

Introduction

As is customary at this meeting I'll do a brief review of council business over the past year and look forward to this year. There will be time later to discuss any issues raised in my report.

Firstly, I'd like to thank my fellow councillors who volunteer their time throughout the year to help improve life in the village and provide a voice on planning and other consultations. Also, to North Yorkshire Divisional Councillor Caroline Goodrick who attends our council meetings and helps us navigate to the right people in NY Council and helps the village with grants from her Locality Budget.

I'd also like to thank the parish clerks who have supported us and done their utmost to keep us on track - no mean feat!

- Thanks go to Liz Martindale who left us at the end of November 2024 after three years in the post, during which time she helped coordinate all council activities, ensure we complied with the relevant codes and regulations, ensured a smooth handover to Anna, and worked selflessly on the village plan project.
- Thanks also to Anna who grew up and lived in Flaxton until her recent move to a local village. Anna has picked things up quickly during what is a busy period for the council when budgets are set, and the year-end financial and audit processes are carried out.

Special thanks go to Juliet Waters who until March 2025 had served as a councillor for almost three years after being co-opted following the local elections in May 2022.

Consequently, we have a vacancy for a councillor to be co-opted to serve for the remainder of this election term until May 2027. We'll publish details on the website and notice board once we've been notified by NYC Electoral Services that a formal election is not required.

In the meantime, if anyone wants to find out more about becoming a councillor and the co-option process, please speak to me or any other member of the council.

Routine 'Business as Usual' Activities

We held 12 council meetings during the year and had an overall councillor attendance rate of 90%. For the second time in her three years as a councillor Grace was the top attendee with a 100% attendance record.

Over the year we've been consulted on nine planning applications including five for property extensions and alterations, two for tree works, and two for certificates of lawfulness.

Unfortunately, the communication from North Yorkshire Council Planning has been poor since the passing of Ryedale District. We've been notified late of new applications on several occasions, and they have been slow in loading documentation to the planning portal. This week we had to request details directly from an applicant as Planning had not loaded any documentation three weeks after they had received the application!

We've continued to deal with our statutory requirements to keep the council's finances, processes, and procedures under review and up to date. Regrettably, this consumes a disproportionate amount of our time.

We've just received a positive internal audit report for year ended March 2025. You all have a right to inspect the council finances during the 30 working day 'public right to exercise rights' period usually starting in July. However, we do publish most materials on the website as is required by the Transparency Code for those who want to know more.

Village Maintenance

Over the year we've initiated several projects to improve things around the village.

- The footpath from Oak Busk Lane to the level crossing has been unearthed and cleared of vegetation after many years of neglect. The work was completed in one day by a villager using his mini digger supported by a few volunteer labourers. We'd like to thank the Green Gait Owners for funding the work and all those involved.
- After a meeting with NY Highways back in 2024, they agreed to re-surface this section of footpath and a further section between Oak Busk Lane and Back Lane. The work has now been scheduled for 23rd to 29th May 2025.
- We've started sprucing up the six benches in the village which are looking a bit tired.
- We've started preparing the village gateway at the old cattle grid for painting. We're awaiting a meeting with Highways to progress this further as the wooden posts have rotted and need replacing.
- We've selected a decorator to refresh the telephone box that houses the all-important defibrillator. Hopefully, this will be completed in the next month or so.
- We've recently replaced the defibrillator battery which is non-rechargeable and has a four to five year life.
- Three councillors act as guardians of the defibrillator responsible for keeping an eye on its status and checking things out each time the access code is issued by the emergency services.
- The bus stop signs have been updated with the correct service number and carrier.
- The signs around the village have been cleaned (and are probably due for a clean).
- From this year we'll be doing the grass cutting at the main junctions in the village, an activity that has been devolved to us by North Yorkshire Council along with their budget of £850. We're discussing when to do the first cut in a later meeting, but it is imminent.

Other Activities

We, along with the Community Hall Building Group formed in August 2024, secured a £5,000 grant from Councillor Goodrick's Locality Budget towards planning activities for the new Community Hall. Hopefully, someone present will be able to give a brief update on the latest plans and timescale though I have heard a separate village meeting may be on the cards.

In August 2024, in line with the Asset of Community Value (ACV) legislation, we organised a meeting to decide whether villagers wanted to submit a community bid for the Blacksmith's Arms after being informed that the owner intended to market the pub. Although villagers decided not to submit a bid, you may have noted that the pub is now being advertised for sale on the open market.

Road Condition and Speeding

There are then the persistent issues regarding poor road surfaces and speeding in and around the village.

- We, along with several villagers, have been in regular contact with Highways, York Council, our Divisional Councillor, and our local MP about the state of Scotchman Lane, which was made worse after the failed attempt to repair it using the 'miracle' Aussie machine.
- We have an invitation to meet with Highways in the next couple of weeks, so we'll get an update then. The meeting will also cover:
 - measures to deter delivery vehicles from parking on The Green in the most vulnerable locations, and
 - cutting drainage grips along York Lane to avoid the standing water hazard arising from heavy rain and snow melt.
- Several villagers and the council have complained directly to the Police and Highways about vehicles speeding in the village. This resulted in a vehicle speed tube being installed on Rice Lane for a week in April. We're trying to obtain the recorder data and see what proposals the Police and North Yorkshire Council have for reducing vehicle speeds.
- We need more than 100 hours of safety camera van attendance a year. Ultimately, the challenge will be obtaining funding for any new speed reduction measures which will undoubtedly be expensive.

Council Finances & Precept

On the subject of finance, we have set the precept for this year to £4,750 (an increase of 10% on the previous year's £4,321). This means that a Band D property now pays around £30 towards funding parish council activities. When compared with other councils in North Yorkshire this is less than the £34 median and £42 average Band D precept payment.

Around 85% of our costs are fixed and recur each year with little scope for reduction; staffing, village hall hires, memberships and subscriptions, insurance, website hosting and internal audit.

Staff costs and training account for 60% of our expenditure. Pay-scales and rates are not directly within our control as they are negotiated by unions and set on a national basis. We don't usually know about the terms of a pay award until a year after we have set the precept.

The remaining 15% of our costs are recurring but not annual covering village maintenance, repairs and consumables including, for example painting, defibrillator pads and batteries etc.

Unlike some other councils, rightly or wrongly, we don't aim to generate a surplus each year to top up our reserves which have remained untouched at around £2,100 in my time as a councillor.

There is some possible good news though. We set the precept in December 2024 before we decided in February 2025 to take on the junction grass cutting. We will incur some costs for the right grass cutting equipment, safety gear, insurance cover and fuel etc. but hopefully by using council members and volunteers to do the work we will generate a surplus which may offset next year's precept or be used to invest in other initiatives.

Anna has already posted the 2025/2026 budget breakdown on the finances section of the website.

Conclusion

That is the end of my update. Thank you for your attention.

I'm now open to questions which I am sure my fellow councillors will help me answer as running the council is a team effort.