

Westminster Confidential

David Hencke's news, views, investigations and much more

Exclusive: Northiam, the picture postcard Sussex village that hides a fractious community of hate and harassment

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Northiam village

By David Hencke and Joseph Eden

An alleged horse murder, police protection at a parish meeting and council office and notice board defaced with hated filled graffiti

You could not imagine a more bucolic English scene. Beautiful rolling Sussex countryside, white painted country cottages, a heritage steam railway running by the village and Bodiam Castle, an imposing moated medieval ruin dominating the valley.

But this quintessential sleepy English village hides some of the most vicious in fighting by former and sitting parish councillors and their friends involving hate filled Facebook posts, false allegations, dodgy contracts, one sided council investigations, favours for friends, while Sussex police and the Rother District Council try to pretend nothing is happening here.

If this was inner city London or Birmingham such battles would be factional or party political. But here it is not politics but rival personalities who either want to control events or who are convinced dirty business is afoot in secret meetings.

A Midsomer Murders village?

If there is a script for this story it could either be an Agatha Christie novel or an episode of Midsomer Murders. So far only a grazing horse has died, but given the tensions here one wonders whatever will happen next.

So how has this happened? The trigger for all this is a remarkable pot of gold given to this little village by the former Tory Cabinet minister Michael Gove. As levelling up secretary he approved a massive £1.4 million loan in 2019 to enable the parish council to purchase a former Blue Cross animal rescue centre so the village could use its ample green acres for community use.

There had been much consternation in the village when the Blue Cross decided to close and sell the site as the original land had been donated by a local farmer and it was a valued part of the village as well as providing much employment.

The parish council was united in wanting this centre. Before they bid to buy it former Beatle Sir Paul McCartney came to the village with the chief executive of the Blue X centre to see if it could be saved. He even offered to underwrite the cost but the organisation was determined to close it.

His earlier letter of support for the Blue X Centre before it closed is here:

Paul McCartney

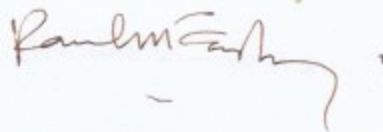
26th February 2010

Dear Kim and Blue Cross Head Office,

I'm writing in support of many local people who value very highly the Blue Cross that we've had for many years in Northiam. It's a great boon to the community and would be sorely missed.

May I appeal to you to find a way, perhaps with our help, to keep this wonderful facility open for the local people who value it so much?

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Paul McCartney', with a long, sweeping tail on the 'y'.

Paul McCartney

The purchase of this 34 acre greenfield site has meant that all the residents face an extra parish council precept on top of their council tax to pay back a Public Loans Work Board loan backed by the Treasury for the next 50 years.



Horses looked after by Lauren Sapsted graze on the former Blue X site – known as St Francis Fields

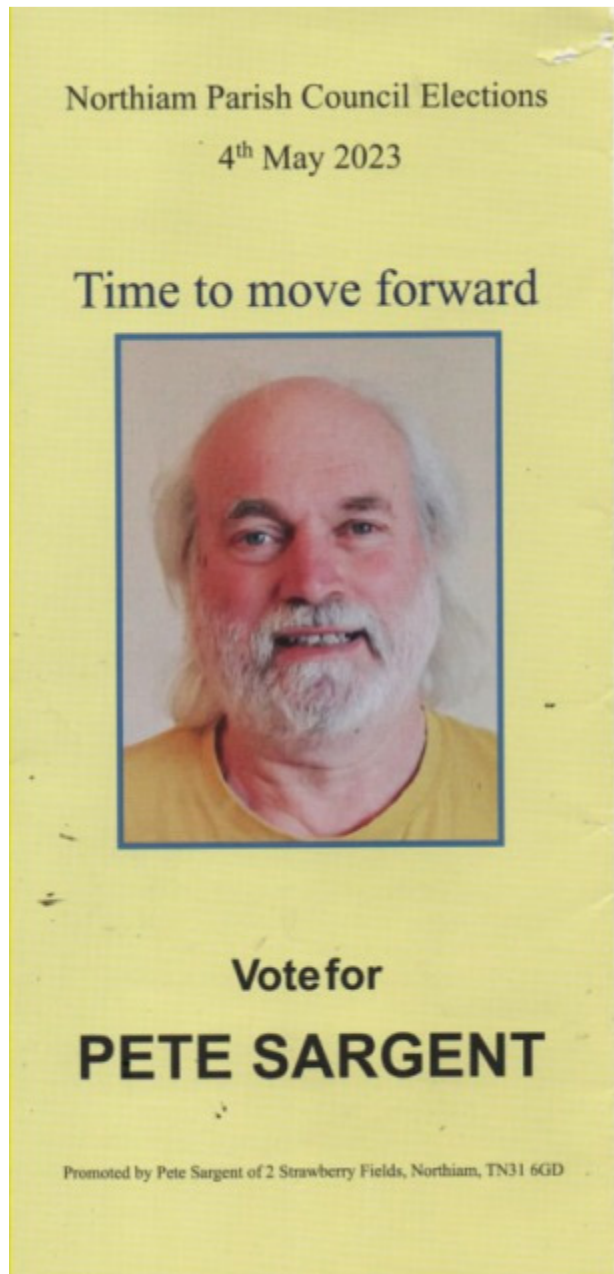
The row emerged about what to do with the land once it was owned by the council. At the time when all was sweetness and light a proposal was drawn up by then councillor Penny Farmer with the aim of providing local facilities for local people with talk of a riding school, workshops and local people being allowed to graze their own horses and allowing a small number of new houses to rent to local people who couldn't afford Sussex's rocketing house prices. These would have been built on an 'exception site' basis and was limited to an initial build of six.

