**WOODLAND PARISH COUNCIL**

**Minutes of General Meeting held on**

**Thursday 9 January 2025**

**at**

**Woodland Village Hall**

**Present**

Cllr Peckett (Chair), Cllr Timms (Vice Chair), Cllr Teasdale, Cllr Brydon, Cllr Gardner, David Buckee (Parish Clerk)

Four members of the public also present

**1. Apologies**

Cllr Rutter

Cllr James Cosslett (DCC Evenwood and Barony)

**2. Declaration of Interest**

None declared in respect of items on the agenda

**3. Acceptance and signing of minutes from meetings 14 November 2024 & 5 December 2024**

Cllr Teasdale referred to the minutes of the meeting on 14 November 2024, and asked that the discussion that took place between Louise Newton and Councillor Rutter be minuted, as even though it was not captured on a recording device at the specific request of Mrs Newton it was held during a Parish Council meeting and should therefore still be minuted. It was agreed that the minutes would be amended and sent to Councillors for approval prior to being signed off.

The minutes from the meeting on 5 December 2024 were accepted and signed.

**4. Matters Arising**

Cllr Gardner confirmed that the funding for the playpark from TAP had now been received.

Referring to the issue raised over a right of way discussed at the meeting on 14 November Cllr Gardner said that Mr Smith has provided her with an update, and advised her that the issues have been resolved and that Cllr Teasdale and Mr Land have dropped the claims to a right of way over his land, saying that there has always been a pedestrian right of way and that his solicitor has established that there is no vehicular access. Cllr Teasdale disagreed, saying that there is access as and when it is required, and he understands that the property has now been sold. Mr Land also disputed that it had been resolved and said that the land does not belong to the property and there remains a right of way for Cllr Teasdale and the other six houses there, and that the matter is still with the legal team. A discussion took place regarding the practicalities of access for some of the properties to get their bins out now that the property has been walled and gated, and that the new owners ought to be made fully aware of the right of way by their solicitor.

Cllr Peckett has contacted Cliff Harding regarding the Royal Garden Party, and he is very happy to be nominated in the draw for tickets. Councillors felt that there is no one more worthy of nomination. ACTION: Clerk to submit nomination to CDALC

Cllr Gardner mentioned the old papers still being stored in the cemetery chapel, and it was agreed that this be left until better weather in Spring.

The Clerk advised that the letter of objection from Woodland Parish Council against the Hamsterley Forest development has now been sent to Durham County Council, and is available to view on the application. It has received some favourable comments on the Forest Action Group Facebook page. It was discussed that there have been subsequent issues regarding subsidence to roads around Hamsterley, leading to road closures.

**5. What constitutes members Declaration of Interests**

Cllr Peckett advised that it has been difficult to get specific rules regarding what constitutes a Declaration of Interest, either from Durham County Council or the Government website. Cllr Gardner said that her understanding is that it is a pecuniary interest which is anything from which a councillor receives financial advantage or receives an income, or that they own or rent out. She has raised with Cllr Teasdale several times the fact that he has herbage rights on the Quarry field which has a value and should therefore be on his declaration of interests, and at the last meeting she said that if he is establishing a right of way over Mr Smith’s land then this has a value and in her opinion should also be declared. Cllr Teasdale said that this could soon be put on but was unsure whether there was any need for it, to which Cllr Gardner responded that it was important for all councillors to be open and transparent, to avoid the possibility of being seen to have something to hide. She felt that it was widely known in the village about his herbage rights, which Cllr Teasdale agreed was the case, and she felt that it would be helpful in the interest of transparency if it were declared. Cllr Gardner said that it is the personal responsibility of all councillors to ensure that their own Declarations of Interest were kept up to date to reflect any changes to their circumstances. There is a specific section regarding charity and community involvement and she felt that Cllr Teasdale’s involvement in Woodland Community Group be declared. Cllr Teasdale responded that he has no involvement in the Group, apart from the recent tractor run and Christmas fayre event taking place from the family farm, but it could quite easily be declared, and provided a commitment that the declarations would be sorted out with the Clerk.

Cllr Teasdale asked why Cllr Gardner and Cllr Timms Declarations of Interest do not appear on the Parish Council website. It was clarified that they do not have to appear on the local PC website, but are held by Durham County Council and are published on their website and available for anyone to view.

