**WOODLAND PARISH COUNCIL**

**Minutes of General Meeting held on**

**Thursday 12 September 2024**

**at**

**Woodland Village Hall**

**1. Present**

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

Cllr James Cosslett (DCC Evenwood and Barony)

One member of the public also present

**2. Apologies**

None

**3. Declaration of Interest**

None

**4. Confirmation of Minutes**

Minutes from the meeting on 11 July 2024 were accepted by all Councillors as a true and accurate record of the meeting, and Cllr Peckett will sign to approve so that they can be uploaded to the website

**4. Matters arising**

Cllr Gardner reported difficulties in uploading items and document amendments to be published on the website, which has been reported to the technical team for investigation

Cllr Gardner advised that some of the policies were still in the process of being reviewed. She explained that a review of the policies generally has been necessitated in part by requirements for the funding applications for the playground. The Health & Safety policy has been amended and will be circulated to the Councillors for approval, together with the Standing Orders

Cllr Gardner reported that there have been issues in the new Clerk being able to access web admin and clerk emails, but these now appear to have been resolved with the exception of the portal which is ongoing

The new website and email process does not appear user friendly, but has been necessary as all Parish Councils are now required to use the system through [gov.uk](http://gov.uk/)

**5. Playpark**

Cllr Snowdon provided an update from the sub-committee. Subject to funding being agreed of £18k which has been applied for from Awards for All (National Lottery), the remainder of the funding required is being set up by Cllr Potts & Cllr Cosslett and Teesdale Action Partnership (TAP). If the Awards for All application is approved, the target will have been reached to fund the playpark. However it has been suggested that it may be necessary to consider alternatives for match funding should the application be unsuccessful.

The issue of VAT was discussed, as this is not a fundable item. The full VAT element of £9k cannot be met by the Parish Council pending it being claimed back from HMRC, as this would take the bank balance below the required legal limit of £4k that has to be maintained. Cllrs Snowdon & Gardner reported that working with Playdale, once the whole funding (excluding VAT) is in place, it is possible to pay 50% of the cost on placing the order, with the VAT element on this amount then being claimed back on this amount under a special scheme that HMRC have for Parish Councils, which should be received back within 6 weeks. The earliest date currently that Playdale could install the new equipment is November, but these dates will change depending when the funding has been agreed and is in place. Once the equipment has been installed, the remaining 50% is then paid and the VAT on that sum is claimed back. Therefore, by paying in instalments and due to the timescale between the order being placed and the work being completed, the VAT can be accommodated.

Cllr Gardner reported that Woodland Village Hall committee have agreed to pay £1k towards the playground project, this being 50% of the profits from the village show. The Teesdale Mercury will be involved in producing an article for the paper. It was felt that this could be used towards the character prints and painting for the equipment that isn’t being replaced, as well as on the paths.

Cllr Gardner advised that the level of insurance cover that the Parish Council has covering equipment needs to be changed, to at least cover the replacement cost of all the playground equipment. Cover currently stands at £13,578.64 which is significantly below the cost of the new equipment. Quotes from Zurich to increase cover to £100k would cost an additional £575.76, which would take the annual premium to around £1k. For £50k cover the additional premium is £221.68

Cllr Snowdon provided an update that funders require a more frequent safety inspection of the playground. This can be either members of the Parish Council inspecting on a monthly basis with a detailed log being maintained of these inspections, or Durham County Council can undertake on whatever frequency is required, at a cost of £35 a visit. It is a mandatory requirement that ROSPA inspect on an annual basis, so the Councillors felt that in view of the additional costs of insurance and a limited precept, to keep costs down DCC would inspect on a 6 monthly basis, with the PC doing a visual inspection monthly, using inspection record sheets that are to be provided by DCC. It is recommended that a photo of the equipment is taken as a record in the event of any claims being made.

Cllr Teasdale mentioned that a previous councillor had attended a course on undertaking inspections. Enquiries are to be made at DCC whether any courses are still available.

Other outstanding items for the playground are that we are still awaiting permission being granted from Raby. Cllr Snowdon has spoken with the land agent, and as the playpark is up for review next year, it may be an opportune time to discuss a longer term arrangement with them, albeit that there is likely to be a higher rent than the nominal figure of 50p at present. Still waiting to hear back from them.

Cllr Cosslett updated the meeting that as match funding is not yet in place, through the task force the TAP funding will be decided by board members by email rather than going to a future board meeting, and as there is no other competition it is hoped that the funding will be rubber stamped. Timing of the application was fortunate, with applications now closed due to boundary changes and unlikely to open again until next September.