Then councillor Penny Farmer, who has an equine background was also asked to provide costings of how the stabling and grazing could be made to work so that government loan would be affordable while allowing public use and her costings were included in the proposal to the government, to help convince them to grant the loan. The proposal and map of the huge site is [here](#) –

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1PJLomhPMtDrIGl3yNsnQofsjlJDopvPcRQcYpiIW_24/edit?pli=1

The first sign of things going wrong was when it was decided to hand over the running of the site to a non profit making Community Interest Company with a clause saying the directors could take profits from developments on the site and it was allowed to keep all the revenue from the site to spend as it saw fit.

The big issue with the CIC is that as a corporate body, it has cost the parish council more money than they have created or put back into the project. The Parish Council “grants” them £1500 a year, they use an office and storage space as well as land owned by the Parish Council rent free which the council could otherwise rent out and they have not achieved anything the Parish Council couldn’t have done itself despite not having “power of competence”. Last financial year – they got double the grant -two tranches of £1500. They also rent unknown land/buildings on the site to unknown people for £1460 a year – there is no record as to who or what this is all about at the Parish Council; it has never voted or agreed to this use. The latest accounts are [here](#).



Pete Sargent

When it was set up it soon emerged that other councillors had different ideas and one in particular Pete Sargent, who chaired the council at the time and is still a member, was seen by opponents as the "village Godfather figure". He is a smooth talking man with a lot of friends

in the village but rather like Macavity in the musical Cats it is his friends who do a lot of the arrangements. Macavity is not there.

Pete Sargent said: “Several of them stated that they would be interested in helping set up the CIC and so I called them all together and asked them if they would like to set up the company, which they duly did. They chose themselves.”

This is not entirely true. Judith O’ Connor, the chair was tipped for the post in advance while Carolyn Pierce, previously a councillor, who had worked on the Blue X rescue centre for 20 years, was denied a post when she requested one. It is said by Jon Streatfeild, a former chairman of the council, that Sargent kept the book with the directorships to himself for six months until all the posts were filled, mainly to members and friends of his in the local Bonfire Society and the Village Hall Trust.

Later when one councillor, Ben Dallimore, in 2022 demanded to see the minutes kept at the parish council office, the then clerk to the council, Nicola Ideson, threatened to call the police, started messing up files and tried to make out she was being physically threatened and harassed and pushed him out of the office. He had the foresight to have recorded the conversation and when she complained he made it clear he had recorded it. In February 2023, she contacted the Information Commissioner’s Office to say that as a Parish Councillor, he had recorded her at work and she wanted a copy of the data. After some arguing back and forth with the ICO about the nature and purpose of the recording, he gave her an edited copy of the recording which only contained her information..

It soon emerged there was a reason for this secrecy. For instead of planning new community facilities the first thing that happened was an approach to a housing developer suggested by retired architect, Julian Luckett, partner of Judith O’Connor, who chairs the CIC and an administrator of the Northiam Facebook page.

