**WOODLAND PARISH COUNCIL**

**Minutes of General Meeting held on**

**Thursday 13 March 2025**

**at**

**Woodland Village Hall**

**Present**

Cllr Peckett (Chair), Cllr Timms (Vice Chair), Cllr Teasdale, Cllr Brydon, Cllr Gardner, Cllr Rutter,

Cllr James Cosslett (DCC Evenwood and Barony), David Buckee (Parish Clerk)

Six members of the public also present

**1. Apologies**

None

**2. Acceptance and signing of minutes from meetings 14 November 2024 & 9 January 2025**

All councillors agreed the minutes from the meeting on 14 November 2024 and 9 January 2025

**3. Matters Arising**

Cllr Gardner mentioned that in the minutes of 9 January 2025 reference is made to the complaints raised against her being put on Durham County Council website. These have been put on the Woodland Parish Council website instead, as only complaints which go to a full hearing will be published by DCC.

No other matters arising

**4. Councillor vacancy**

Andrew Hall is willing to stand as a candidate to fill the current vacancy, and Simon Land expressed his wish to stand at the meeting as well. As there are two candidates, this will require a vote. As there is an election in May, anyone co-opted to fill the role will only be on the PC for 2 months and Cllr Gardner suggested that with anyyone wishing to be a councillor needing to stand at the May elections it was perhaps better to leave the vacancy unfilled. Councillors agreed.

**5. Election 1 May 2025**

The Clerk provided details of the important dates relevant to the election:

**Thursday 20 March 4pm** Publication of Notice of Election

**Fri 21 March 10am to Wed 2 April 4pm** Candidate Submission of nomination papers, consent to nominations and home address forms.

**Wed 2 April by 4pm** Deadline for candidate withdrawal

**Thurs 3 April by 4pm** Publication of Statement of Persons Nominated

**Wed 23 April 5pm** – no later than (might be combined with 3 April Notice) Publication of notice of poll where election is contested

**Thurs 1 May 7am to 10pm** Polling day

**Fri 2 May** Counting of Parish and town council elections and clerks notified of results where contested. Likely to be pm when hear

Nomination papers need to be hand written and then handed in to County Hall (Durham Room) in person. They cannot be posted or emailed in.

There is no ‘rolling over’ of councillors and anyone who wishes to be on their council from May onwards must complete and submit nomination papers.

Advice from DCC is to get them in early. They do a brief check to ensure that they are filled in correctly with a more detailed check done later, so if they are left to the last minute there may not be enough time to get them corrected, particularly if they have been taken in on behalf of someone else.

Cllr Peckett suggested that all the completed nomination papers be taken to DCC by the Chair and Clerk so that the responsibility does not rest on one person. Cllrs agreed that for those wishing to do so, their completed nominations papers be put in an envelope with their name on the front and deliver to the Clerk by 5pm on Monday 24 March. Arrangements will then be made for the Chair and Clerk to hand deliver them to DCC.

If anyone wishes to withdraw their nomination and does so after 2 April, their name will still be on the voting paper.

Results of elected persons will be published on DCC website and will also be sent to the Clerk

New Councillors take up their positions on Tuesday 6 May

New Council must have its Annual Council meeting between Wed 7 & Thursday 22 May inclusive, where the first item is to elect a Chair.

Keep an eye out on the elections page at DCC for information [DCC‘s elections page](https://www.durham.gov.uk/elections2025), CDALC have an elections page [CDALC Elections webpage](https://cdalc.info/members-area/elections/) as does Electoral commission [Electoral Commission’s Candidate Guidance](https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance-candidates-parish-council-elections-england)

The Clerk will cascade any further information as it is received.

Indicative figures received are for an average election cost to WPC of £2,851.41 although unclear whether this is subject to VAT.

Cllr Gardner advised that as DCC do not publish the names of candidates until 3 April, we will not know how many are standing, so whereas in the past candidates could withdraw applications so that an election was not necessary, this is now no longer an option as it was felt that candidates were being pressurised to withdraw. It is likely that an election will have to take place this year unlike in previous years, as there are likely to be more candidates standing than Councillor seats.

Voters will be asked to pick 7 names on the election paper; any papers with fewer candidates ticked will be disregarded. It will give full instructions on the voting slip.

During the pre-election period Thursday 20 March and polling day, candidates need to be very careful in terms of publicity, for example photos, to ensure that they are not seen to be trying to influence voters. Clerk to send out details to councillors.

