**WOODLAND PARISH COUNCIL**

**Minutes of Annual Meeting held on**

**Thursday 15 May 2025**

**at**

**Woodland Village Hall**

**Present**

Cllr Peckett, Cllr Timms, Cllr Snowdon, Cllr Blackwood, Cllr Gardner,

Cllr Robert Potts (DCC Evenwood and Barony), David Buckee (Parish Clerk)

Three members of the public also present

**1**. **Election of Officers – Chair & Vice-Chair**

Cllr Gardner proposed Cllr Andrew Hall as Chair. In his absence, Cllr Hall had written to the PC stating his willingness to be nominated. The proposal was seconded by Cllr Timms.

All Councillors voted to accept the proposal.

Cllr Gardner proposed Cllr Nick Peckett as Vice Chair, thanking him for his work as Chair over the last challenging 12 months. The proposal was seconded by Cllr Snowdon.

All Councillors voted to accept the proposal and Cllr Peckett accepted the role.

**Cllr Hall was duly appointed as Chair and Cllr Peckett was duly appointed as Vice Chair**

In the absence of Cllr Hall, Cllr Peckett chaired the remainder of the meeting.

**2. Apologies**

Apologies received from Cllr Andrew Hall & Cllr Brian Abbott

**3. Declaration of Interest**

**(Members are asked to consider if they have a conflict of interest either personally or pecuniary in any matter included within the agenda**)

None

**4. Acceptance and signing of minutes from meeting 13 March 2025**

The Clerk was thanked for producing the minutes, and the minutes from the meeting on 13 March 2025 were accepted by all Councillors present as a true and accurate record of the meeting. Cllr Peckett will sign to approve so that they can be uploaded to the website

**5. Matters Arising**

Cllr Timms updated the meeting regarding the payment of £840 to Woodland Community Group which was discussed in the January meeting, and which Mr Simon Land had previously said would never be cashed. At the last TAP meeting on 19th March 2025 attended by Cllr Timms, Cllr Snowdon and the Parish Clerk, Mr Land approached the Clerk to advise that the cheque would in fact be cashed. Cllr Timms wished this to be recorded in the minutes. The Clerk confirmed that the cheque had now been debited from the PC bank account.

Cllr Gardner followed up on the issue regarding a camera covering the playpark that had been briefly discussed at the last meeting. Cllr Peckett referred to recent news of serious damage to playparks in Darlington, and whilst it is hoped that there would be nothing similar in Woodland, having a camera would mitigate any likelihood of something similar happening. Cllr Peckett has obtained an idea of cost for an 8 mega pixel infra-red light HD camera with a 50m range of £200-£250 fully fitted. As there is no mains electricity at the playpark or on that side of the road, the camera would need to be attached to his property and would solely cover all areas of the playpark. It would be professionally installed and can be made available to view by other members of the PC as any need arises, with those councillors being subject to enhanced DBS checks. Cllrs agreed that the PC contribute to the costs and that it should investigate the installation of a camera as outlined.

Cllr Gardner asked for an update regarding grass cutting. The clerk said that a quote had been obtained from Richard Toward who did the cutting last year, as well as one from Andy Houseman. No quote received from Batsons. Contract awarded to Richard Toward whose quote was significantly cheaper. ACTION: Clerk to check when full cut to the wall will be done

Litter picking - The Clerk has obtained equipment from DCC – bags, hi-viz, litter pickers – on a long term loan, free of charge. First litter pick was done on 26 April 2025 by Cllr Timms, the Parish Clerk, Sharon Cain and their respective partners. Whole of the triangle done, some places were worse than others, a total of 20 bags of rubbish collected, which were taken away by the Council the following day. Plan moving forward is to do on a quarterly basis and to invite any members of the public who wish to help to join in.

Speed awareness – this was discussed at the last meeting, and whilst no one has been caught speeding by the speed camera van, it was felt prudent to look further at getting vehicle activated speed signs (VAS) and their costs. Cllr Potts has experience from other villages, and said that the PC needs to source its own, with the help of the Area Network (formerly AAP) to ensure that the correct one is obtained and approved by DCC. As far as funding the costs is concerned, he said that he is willing to help from his County Councillors budget and we can approach the Area Network so that match funding can be looked at by the PC. ACTION: Cllr Gardner to discuss with Annalisa Ward when she arranges an official opening of the playpark which was delayed due to the pre-election period.