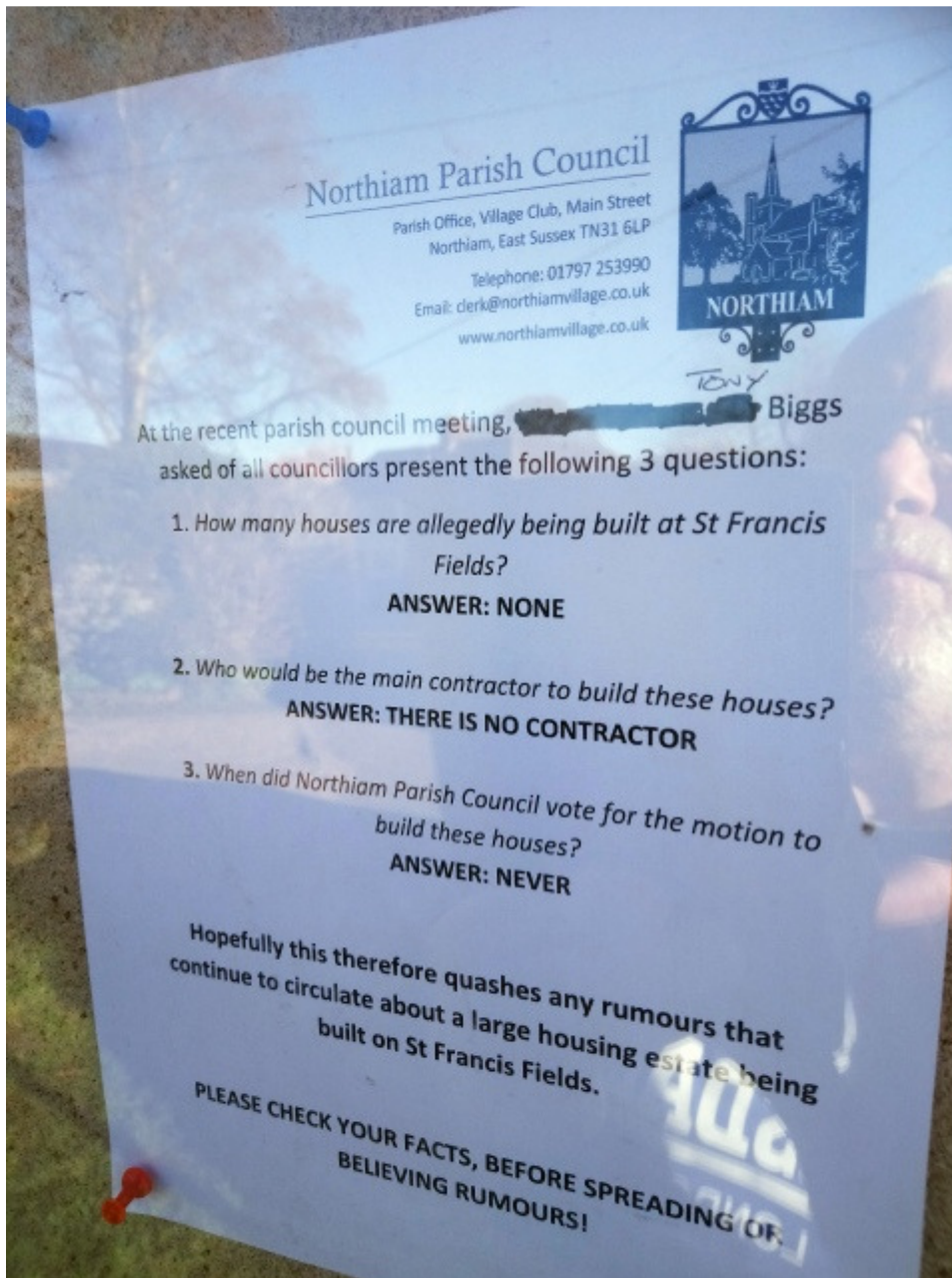
Jennifer Owen Construction Ltd, a local firm, had already built expensive £500,000 four bedroomed detached homes in the village, and was contacted by Pete Sargent’. He said: “I contacted Mr Malcolm Edmonds, the MD of Jennifer Owen Construction Ltd to discuss possible options on part of a field to which they owned the access. This plot was less than one acre in size, so 3% of the total site rather than 33% as suggested. Initial contact was by email due to lockdown and so a site meeting was impossible. A year later when I was no longer a Councillor he made contact again. I forwarded their email to the new Chair of the Council and the Chair of the CIC, both of whom decided that they did not want to follow it up at that time.”