**6. Public participation**

Query raised from the last minutes regarding the payment of £840 to Woodland Community Group which it was said would not be cashed, and whether after 6 months the cheque would become out of date and invalid and the monies could be used for something within the village. Agreed that if the cheque was not cashed after 6 months, the funds would go back into the PC reserves and be available for use.

**7. Playpark**

The Clerk submitted an application to reclaim the VAT paid on 7 February, and expected to hear back within 60 days from then, hopefully early April, with monies being paid direct to the account.

Cllr Peckett said that contractors have done a thorough survey of the playpark and area, and work is still expected to start towards the end of March. Once we have a confirmed date, this will be put on the website and Cllr Peckett will try and inform as many people as possible.

It will be necessary to close the playpark whilst the work is being done. It will be cordoned off and proposed that a large ‘Park Closed’ sign be put up.

Cllr Peckett has received comments that part of the play park is being greasy with moss. He has some oxygen bleach, which he intends to put down which kills the moss. This is not a harmful product. It needs to be put down when the surface is damp for it to be effective and the dead moss will then need to be removed.

The land agent at Raby has now given formal approval to the murals,etc being done on the path. Cllr Gardner will chase the company regarding the murals.

Looking to get publicity through Teesdale Mercury when work has been done. The school council are keen to be involved and try out. Looking to invite Deborah Snowdon who was heavily involved with getting the project off the ground, Woodland Village Hall and The Edge who provided monies towards the equipment, Cllrs Potts and Cosslett who kindly gave monies from their allowances, TAP who provided funds. We will also need to send photos to Awards 4 All and Hadrian Trust who provided grants.

Simon Land made the point to be careful about any publicity during the pre-election period to avoid current councillors being perceived to be disadvantaging any non-councillors who are standing for election, and to perhaps check with Electoral Services

Cllr Peckett raised the possibility of a camera being put up overlooking the playpark to provide security whilst the work is being done and beyond, but concerns raised over the fact that children use the playpark. Cllr Gardner raised the point that the village hall has CCTV and children use that venue, everywhere we go is covered by cameras, we are even captured by doorbells as we walk past houses. She agreed that it would be useful for the playpark to be covered by cameras to deter anti-social behaviour and there will be rules & regulations that we will need to look at.

**8. Grass cutting**

We have approached Batsons of Tow Law (who do the cutting at Lynesack & Softley) and Richard Toward (who we used last year) to provide quotes for grass cutting, and are still awaiting a response. The clerk has spoken with them, Batsons said that they were keen to quote but have still not come back. Richard Toward was under the impression that his contract last year would roll over. He feels that the cuts will need to be fairly frequent to avoid the grass getting too long and then damaging his equipment. He is to provide us with some suggestions and costs for a deep cut up to the wall and also for smaller 1m deep cuts so that we can decide how many the PC can afford within budgets.

Clerk to email councillors with figures once received.

**9. Finance and Financial update**

Balance currently stands at £31,783.30. From that there will be the other 50% of the Playground to pay £19,852.02, reserves to be kept at £4k, election costs nearly £3k, so pending the VAT refund of £4,444.16, this leaves just over £5k available.

Payments made since the last meeting have been to the Village Hall for room hire, CDALC for Finance & Budget training, TEEC for web hosting, and finally the donation for the village show. The cheque of £840 just issued to Woodland Community Group is not included in the figures.

Another invoice received of £72 to TEEC which has been queried with them. This relates to the gov.uk domain whereas the previous invoice relates to the web hosting. The PC has to use the gov.uk domain as will all councils so have no other option available. We are still waiting to hear back from TEEC regarding cost of having dedicated councillor email addresses, and also for a copy of the original contract with them.

The clerk confirmed that everything is now running smoothly with Virgin Money.

**10. Plans & aims for Woodland Parish Council for 2025**

Cllr Timms provided an update on feedback from the Facebook page request for ideas. There were a total of 13 suggestions made, some of which were duplicated.