Over-hanging tree branches. Cllr Gardner will arrange for these to be removed

Removal of soil heap at the cemetery - The Clerk contacted Burial Services who were then asked to liaise with Robert Teasdale regarding removal of the surplus soil. Mr Teasdale reports that they have not yet called him back. ACTION: Clerk to chase

Tree planting - This was done on 26th March. A total of 14 trees were planted, with the trees mainly donated by Susannah Baker with some also being donated by Cllr Gardner and Pat Kingsnorth. Cllr Gardner, Cllr Timms and the Parish Clerk attended the school to help with the planting, which was done by 6 children from the school council together with a teacher. Two trees were planted in school grounds to replace ones that had been lost due to ash dieback, with the others being planted along the verge towards Cust Barn. Cllr Gardner has since watered them several times, and the trees are now coming in to leaf. ACTION: Now that the pre-election period is over, the PC can now update the website and Facebook page to publicise that the trees have been planted and a litter pick has been done. ACTION: Clerk and Cllr Timms/Gardner to update website and FB page.

Playpark – Cllr Peckett will attend to the treatment of the moss/slime/residue on the paths caused by the trees once wetter weather is forecast, as it only works when wet. The Clerk has obtained a refund of VAT on the first instalment of the new playpark equipment which has credited the bank account, and is in the process of claiming back the VAT on the second payment. He also clarified that the figure for the balance payment due to Playdale quoted at the last meeting did not include VAT.

**6. Policies**

The Clerk has reviewed the Parish Council Standing Orders, which have been updated to reflect the recent updates from NALC to comply with new procurement legislation and to ensure consistency with Model Financial Regulations, as well as changing the language used to gender neutral terms to align with NALCs policy of the civility and respect project. In practical terms for Woodland PC, the opportunity has also been taken to reduce the time allowed at meetings for public participation to 15 minutes, the time an individual is allowed to speak for is reduced to 5 minutes and the maximum overall meeting time is reduced from 4 hours to 2 hours. The Chair does have the option to allow longer speaking times if deemed necessary at a meeting, but these changes are all designed to reduce the length of each meeting, which will then reduce the costs of room hire. A draft of the updated Standing Orders has already been circulated to Councillors for comments. Councillors confirmed the existing rule previously agreed regarding anything sent out by email which requires a decision - any comments/issues need to be submitted back within 48 hours, otherwise they will be deemed to have been accepted. All Councillors present agreed to accept the amended Standing Orders. ACTION: Clerk to update website with the new policy.

The Clerk is to review other policies to bring them in line with model ones produced by NALC, and these will be circulated to Councillors in due course.

**7. Public participation**

No members of the public wished to raise anything

**8. Playpark**

The new equipment has been well received, and has been well used by a number of children since being installed. It offers an increased capacity in the number of children who can use it at any one time. There was an incident soon after it had been installed where bolts/nuts had become undone on the hammock, whether intentionally or through manufacture/installation is uncertain. The PC met with the project manager of Playdale onsite to discuss the matter, who was adamant that the bolts were secure when it was signed off. The issues have now been rectified.

Cllr Timms has been inspecting the play park weekly, and has designed a comprehensive but simple checklist which can be completed electronically. Councillors agreed that a rota be set up for inspections, with Cllr Timms agreeing to complete them for the rest of May, Cllr Gardner will do in June. Agreed that if anyone cannot do them for any reason, to ensure that someone else completes them, and suggested that at least one of these inspections is done jointly with someone else to show what needs to be checked. If any faults are identified, suitable photos need to be taken, and the issues reported. ACTION: Clerk to draw up a rota.

Official opening – some general tidying up of the area needs to be done, such as weeding, and once this has been done a date can be fixed and put on the website/Facebook page. ACTION: Cllr Gardner to deal, with invitations to the opening being sent to all who have been involved and assisted in helping to get the new equipment installed, as well as to the Teesdale Mercury.

Engineers from Playdale will be coming back sometime week commencing 26 May to replace the clamps which are discoloured. The playpark can remain open whilst this work is being done, although the new equipment will not be available to use during the time the engineers are on site.

ROSPA safety inspection has been booked for June

Instead of being scrapped, the bench and litter bin that were removed to make way for the new equipment are being stored pending possible re-siting of them within the village.

Arrangements have been made for the remains of the old mobilus to be collected from Tilesheds Farm for scrapping, as well as the pole which is at Cllr Gardner’s, with the scrap value to be paid to the PC.

