 Bus Users Group Working Party

This group continues to try and improve services to Ponteland. PTC has just replied to a consultation about a proposed change of bus services in Ponteland and we asked for consideration to be given to a re-routing of a local service to assist residents in Thornhill Road. The old adage of "use it or lose it" seems to apply in bus services.

4. THE BUDGET

PTC has worked hard to minimise the increase in local precept. The percentage increases in the last four years have been limited to: 2.9%, 3.0%, 2.8% and 2.0%. These low percentages have been achieved against a backdrop of some responsibilities such as cemeteries and toilets being transferred from the County to the Town Council.

For a band E household, the PTC part of the precept has moved from £77.21 to £83.41 – an increase of only £6.20 over four years and we believe this demonstrates our commitment to delivering value for money services.

The budget precept for 2013/14 totalled £349,631, in 2014/15 it increased to £358,815 and in 2015/16 it will be £368,828. Full details of the precept breakdown are included in Appendix D.

4.1 Setting the Budget

Each year Town Councillors discuss what improvements can be made in the following year. Some costs are standard such as office rent, staff salaries, heating, lighting, telephone and stationery. In addition, each Councillor can suggest things that they would like to see carried out in the following year and this generates a “Wish List”. A number of meetings then take place where the draft budget is discussed, and voted on. This includes a sum of money to fund the “wish list” items. The budget is agreed in January. A further meeting is held to discuss and agree which items will go forward to form an agreed project list for the year.

The wish list for 2014-15 has been actioned although a decision still has to be made on the projects to be implemented in 2015-16.

5. PRESTWICK CEMETERY

On 1 April 2013 the running of Prestwick Cemetery became PTC’s responsibility. PTC pays NCC a service level agreement for some work in the Cemetery but in addition, certain activities such as hedge cutting and minor improvements are now being carried out by PTC. It is pleasing to note that since PTC has taken over responsibility we have been getting good reports from residents. One issue of concern is that the amount of burial space is finite and there will be a need to acquire more land in a few years. Many other Councils in Northumberland are facing the same issue.

6 EVENTS

There have been a number of memorable events during the year and these ranged from prize giving events for gardeners and school children to fund raising concerts.

Record attendances were reported for Party in the Park in June and at the Rotary’s Duck Race in August.

Music in the Park was held in June and was hosted by Jonathan Miles and residents enjoyed a show of music and dance.

Again in August, a service was held to mark the outbreak of the First World War and the names of the fallen from Ponteland were read out in St Mary’s Church. This was followed in November by a Remembrance service and exhibition in the Memorial Hall attended by over 500 people. Thanks are due to all and especially Councillor Peter Cowey who took part in this moving event.

In September, Ponteland’s finest produce was exhibited in the Parish Flower Show and this was followed a month later by another well attended Opera Concert organised by the Rotary.

On 1 January, Ponteland’s annual wheelbarrow race was witnessed by a large crowd and the winner’s name was added to the Display Board in the Council office.

7. CONCLUSION

But of course, not everything is perfect and there are a number of issues that recur as complaints. We ask local residents for their continued support please in avoiding:

- litter, speeding, inconsiderate parking, parking on verges and pavements and unauthorised overnight parking

and we ask for the continued support of residents please in promoting:

- greenery in frontages and hedges and colours in borders

In summary, what we achieve is the result of hard work by all Councillors, particularly those who chair a committee or working group, and our dedicated Office staff, namely, Kath Mavin our Town Clerk, Jeanette Dodd, our Deputy Town Clerk, Christine Holleyman, our Assistant Clerk and Caroline Thompson our part time Administrative Assistant.

Lastly but certainly not least are our Contractors, Iain Clough, Michael Champion and Jim Scott who perform to a high standard and whose work is appreciated by everyone in Ponteland. We are often approached by residents to say how nice some of the displays look.

I am sure that I speak for all the Councillors when I say a very big **THANK YOU** to everyone for all your hard work and dedication.

Carl Rawlings