1. Litter picking, suggested once a quarter. Information pack now received from DCC, we can loan the equipment from them, will need to do a site assessment, we pick a date and then request the equipment which is on a first come first served basis. Equipment is litter picking sticks adult & child size, bag hoops, Hi-Viz vests, blue bags, all free of charge. DCC will collect the bags of rubbish. The village hall have an Easter Fun Day taking place on 17 April which we need to avoid, so decided to provisionally look at arranging it 26/27 April. Clerk will contact the clerk at Lynesack & Softley to see if they want to liaise and be involved and coordinate to do their side of the village. PC will need to do risk assessments.
2. Speed awareness. This has been covered previously, at the last speed van checks no-one was caught speeding. Cllr Teasdale said that vans have been in the village several times over the last few months. As far as permanent flashing speed signs are concerned, this was felt to be a good idea, but costs are prohibitive. Simon Land said that some time ago he had obtained a quote to buy the sign which was about £1,700. However DCC have to install and maintain them, and this cost has just risen to £11,750 for a 5 year period. This was felt to be unaffordable. Cllr Cosslett mentioned that there was the possibility of funding being available, and he will investigate.
3. Dog poo around the village, do we need extra bins and signs. It was felt that those responsible dog owners who already clear up after their dogs will continue to do so, and those who don’t will be unlikely to change irrespective of how many signs and bins are available. The only practical option would be for cameras to be put up to monitor. Point raised that there is felt to be a sufficient number of bins already available. Not practical to offer free dog poo bags.
4. Planters around the village and picnic tables on the village green. Discussed the issue of planters/hanging baskets being looked after, and the need for plants to be watered and fed throughout the summer. Felt that whilst the idea is good in theory, in practice unless volunteers come forward to look after them on a regular basis, the practicalities make it difficult to undertake. With regard to picnic tables on the green, the idea is liked but not felt to be practical. There is a bench already there, and the part of the green that is most popular is not within Woodland PC area. Felt that Picnic tables would interfere with children playing football and it is unlikely they would be moved when grass cutting is done resulting in looking unsightly with long grass round them.
5. Information board looking tatty as are some of the benches. Cllr Brydon will have a look at the board and it is suspected that it and the bench just need a clean to remove the green marks on them. Other benches will be looked at to see what work is necessary.
6. Overhanging tree branches near the playpark. Some are at eye height in the way of anyone walking along the grass verge. Cllr Gardner to arrange for these to be removed by qualified and insured persons
7. Slime at playpark – already covered above.
8. Christmas tree to be funded by PC. Not known where it would be put. There is already a tree put in the village hall which is decorated for people to enjoy, and if the PC were to put one up it would need to be outside, raising the issues of keeping it safe from the public and how to stop lights and baubles being stolen. Felt that it might be a better idea to put lights up in trees near the playpark, possibly solar lights as there is no power supply there, and this will be investigated.
9. Extra Grit bins between the cemetery and the end of Middleton Road towards Cust Barn. This is felt to be highways department responsibility, although it was pointed out that the existing two in the village are owned by the PC. Unsure where any new ones could be sited and felt that the roads are already well gritted. Discussed the issues that individual members of the public gritting outside their properties will be liable in the event of any accidents then caused. Suggested that perhaps the village hall could have one, and this will be taken to their next meeting for discussion by their committee
10. Cemetery chapel to be repurposed as a visitor centre. Cllr Gardner stated that this has been discussed previously, and the issue is that we do not know for certain who owns the cemetery chapel. A survey was commissioned by Simon Land some time ago, and at that time around £150k would need to be spent on it, although other lower figures have subsequently been mentioned. Opinion was that until ownership can be confirmed by deeds/land registry, nothing further could be progressed. If the PC were to apply for grants or agree to work with a third party who applies for grants to take over the cemetery chapel and refurbish it, the PC would be responsible and liable for the ongoing upkeep and maintenance, which it cannot afford to do, and also in grant applications one of the first questions is usually ‘do you own the property’ or ‘do you lease it’. If we say it is leased, a copy of the lease will need to be provided, and if we answer we own it, without any documentary evidence that we do, we could be liable for fraud in the event of any complaints. Cllr Gardner added that in her opinion having a visitor centre in a cemetery is not the right place, particularly as the cemetery is a place where people may be paying their respects to loved ones. The original purpose of the cemetery chapel as somewhere to meet before/after burials is now no longer relevant to modern times, and the village hall is available as an alternative. In her opinion the chapel has no architectural value, has very little historical value, and any money spent on it by the PC would have massive detrimental effect to the PC finances.

Simon Land explained that Woodland PC used to be Woodland Parish Council & Burial Board and there is a document in the chapel from Teesdale District Council agreeing to take over the cemetery with the exception of the War Memorial and the Chapel. His suggestion is that it could be set up as an historical reminder of why Woodland is here, as a result of the coal. Butterknowle Village Hall hold a number of artefacts from Gaunless Valley Heritage Trust about the area which had previously been held in the old visitor centre which he used to manage on a voluntary basis. He still gets calls from people wishing to visit the centre for research. He accepted that there are no toilets and poor facilities in the Cemetery Chapel, but felt that a joint venture with the Village Hall Committee could be an option at times when the visitor centre was open, which would benefit the village hall as well. There is money available through Lottery Heritage Fund and any funding would create not only a heritage centre but would get the chapel renovated including the roof and the leaning back wall. The last verbal figure he was quoted was £35k for the work. There is no tourism in Woodland, and he felt that a visitor centre would get people in to the village and is a chance for Woodland to put itself on the map, and it would be a shame if the opportunity was missed.