**6. Public participation**

Audrey Buckee wished it to be known that she had not made a complaint about the tractor run and Christmas fayre, as has been portrayed on social media, but had raised a simple enquiry to check that all relevant regulations had been complied with for the event. She felt this to be a perfectly legitimate enquiry to ensure the safety of the public, saying that if something had happened she was sure that the PC would have been accused if had not followed up an enquiry made by a member of the public. The organisers did not provide any paperwork following the enquiry, and she felt that misinformation has been posted by the organiser on social media which has misled the public. She sought clarification as to how her name had been obtained and published on social media, despite her enquiry to the PC asking that her name be withheld from publication. She said the she, along with numerous other residents are denied the right to respond to any posts made as they have been banned from the Community Group Facebook page, and she felt that a post from Cllr Teasdale supporting comments made called in to question his position as a councillor when the enquiry had been made confidentially to the PC and then her name had been leaked. She felt that publication of her name in these circumstances is a clear breach of her privacy and is contrary to Woodland Community Group’s own ethos and rules, and felt that despite the group administrator Becky Land being portrayed as a supporter of mental health and wellbeing initiatives in the area, there is no thought given as to how the impact her posts and comments made on the group social media page affect the mental health of those people she attacks.

Cllr Gardner felt that it was disgraceful how the matter had been handled by Simon Land, Becky Land & Cllr Teasdale, and also that it had been twisted to mislead the public. She felt that it will definitely put off members of the public from coming to the Parish Council to raise their concerns in future, and that the Parish Council had a duty and responsibility to encourage members of the parish to come to the Parish Council with any issues, whether the PC agree with them or not. She felt that the way in which it was handled was a deliberate attempt to deter people from speaking up against the Community Group or anything that Simon Land, Becky Land or Cllr Teasdale does not agree with, and this is not democracy but dictatorship. She said that all Parish Councils are classed as the first level of democracy, and it is wrong for any individual to publish anything which deters people to come forward with their concerns. Cllr Gardner felt that Cllr Teasdale’s involvement in the matter has brought the whole Parish Council in to disrepute, which led to a discussion regarding how Cllr Gardner had not mentioned any names and had sent to the Chair a fully redacted copy of the letter with names not being visible. Cllr Gardner does not recollect any mention of names to anyone, and has employed a data breach company to inspect her own and the PC emails to investigate, and will bring the results to a future PC meeting. Cllr Teasdale asked how names became made public.

Simon Land strongly expressed concern that his name had yet again been dragged in to a PC meeting by Cllr Gardner when he had nothing to do with the matter, and felt that it was a breach of GDPR. He stated that the document was not fully redacted and details were very clear to read when it was sent to the Group by the Chair, and in terms of the points raised in the letter the Council has no powers to deal with any of the questions. The Group had made enquiries on all the questions raised and no problems were identified. They had spoken with Food Hygiene and Health & Safety, the person handling food had level 5 qualifications, so there were no problems. When questioned as to why no documentation requested had been supplied, Mr Land reiterated that the PC had no powers to request them and referred to a conversation that he had with Cllr Peckett to say that they had everything in place, He said that the Group is open and transparent, and he will be happy to provide anything if it is requested as long as it is not vexatious which he felt it was. When challenged that there was nothing vexatious about it, and that the council has a duty of care to investigate what is brought to them, Mr Land responded that the duty of care that the PC has is when an event takes place on PC land, and as neither event took place on PC land their duty of care does not exist. He stated that the PC had forwarded an enquiry to the Community Group, they in turn had made enquiries with the relevant authorities and he had responded to the Chair to say that everything was in order and that was their only requirement, the PC has no powers to request copies of documentation which they cannot release under GDPR as they have names on them. He reiterated that the document that had been supplied to them was not fully redacted, details were plain to read. Cllr Gardner handed out for inspection by the public and Councillors a copy of the redacted letter which she had sent to the Cllr Peckett, and it was generally agreed that the name was not visible. Mr Land said that it was from that document that they had seen the name, and stated that the leak must have come from within the Parish Council.

Mr Land stated that in every meeting since August 2023 Cllr Gardner is asking questions about the Community Group for no reason other than it appears she has a dislike for the community group and wants it closing down. Cllr Gardner responded that she is not the only person who has a dislike for the group, and she does not like a lot of what appears on their social media site which she feels is nothing to do with helping the community but is to promote power and control. She stands by all the comments she has made about the group, and the reason she keeps referring to it is because it is a source of so many problems within the community. She is regularly approached by members of the public about it, and has a duty to bring it to the Council, and is only one voice amongst six so does not have the power to do anything unless there is the agreement by other councillors, and anything that the PC does is by group decision.