**9. Complaints**

None

**10. Finance and Financial update**

The Clerk provided an update. Bank balance currently £12,550.50. Since the last meeting, precept monies of £3,900 and VAT refund of £4,444.16 have been received. Payments made £72 to TEEC for the domains, the cheque for £840 to Woodland Community Group already mentioned has been paid, balance to Playdale of £26,664.96 (inclusive of VAT £4,444.16 which is to be reclaimed). Invoices to be paid CDALC £44.35 (CDALC & NALC subs), £28 (Good Councillor Guides) & £60 (elections training) and also a cheque for £16 to repay Mr Teasdale for training he undertook whilst a councillor.

The AGAR (Annual Governance & Accountability Return) is due in by end of June. Due to the grants/cost of the new play park equipment, as the income and/or expenditure is greater than £25k, the AGAR this year is more complex than in previous years, and is also likely to be the case next year. As a result it will be looked at more closely by Mazars. One of the implications is that they look closely at the level of reserves being retained by councils, which are not earmarked. They look at a maximum of 1.15 times precept and staff costs, which for WPC would equate to approximately £6,700. Currently, taking the current bank balance adjusted for anticipated costs due now and over the next 12 months including the election cost anticipated around £3k, the VAT refund due, and around £2k still earmarked and not yet spent from the grants on murals, paths etc for the playpark, this will leave a balance of around £9,800. The Clerk felt it important that we start earmarking funds for certain projects to avoid the impression that the PC is awash with unallocated funds, which creates a false picture. Agreed that once the election costs have been paid, we look at a separate savings account to split off the reserves needed, so that better decisions can be then be made on any future spending from unallocated monies.

Cllr Snowdon raised the issue that the PC is running at a deficit, as estimated annual costs exceed the precept. The Clerk explained that this was discussed at previous meetings, and the decision was made not to raise the precept massively in one go to cover the increased costs caused primarily through additional spending on insurance for the new playpark equipment, but to progressively increase it year on year at a rate above inflation. Whilst it is accepted that the council may run on a deficit for a few years, having to use retained unallocated reserves to cover the shortfall, the situation would resolve itself within a couple of years.

**11. Planning**

No local planning applications have been submitted. With regard to the Hamsterley Forest development, Cllr Potts said that following the elections, the first planning meeting at DCC will not be until June. He confirmed that once the developers have resubmitted their application with all the other documentation required, as far as he is aware, it is not necessary to resubmit objections, as all those already made will be transferred over, but confirmed that DCC is well aware of the issues surrounding the plans.

**12. Cemetery Chapel**

Cllr Gardner stated that the PC still needs to ascertain legally who owns the cemetery chapel to establish who is liable for its upkeep, and that the Parish Council cannot afford to be responsible for it on the limited precept which it has. Until legal ownership is established, the PC cannot use it, repurpose it, or apply for grants. As a matter of urgency, the old parish records need to be removed from it, sorted through and those documents which have to be legally retained can then be sent to the archives unit at DCC. CDALC have provided a retention period list which will help establish documents to be kept. The Village Hall has agreed that some documents and other items currently held in the chapel can be held in their storage area if necessary. ACTION: Cllr Gardner to speak with the Village Hall Committee regarding availability for the PC to use the village hall to sort through the documents, and to report back to Councillors so that a suitable time can be arranged to make a start on sifting through the old documents.

Cllr Peckett has spoken to the previous Chair of many years who says that in the past the PC had taken on responsibility for minor repairs to the chapel, such as broken windows, with any expenditure on it being very small.

The possibility of the chapel being handed over to DCC was discussed. Cllr Potts suggested contacting cemeteries department at DCC who may be able to give guidance. ACTION: Clerk to email DCC, copying in Cllr Potts who can then take up with DCC on our behalf

Currently there is no insurance cover for the chapel under the PC insurance policy. There is currently a ridge tile missing from the chapel, Councillors agreed that the PC will not arrange any repairs as it will set a precedent and the PC will then be deemed to be taking on liability for repairs for a building with unknown legal ownership.

**13, Quarry Field**

Cllr Gardner handed those present a copy of a document she had been given by Cliff Harding when she first joined the Parish Council, which was read out in full. This is from a Court Hearing by the Commons Commissioner held on 12 August 1980 regarding the ownership of the quarry field. A copy of this document is attached to these minutes. In summary it states that the Commissioner cannot be certain that any one person owns the land, which therefore gives the land protected status under the Commons Registration Act. However, there are herbage rights on the land. The PC has a duty to protect the land, in the same way as it does with village greens.