Cllr Gardner questioned why we needed another building, when the village hall was available where an exhibition could be done at certain times throughout the year. Mr Land said that the PC needs to do something with the chapel, as it owns it, and questioned why the PC received £10k Covid business grant if it didn’t own it. He said that the PC is charged business rates on the building (although this is offset by relief so nothing is charged), and was eligible for the Covid grant as the building is classed as business premises and is owned by the PC. Cllr Gardner did not feel that this was the reason for the grant, with other parish councils also receiving the grant under special rules at the time. Cllr Rutter asked whether it can be clarified one way or the other.

A member of the public agreed that the village hall was a more suitable place for any display / exhibition, but said that it needs to be clarified who owns the cemetery chapel before it deteriorates further and becomes a security risk.

Agreed that ownership needs to be investigated.

Cllr Brydon mentioned that he had been approached by a member of the public saying that a headstone had been damaged by the wall. He has had a look, the wall is fine, and he can see no damage on the headstone, but will have another look. As the PC is no longer responsible for the cemetery following its transfer to DCC, he will advise that any issues need to be taken up with DCC direct.

1. Removal of soil heap from cemetery. There are two soil heaps at the top of the cemetery, which are not visible from the front of the cemetery. The same issue has been raised before, burial services were contacted to remove it, but unable to do so at that time until better weather, since when nothing has happened, this being around 18/24mths ago. ACTION: Clerk to contact Burial Services to progress, with backfill of sunken graves and removal of surplus soil.

**11. Planning**

No local plans submitted.

With regard to the Hamsterley Forest development, the applicants have asked for a 3 month extension period to allow them to produce more reports, which DCC have agreed. Hamsterley Forest Action Group have identified points that the planning application falls down on, identifying missing reports which they have detailed on the Facebook page, and now feel that they have been used and taken advantage of by the applicants who will now be going away to write these reports. As a result HFAG will be quiet about further identified planning anomalies, and will focus instead on how nice the forest looks now and how it will be destroyed by any development. Nearly 400 objections have been submitted, and the PC may need to rewrite its own objection depending on what happens at the end of the extension period. Cllr Cosslett said that he does not feel any application should be considered until the C31 road reopens, as there is not enough infrastructure around it to support any development. Felt unlikely that this road will ever re-open, and with other roads having subsidence issues, it could be that the only road open to the forest is through Woodland, so we will need to keep a very close eye on developments. Cllr Rutter has been in touch with various councils throughout the dales, 11 have already sent in objections, including one in North Yorkshire, and further ones may be doing so.

Cllr Peckett suggested we review again at the next meeting

**12. Tree planting**

Cllr Gardner met with the school council who are very keen to be involved with the tree planting, and a date of Wednesday 26 March has been suggested at 1.10pm. The 6 children from the school council plus a couple of teachers will join the PC to plant the trees. The school will do their own risk assessment and supply their own Hi-Viz. The children will identify areas for the trees to be planted, possibly along the road near Cust Barn. The school would like a couple of trees for their grounds. Felt it would be a good idea to start at the school, plant the trees there, and then walk down to the other sites. The school will provide child size spades, we will need to take our own spades, etc as well as plant food and Cllr Gardner will arrange water containers and order stakes / tree guards. There are about 10 trees which Chris & Susanna Baker have very kindly donated, Cllr Gardner has 3 beeches and 2 oaks which she will donate, and Pat Kingsnorth has some which she will also donate. Expected to be a maximum of 2 hours work, but volunteers will be appreciated to dig holes.

**13. Clerk’s matters – correspondence received**

NALC have updated their anti-bullying and harassment policy and have suggested that councils review and update their own policies as well. Clerk to review our own.

VE day Thursday 8 May & VJ day Friday 15 August celebrations – various events taking place nationally. Suggested possibly doing as a joint venture with the village hall. With VE day being close to the election and uncertainty about future councillors post election, it was felt that potentially something to celebrate VJ day in August would give more time to arrange something.

**Date of next meeting**

Following the election, the council must have its annual council meeting between Wednesday 7 May and Thursday 22 May.

Next meeting therefore agreed for Thursday 15th May 2025 at Woodland Village Hall, with anything urgent in the meantime being communicated by email.

*These are true and accurate minutes of the meeting as agreed by the council*

**Date ………………………………………..**

**Signed ……………………………………..**

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