There followed a discussion as to why the queries came through the PC and were not asked directly of the organisers; the issues that half of the village have is they cannot see anything important that is posted by the community group which affects the community as a whole, for example about the recent snow and road clearing; the fact that some people likewise are blocked from the Support Network Group.

In response to a query raised, Cllr Peckett confirmed that there is the option through the Parish Council website for people to contact the PC directly for any issues, and that is the preferred method for contact.

**7. Playpark**

Cllr Peckett was pleased to report that things are moving with the playpark, an onsite meeting was held on 7 January with the project manager, with work due to start week commencing 24 March and is expected to take between 1-2 weeks to complete. 50% of the invoice has been paid to Playdale for the equipment, and the Clerk is in the process of reclaiming the VAT from HMRC.

The contractors will need a container on site, suggested that it be put on the verge alongside the playpark where it will be off the road. The other issue potentially is the Hiab wagon and there being insufficient height for it to operate due to power cables, but the project manager is to speak with contractors to possibly arrange a visit to identify and resolve any issues prior to work starting.

The litter bin which will need to be removed to allow the new equipment to be installed is to be re-sited within the playpark.

Cllr Gardner has spoken with a firm regarding patterns to put on the path, and they will do an aerial survey and provide quotes which will hopefully be available by the next PC meeting.

**8. Complaints**

Two complaints received regarding the draft minutes from the meeting in November and a discussion that was held which was not minuted. Cllr Peckett agreed that these would be discussed separately by the councillors.

A discussion then took place between Cllr Gardner and Simon Land regarding Woodland Community Group. Mr Land explained that the Facebook group and the Community Group are separate entities, with Woodland Community Group being a fully formed Association. Mr Land wished it to be minuted that he felt that he was being treated by Cllr Gardner in a harassing, vexatious and malicious manner, and similar comments were reciprocated by Cllr Gardner.

Cllr Gardner raised the issue of 5 complaints made to Durham County Council against her over the last 14 months by Cllr Teasdale, Simon Land, Becky Land and Cllr Rutter in which she was accused of breaking Councillors Code of Conduct and should be disciplined accordingly. Each of the points raised in the complaints were fully investigated by the Governance Lawyer and Monitoring Officer at DCC and none were upheld. This has taken up a lot of time which could have been better spent on doing something productive for the parish. As a result, Cllr Gardner has proposed an amendment to add an addendum to the Parish Council complaint procedures, which has already been circulated to all the Councillors for their consideration and comments. This has been taken from Durham County Councils own complaints procedures which deals with habitual and vexatious complaints. Cllr Gardner proposed that this be adopted and added to the Parish Council website. All Councillors present voted to adopt it.

In the interests of transparency, Cllr Gardner proposed an item also be added to the website saying that 5 complaints had been made against Cllr Gardner and Cllr Gardner had made 1 complaint against Cllr Rutter, with a link to the complaints so that the public were able to access and read them on DCC website if they wished to do so. Councillors present had no objections to this.

**9. Finance and Financial update**

The Clerk advised that the current bank balance is £32,153.06. Since the meeting in November receipts have been £20 donation for the playpark from Ark on the Edge, £26,097 grant funding from TAP/DCC for the playpark and £1,000 from Woodland Village Hall also for the playpark. Payments made £95 to Woodland Village Hall for meetings since March 2024 and £26664.98 to Playdale Playgrounds Ltd being a 50% deposit for the new equipment.

Payments to be made £24 to CDALC for Finance & Budgets meeting attended by the Clerk, £200.76 to TEEC for annual web hosting, £22.50 to Woodland Village Hall for the December meeting and a further £22.50 for the January meeting. Councillors agreed for these payments to be made.

There are three outstanding payments to be made. £100 for Woodland Show (Pat Kingsnorth asked that this be made by Bank transfer to Woodland Village Hall), £840 to Woodland Community Group previously agreed for refund of rent for the Cemetery Chapel (Simon Land requested that this be made by cheque, although he promised that it would never be cashed) and £11 to Deborah Snowden who paid the licence fee and two annual rents for the playpark on behalf of the PC.

**10. Agreement of the budget & precept for 2025/26**

Cllr Peckett stated that the PC will have additional expenditure this year due to the improvements to the playpark through increased insurance costs (indicative figures provided by insurers several months ago was £650 against the last premium of around £400) and increased inspection requirements as part of the grant funding received. ACTION: Clerk to investigate obtaining quotes from other insurers on renewal.