This turns out not be quite true. A memo from Georgina Jackson, a later parish clerk, reveals there was a secret meeting with the firm to develop one field where there was access and it was not to build cheaper rented homes for ordinary local people but expensive new homes.

Sargent had also written an internal report where other areas of the site could be considered as ‘brown field’ and therefore considered for development. This was in spite that he had given assurances, including in TV interviews and in emails to the government, that the proposed purchase of the site was to save it from development, as well as providing a community asset.

The development foundered because the firm discovered the homes would have to be marketed as leasehold because the parish owned the land and it would not get the best price. The firm was also worried it would have to go out to competitive tender and it could lose the contract. The company was not interested in developing the whole site, despite rumours to the contrary.

A fake Northiam Parish flyer was put out to worried residents about this when news leaked out.



The clerk took legal advice about this and was advised this would have been illegal if they had gone ahead and the parish council could have been prosecuted for breaking the terms of Gove's loan.

But there was a much bigger row on the horizon that was to lead to nasty consequences for anyone who objected. During the pandemic a decision was made to lease 10 acres of the site to a horse trader, Lauren Sapsted, who would keep horses for wealthy owners, on the site, while at the same time blocking a local resident who wanted to graze her two horses on community owned land. Several other local horse owners were also turned away. The exclusivity clause in Sapsted's lease meant that local residents were barred from using much of the site and none of the equine facilities including the sand schools, even though they were funding it through the council tax.

The deal only open to her was she would pay the parish £12,000 a year to lease the land and the parish council even agreed to pay half her £3000 legal costs and she would pay a small sum every month to repay the loan. It was renewable. The loan was not disclosed to the full council. It turned out that the deal could have been illegal because it broke procurement rules and a planning restriction by Rother District Council that forbade commercial activity on the land. Pete Sargent defends it as done during the pandemic and claims that 50:50 arrangement on legal fees is "common practice".

Events took an extraordinary turn when the lease came up for renewal . After her horse died Lauren Sapsted demanded the parish paid for security cameras to be put up on the land which costing £14,000 – more than the annual rent. The parish council demurred in drawing up such a contract but unknown to them Sue Schlesinger, chair of the parish council at that time and sister in law of the famous Hollywood director, John Schlesinger who made Midnight Cowboy, secretly made a separate contract granting this without telling the council after Lauren asked her to do it.

The security cameras never came and the shenanigans over the two contracts were too much for Lauren and she left 18 months later leaving the parish with no income and moved her business elsewhere. Sue Schlesinger resigned but has lately been re-elected to the council.