Cllr Gardner had been asked by a member of the public about the recent removal of some of the boundary wall to create a large opening, with double gates now installed. She has contacted the Land Registry to ascertain who owns the boundary wall, but has been advised that it is unclear. Robert Teasdale, present at the meeting, stated that the existing access in to the quarry field is not now big enough, particularly for spraying equipment, hence the reason to create a bigger access in to the quarry field from his own land. Regarding the road from Tilesheds to the back of Blackhorse Terrace, he stated that there has always been a road there, and he has merely built it up recently so machinery can better use it. Cllr Gardner questioned why larger access was required, when the existing access is adequate for the herbage rights which Mr Teasdale has on the quarry field. A discussion was held between her and Mr Teasdale regarding ownership of boundary walls generally, with disagreement over who owns them, Mr Teasdale stating that it is North & West boundaries where ownership lies, as well as roadside walls, which is different to that which Cllr Gardner has been told by the Land Registry who said that ownership is established when a property changes hands. ACTION: Councillors agreed to draft a letter to the legal department at DCC to try and establish who legally owns the quarry field boundary walls.

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

Reminder that Councillors need to return their Register of Interest forms to DCC by 3 June, with copies to the Clerk

Return of Election expenses forms – these are required to be completed in all cases, even if there was nothing incurred.

Insurance renewal received from Zurich, renewal premium £737.17, which is a little bit higher than estimates previously given. The clerk has contacted Clear Councils Insurance Brokers who have been suggested by NALC, and is awaiting a quote from them. When quotes received, these will be emailed to Councillors so that a decision on who to go with can be decided. The insurance provides public liability insurance as well as insurance cover for the playpark equipment. Cllr Snowdon suggested that the PC approach Lynesack & Softley Parish Council asking for a contribution towards the insurance costs of the playpark as children from their parish use the equipment. ACTION: Clerk to write to them.

Councillors having separate parish council email addresses – TEEC who manage our IT have said that we can have up to 10 email accounts within the existing arrangements, and we are currently using two. Councillors felt that whilst it would separate personal and council emails, it was questionable whether they would be any more secure than the ones they currently use, indeed it was felt that they could be less secure, and therefore decided to keep things as they are without setting up new councillor email addresses.

TEEC have contacted us to say that they can streamline links between the website and social media pages, so that anything the PC puts on Facebook will automatically be updated on the website, and vice versa. They can also introduce a helper BOT to the website allowing anyone to ask a question and then be directed to the relevant part of the website. They can also put local services on the website with links to items such as bins, transport, parking, and tourist information. Councillors voted to leave the website and Facebook page totally separate, and felt that the other add-on options were not relevant to the parish council.

Teesdale Local Network – TAP ceased existence at the end of March and throughout County Durham, Local Network Groups (LNG) are replacing Action Area Partnerships (AAP). They will be governed by a new panel, and Parish Councils have been asked for any volunteers who wish to be nominated to sit on the panel. Volunteers have to be prepared to commit to a number of things to promote the LNG work. Cllr Potts will be part of the LNG. No councillor wished to be nominated for the role.

In view of Microsoft ceasing to provide updates for Windows 10 in mid-October, this will affect the parish council laptop, which cannot be upgraded to Windows 11. Cllr Peckett felt that a decision as to whether to replace the laptop should be deferred until nearer the time, as the feeling was that Microsoft may come to a compromise at the last minute due to pressure from the huge numbers of Microsoft users, including large corporates, who are unable/unwilling to upgrade to Windows 11. It was agreed to review again at future meetings.

VJ Day 15 August 2025. Agreed at the last meeting that due to the election we were unable to do anything for VE Day, but we would look at possibly doing something for VJ Day. It was agreed to liaise with the Village Hall Committee to discuss arranging something jointly. The Natterers Craft Group are working to produce a knitted poppy display for Remembrance Day, so a possibility may also be to see if that can be brought forward. ACTION: Cllr Gardner to speak with the Village Hall Committee

**Date of next meeting**

Next meeting provisionally agreed for Thursday 10th July 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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**Please note, all parish council meetings will be audio recorded for the purposes of accurately producing the minutes. The recording will be retained by Woodland Parish Council until the minutes have been agreed and signed. The recording will then be deleted unless the retention is requested by a lawful authority.**