Expenditure anticipated around £4,600 for 2025/26. Discussions were held by Councillors at the meeting in November regarding the precept, with a general view that a phased increase over several years in the precept be made rather than a large one off increase to cover the costs. Councillors agreed a 10% increase would be sensible, with any shortfall being covered by the remainder of COVID monies which haven’t been fully spent. Councillors present agreed a precept of £3,900

Clerk advised that having spoken with current bankers Virgin Money regarding separate savings accounts to ring fence monies for specific purposes, everything is now done online. There are a couple of options ranging from instant access to notice period and fixed term savings accounts. Questioned whether it was worth splitting monies or whether it can all be managed from the one account with notes made of how much is attributable for each purpose. Simon Land said that within government there is a recommendation that if separate accounts are held, these be at separate financial institutions for resilience purposes, and suggested that some of the non-working capital or working revenue be moved to a separate account at a different Bank for safety purposes. It was questioned whether monies were covered by FCSC compensation scheme or not.

**11. Planning**

No local planning applications received.

The objection letter from the Parish Council regarding the Hamsterley Forest development has been sent to DCC and is available to view on DCC website.

Councillors agreed that the news section of the Parish Council website be updated to say that the PC had objected to the development, with a copy of the letter being published.

**12. To discuss the trees kindly donated by** **Chris & Susanna Baker**

Cllr Gardner has spoken to Woodland School, who are very keen for children to be involved in planting the trees. The school council will discuss with teachers the possibility of some trees being planted within school grounds if there is space and also within the village and then come back to the PC. ACTION: Clerk to update Mr & Mrs Baker.

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

Clerk gave a reminder to be aware of spam emails. Recent example of one purporting to be from Cllr Peckett to the Clerk email and also separately to Cllr Teasdale, which on investigation originated from an IP address in St Petersburg.

Clerk mentioned a recent review that JPAG Proper Practices state that all Councils should have an email account which belongs to the Council and to which the council has access, and asked Councillors whether they felt it necessary to have separate email addresses themselves to be used for council business rather than using their own personal ones. ACTION: Clerk to contact TEEC to enquire if separate email addresses can be set up, without incurring costs, and how necessary retention can be handled.

Elections preparations – CDALC have a lot of information on their website which can be viewed, once registered. They are running various training events, the first one on 18 February at County Hall, Durham.

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

Cllr Timms asked for views as to projects that the Parish Council can undertake once the playpark has been finalised, and also asked about tenders for grass cutting.

Agreed that grass cutting needs reviewing, to include every other month for the grass to be strimmed to the bottom of the wall to prevent weeds growing.

Agreed to seek ideas from the public about possible projects via website and surveys. ACTION: Cllrs Timms & Gardner to arrange.

Cllr Timms raised the issue of the length of time each Parish Council meeting is taking, and suggested an aim to reduce to 1 hour if possible, which would also have a benefit of saving money on room hire.

**15. Councillor vacancy & proposal for DBS checks on Councillors**

Cllr Gardner stated that a lot of other parish councils have DBS checks for councillors as standard, and proposed that Woodland Parish Council do the same with enhanced DBS checks being done. This will show the PC commitment to public safety and wellbeing as well as protection of vulnerable people. This will incur a cost, and is organised by DCC, with the report being sent to the individual who would then need to copy and submit to the PC. Councillors agreed that any new councillor should also be subject to DBS checks. Councillors present agreed to implement this policy.

There is currently a vacancy for a councillor following the resignation of Deborah Snowdon.

Councillors wished to put on record their appreciation of the work that Deborah did whilst a councillor, in particular the tremendous amount of work she did on the playground project, and agreed to invite her to the grand opening once the work is complete.

No formal applications or approaches have been received for the vacancy, although some are believed to be considering it.

**Other matters**

Cllr Teasdale mentioned that snow ploughing is difficult in the village where cars are parked on either side of the road, in particular on Woodland Heights where the road narrows. Due to the width of the snow plough, there is little leeway and if the plough goes down pushing a lot of snow vehicles could get damaged, or alternatively the plough would have to stop ploughing at the top of the hill which would then cut the village in half. Similar situation along The Edge. To make it easier he asked that when snow is forecast residents park cars wholly or as far as possible on pavements to create more road width for the ploughs to operate. Suggested that parking on footpaths is frowned upon, but common sense should prevail.

**Date of next meeting**

Provisionally set for 13th March 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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