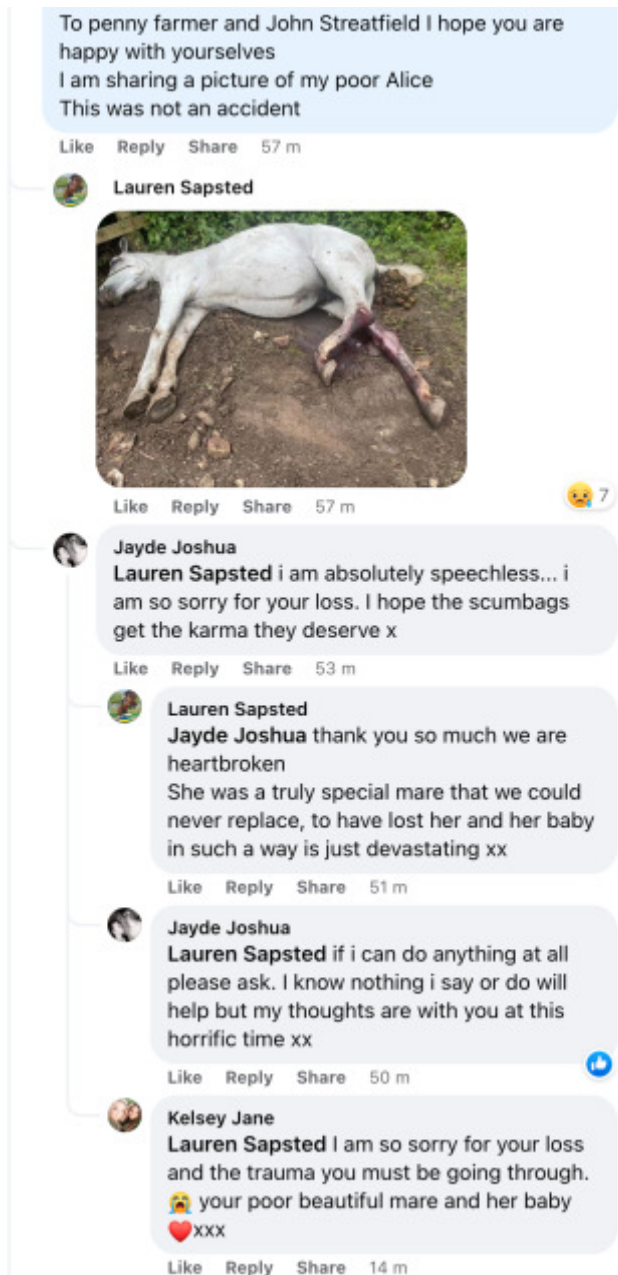


Entrance to Lauren's Sapsted's leased business

Lauren still claims her horse was murdered today and the two former councillors are to blame.

There was also a nasty consequence to all of this. When Lauren discovered Alice, a valuable pregnant horse, had been found dead, she was convinced it had been murdered in the night and blamed two councillors, Penny Farmer and Jon Streatfeild, a former chair of the council, for killing it because she had been erroneously told that they wanted to take over her business. Councillor Robert Maltby, a friend of Sargent, gave Lauren the report which he obtained from Sargent of Penny's 2019 submission, which had originally been requested by Sargent, saying it was her current plan in 2022.

The murder allegation was not just village gossip it was put up on the Northiam and Nearby Facebook page by Lauren on the 16th May 2022. The site administrator, none other than CIC Director Judith O'Connor allowed this post to remain.



You can also see the shock of local people who now believed they were scumbags. Lauren called Sussex police asking them to open a murder investigation. They found no evidence. To do this the councillors -one of them a middle aged lady – would have got up in the dark middle of the night and tramped across fields. Two people questioned this. One, Ben Dallimore, a former councillor, was up in the middle of that night because he and his wife had a new baby. Their house is close to the field and they heard nothing. Another resident was surprised because if strangers were nearby, their dogs immediately start barking. They heard nothing either.



Jon Streatfeild –
former chairman of Northiam Parish Council

Then the real harassment began. The parish managed to get sympathetic support from two top officials at Rother District Council to investigate then councillors Penny Farmer and Jon Streatfeild. Lorna Ford, chief executive, and Lisa Cooper, a monitoring officer, got a lawyer from Chichester District Council to prepare a report saying Streatfeild was guilty of leaking the confidential contract with Sapsted which revealed the arrangements for the lease and it was not in the public interest. They paid the lawyer £12,000 for the report but there are no records of their agreement or how much time was spent on the report which sounds highly irregular for a local authority. The finding contradicted later legal advice obtained by Jon Streatfeild that said the deal with Sapstead broke the law – so it was in the public interest for this to be released.

Separately when the police inquired about concerns brought by Jon Streatfeild about what was going on at Northiam, Lorna Ford sent emails to the police that everything was fine there.

Another report was commissioned by the parish council – at a cost of another £12,000 from an independent firm – which was skewed not to include any investigation into the relationship between the parish council and community interest company – which was central to the development and subject of concerns. This was prepared just before a public meeting in Northiam where Streatfeild and Farmer were treated as pariahs, including being spat at by people who believed they were horse murderers.

So bad was this meeting that at a future hustings meeting in the village last year Sussex Police arranged security to protect them – Penny Farmer, a former police officer, was so worried she did not attend.

Last year Streatfeild was defeated in the parish elections as most people believed the allegations. But he also had to put up with further stress. His front garden was sprayed with weedkiller, a parish noticeboard was covered in graffiti denouncing him, and two stalkers appeared to harass him at his place of work.

One, Michael Court was served with an adult ASBO by the police to keep good conduct for the next two years. Another Richard Smith, an ex policeman, came into the pub where he worked part time and denounced him in front of all the pub customers – obviously hoping he would get the sack. But this has not happened.

All these details of the harassment has been put to the police and the Rother District Council. The official statement from Sussex Police is completely defensive.