**6. Model Councillor Code of Conduct ‘Civility and Respect’ course and other connected matters.**

Cllr Peckett stated that it was necessary for this training to be undertaken by Councillors due to events at previous meetings. There is a deadline for doing it by October. It is an online course, taking around an hour to complete, cost £16 which will be reimbursed by the Council on receipt of the proof of payment. Cllrs Peckett, Gardner, Snowdon and Timms have completed it, Cllrs Rutter, Teasdale and Brydon to complete as soon as possible, as it is mandatory that it be completed before the deadline.

Connected matters: Cllr Gardner advised that the necessity of the course arose due to complaints made against her by Becky Land, Simon Land, Cllr Alastair Rutter and Cllr Robert Teasdale. The report is available to view online at Durham County Council, comprising 79 paragraphs. In summary, all allegations have been fully investigated, with none being upheld. Resulting from this, Cllr Gardner has reviewed the Woodland Parish Council code of conduct for members, which has identified issues which she felt needed to be resolved, in particular with Cllr Rutter regarding various written comments made by him in emails to her dating back to March 2024, which she felt are abusive and which she has asked specifically to be minuted. Now that the governance lawyer and monitoring officer have completed their report on the allegations and ruled as being false, these insulting comments made against Cllr Gardner specifically and against the Parish Council in general, can now be put in the public domain, and addressed with Cllr Rutter. Examples include Cllr Rutter accusing Cllr Gardner of conducting a coup d’état (dictionary definition is a sudden, violent and unlawful seizure of power from the Government - which she refutes), running a platform of hate, running a kangaroo court, the Janet Gardner show which should be marked out of ten in competition with the Jeremy Vine show. He has also sent threatening emails (which have been registered as a crime of malicious communication with the police), he has stated repeatedly and in a public meeting that she has been acting illegally despite being unable to say which crime has been committed, says that she is not normal, doesn’t have normal behaviour, is unstable, unwell, has mental health issues, needs to seek help, and is more special than others. He has also used quotes, one referring to an incident at Watling Street in AD61, which relates to Boudicca and her two daughters being captured, beaten, raped and murdered and the other relating to Edward IV in the War of the Roses which relates to a very savage and bloody battle for power. Cllr Gardner feels these references are far from helpful. Cllr Rutter also states that he stands with the Teasdale’s and the Land’s and that there are now three family names opposing her and that there are more, the question is how many more?

In terms of the entire council, Cllr Rutter describes them as committing a great betrayal which they will never forget, that there were knives out and he knows who their friends are, it is obvious who is in charge, saying that although Cllr Peckett may be Chair someone else is pulling all the strings, that the Councillors are pitifully weak and afraid to stand up against Cllr Gardner, that there is not one backbone amongst any of the Councillors, casting shame on them all and saying that the only one who would have been proud would be Judas himself. Cllr Rutter also stated that he stood by all the comments and when he looked around the room at the meeting there was no trust amongst any of them.

Cllr Rutter was asked by Cllr Gardner whether he stood by all of these comments, to which he responded that he was angry when he made them, he did feel a sense of betrayal, and that things are said at the time which are not meant. He accepted that it becomes a different matter when comments are in written format, and formally apologised to all Councillors, with the exception of Cllr Gardner to whom he refused to apologise. Both Cllrs Gardner and Rutter said that they will be taking things further.

Cllr Peckett asked Cllr Rutter whether he was prepared to work with the rest of the Council in a meaningful manner going forward, otherwise problems would arise. Cllr Rutter asked for clarification, and agreed that he would work with each of the Councillors in a professional manner, but in respect of Cllr Gardner he said that there was too much water under the bridge and whilst he would work with her it would only be in a professional capacity.

Cllr Gardner questioned Cllr Rutter on his loyalties after supporting Simon Land above his loyalties to the Parish Council, quoting from an email 29 August in which he said that it was the right thing to make a formal complaint calling out bullying which he would continue to do, irrespective of the views of others. Cllr Gardner did not feel that this was professional behaviour, and quoted five examples from the Woodland Parish Council code of conduct written in March 2021 where Cllr Rutter had broken the conduct behaviours. Cllr Rutter did not agree with these items, which he felt were being manipulated, and advised that the issues stem from a meeting on 11 January where he felt that Simon Land had been mistreated, and he felt that the findings of the governance lawyer were wrong.

Cllr Rutter stated that he stands by his actions in making a formal complaint against Cllr Gardner, would do so again, and has no regrets in doing so. He reaffirmed his view that the findings of the complaint review are wrong. Referring again to the meeting on 11 January, he felt that he had to call out what he perceived as significant bullying and harassment by Cllr Gardner of Simon Land.

