

Acomb Parish Council – District Councillor’s Report June 2006

On April 25th I attended a meeting of the Age Concern Northumberland Liaison Committee, at which the guest speaker was Claire Poole from the newly launched Northumberland Home Improvement Agency, which provides advice, support and assistance to elderly, disabled and vulnerable people. They help older people to stay in their own homes for as long as possible, by organising repairs, improvements, maintenance or adaptations to meet their changing needs, whether they own their own home or live in privately rented accommodation. Many individuals of any age are worried about “cowboys” carrying out work on their properties. Before any work is carried out, a surveyor from the agency will visit the home, assess what needs to be done and arrange for an approved contractor to carry out the work. The advice service is free for those in receipt of benefits; otherwise there is a charge equivalent to 10% of the costs. The agency will also advise on sources of funding to pay for the work, and is more than happy to come out to speak to groups (01670 840469).

As a member of Tynedale Council’s Renewable Energy Working Group, I visited Kielder to find out about its shared biomass heating system, which provides heat and hot water to the Kielder Castle Visitor Centre, six new three-bedroom houses, the Rivermead Workshops (commercial units), Kielder Community First School and Kielder Youth Hostel. District heating systems are commonplace in Scandinavian countries, but this is one of the first of its kind in the UK. Locally grown wood is chipped and stored by Forest Enterprise, and then fed to a 300kw Austrian Koeb boiler in Kielder village. The hot water is piped to surrounding buildings, where heat exchangers transfer the energy into domestic central heating and hot water systems. A heat meter measures the amount of energy used by each customer, and the local community company, Kielder Community Enterprise Ltd, sends them monthly heating bills. We also called at Falstone Tearooms, which uses a wood pellet boiler and photovoltaic panels to produce heat, and the new Stonehaugh Village Hall, still under construction, which takes advantage of several types of renewable energy, including a small wind turbine and solar panels. The new hall is being built from Finnish pine, and is designed to be extremely energy-efficient.

Several post offices in Tynedale have been forced to close recently, or have had to change the way services are delivered. At the Tynedale Council’s Economy Overview and Scrutiny Committee on May 24th, we met with Mr. Ray Jefferson, the Rural Post Office Transfer Advisor from Post Office Ltd to discuss the long-term impact of post office closures on our communities. He explained that current government policy is to support rural post offices, and emphasised that there is no programme of post office closures. In order to have a post office in a community, however, there have to be suitable premises, and somebody prepared to run it. In areas without a conventional post office, several different models are being created: at Fourstones, the post office is reopening as part of the garage, at Greenhaugh the post office is housed in the Hollybush Inn, Allenheads post office is run as a satellite of Allendale, while in the Bishop Auckland area, a mobile post office tours the more remote villages. Post Office Ltd reported to central government in December 2005 on innovative ways of delivering post office services. The government is due to respond at the end of 2006, and this response will determine the level of support given to rural post offices in the future.

If you would like to discuss any of these matters further or if you have suggestions or concerns, please contact me on 01434 681487, e-mail jane.wrigley@tynedale.gov.uk.

Jane Wrigley, May 30th 2006