Rosie Ross, divisional commander at East Sussex police replied: “As a journalist you will know the rules around personal data and sharing of such data. This request is in the context of named individuals and actions we may have taken to either safeguard or sanctions used, as and such cannot be shared. Even if it were a Freedom of Information request, it would be exempt under s40 FOIA for these same reasons.”

We actually didn't need to put in a request as we have seen the terms of the order against Michael Court and there were plenty of witnesses to the incidents.

Rother District Council was equally defensive.

A Rother District Council spokesperson said: “The district council has a duty to put in place arrangements to manage complaints against elected members for the town and parishes. We deal with all code of conduct complaints diligently and fairly in relation to all complainants, and we believe we have done so in this case.

“It would not be appropriate to comment in detail on individual code of conduct complaints as they are confidential.

“However, we have repeatedly advised Mr Streatfeild and others of the limited powers that Rother District Council has to become involved in matters relating to other councils, especially with regards to matters such as the Blue Cross Site. We have advised Mr

Streatfeild how best to pursue those complaints via organisations which do have the power to intervene, including the police.”

Rother District Council have not investigated any complaints brought against Peter Sargent, even though he helped instigate the proposed development of the land after publicly stating that the loan was for a community asset, lent parish council money without the knowledge of other councillors to help cover Sapsted’s legal bills which is unlawful and brought a complaint for criminal damage on the site, on the very day that we visited it to research this article and witnessed no such criminal damage.

Again we have seen all the details involving the Rother District Council officers involved and have published this in the public interest.

One bizarre reaction from Sussex Police was to suggest the complaints went to the National Audit Office, the Parliamentary watchdog that scrutinises Whitehall. Since the abolition of the Audit Commission by the Tories, which did scrutinise parish councils as well as larger bodies, there is no body that has the power to regulate local government.

As a result the NAO said it could not conduct inquiries into parish councils like the now defunct Audit Commission. But Adeel Shah, the NAO’s FOI and Correspondence Officer gave Jon Streatfeild very useful advice. He said the answer was to go to the external auditor of the council and helpfully looked up who was responsible.

Now the external auditor, **PKF Littlejohn LLP**, based in London, is looking at Northiam Council following two separate complaints. One is from Penny Farmer, which is challenging the whole way the council is managing its budget and whether certain earmarked funds, such as for a sewer outlet, are being raided, and whether the parish could run out of money.



Ben Dallimore on holiday

Another is from Ben Dallimore, another former councillor, about how money has been promised to Wealden Traditional Construction Ltd for the design plans of the new Football Pavilion to be claimed back from S106 (money given by builders Persimmon)held by Rother DC. The contract to build the new pavilion will be worth £300,000.

Now the main employee of this company is local villager John Cusden, who plays for Northiam Football Club. His application was supported by retired architect, Julian Luckett and Pete Sargent. Companies House records show that his own company, Wealden Design and Build Limited has just gone bust and is in the hands of a liquidator. The new company is registered at the same address in Rye that the old company recently moved to. It has one new director, Charles Dawson, but its website praises the work of John Cusden over the last 10 years when he was director of the bust company.

A letter from the external auditor has now raised 11 procedural issues that led to the granting of the money which the council must answer. It also discloses that the external auditors may have received more than two complaints.

Mr Dallimore is now facing the same treatment as meted out to Jon Streatfeild. He has been recording council meetings and did some filming after one was held in private. The council are now discussing with Rother District Council whether they can impose restrictions on his activities by imposing the equivalent of an adult ASBO.

Mr Sargent did not want to comment on these complaints. His case is that he is the victim of harassment not the other councillors. The only evidence we could find about this is that someone scratched on the council office that it was "The Bank of Pete Sargent" – of which there is no evidence that he has ever taken money for himself.

We have done this long special report to illustrate what has happened to local government at parish pump level now there is no official scrutiny by national bodies and local media has disappeared in this part of East Sussex. The irony is the lack of scrutiny has led to people putting too much on the internet so there are a wealth of documents to stand up exactly what has been going on in Northiam.

Michael Gove has left the new Labour government plans to revive a smaller version of the Audit Commission to regulate local government again. The new government need to act not only to police the growing number of technical bankruptcies in big local councils but to ensure that smaller bodies don't end up being run by cliques helping each other out. The police and bigger authorities are obviously not up to the job and the NAO has much bigger fish to fry in policing waste and dodgy deals in Whitehall.