This led to a lengthy discussion about the definition of bullying, with Cllr Gardner suggesting that complaints made against her by Cllr Rutter, Cllr Teasdale, Simon Land and Becky Land could be viewed as bullying of one individual.

Cllr Teasdale refuted that he had ever bullied Cllr Gardner, and both he and Cllr Rutter explained why they had made formal complaints against Cllr Gardner’s behaviour, with Cllr Rutter emphasising and making it crystal clear that it was his idea that formal complaints be made, and that he did not regret these actions. Cllr Rutter believed that there were no grounds if any complaints were to be made against him.

After a heated discussion it was agreed that Councillors, with the exception of Cllr Rutter and Cllr Teasdale, would discuss how to resolve the issues at the end of the formal Parish Council meeting.

**7. New Clerk Introduction**

Councillors welcomed David Buckee to his new role as Parish Clerk. He gave Councillors a snapshot of his career having worked in banking for 40+ years before taking early retirement in early 2020. He felt that the training for new Clerks due to take place on 18 September would provide a greater insight in to the role, and explained he felt that he role of Clerk was a good way to become more involved in the community, working with the Councillors to improve the area for the benefit of everyone locally.

**8. Finance & Accounts**

Bank balance currently stands at £12,738.04

Issues with changes to the bank mandate and online banking have now finally been resolved

There are 3/4 outstanding invoices to be paid to Woodland Village Hall once they are received

Now that online banking can be accessed, the agreed rent refund of £840 to Woodland Community Group for the Chapel can be made

Cheques signed by Cllrs Peckett & Snowdon have been issued to ROSPA, HAGS, grass cutting and CDALC to settle overdue accounts due to delays over the banking changes

**9. Highways and grass cutting**

Comments have been made regarding Ragwort, which it was felt is a result of grass not being cut right up to walls. Cllr Teasdale explained that it is growing in many areas, at one time it was a notifiable plant although this may now have changed. Ragwort is toxic to farm animals, in particular horses, and if left unmanaged will rapidly expand. The only way to eradicate is to pull out using gloves as it is poisonous.

When the grass cutting contract is next due for tender, suggested that cutting be right up to walls.

ACTION: Clerk to investigate. Cllr Cosslett suggested contacting the green & clean team at DCC

Highways - there is not enough room to create a lay-by for parking at the playground. An option could be to approach Raby for the use of a small area of land on the road down to Brassides for parking for 2/3 cars, although it would need hard standing. Agreed to leave for the time being and discuss further once the rent renewal for the playground has taken place.

**10. WPC policies update**

Cllr Gardner and Cllr Timms have been updating and agreeing relevant policies with the Councillors, and publishing them on the website. With the exception of Standing Orders and Health & Safety policy which require amendments and agreement from Councillors before upload to the website, all policies are now up to date.

**11. Planning**

There have been no new planning applications.

Cllr Gardner provided an update on the large shed at Garden House. Tenants have now left the property, there have been no retrospective planning applications made, and it is now in the hands of Durham Planning Office as to what enforcement action they will now take. Until such time as planning permission is applied for, Woodland Parish Council is unable to comment further.

**12. Correspondence / AOB**

Parish Council Facebook page updated with information that has been received regarding a charity scheme to provide scooters for young people who have no transport to get to work, and also from a researcher who wanted to hear about any wildlife/nature projects that were being undertaken for a survey that was being done.

Cllr Timms read to the meeting an email received from Becky Land regarding Woodland Parish Council Facebook page. Cllr Timms reiterated that it is merely a notice board for the Council, no comments are allowed, no one will be blocked, and both she and Cllr Gardner are in control of it, so anything regarding social media to be referred to them in the first instance. Cllr Timms to respond to Becky Land, referring to minutes of a previous meeting once they have been uploaded to the website, where Councillors had approved the setting up of the social media page as a notice board to keep villagers updated on relevant Parish Council and other matters

Hamsterley Forest:

Cllr Rutter provided a comprehensive update on proposed developments at Hamsterley Forest.

£32.6m development of which £26.5m from Forest Holidays. Creation of 70 luxury eco cabins of various sizes for between 4 & 10 people, which will also have hot tubs. Will be built on stilts. Open all year round. Total capacity of 356 people, Forest Holidays hoping for 95% occupancy equating to 320 people for average 4 night stays. Will be built next to SSSI areas. Anticipate around 1200 people staying each month, equating to 15,000pa.

Go Ape planning a 1.5 hectare development hoping to attract 30,000 visitors a year

Development will be across three different areas. (1) All existing Forestry buildings to be demolished and rebuilt and extended, creating a larger cafe and a visitor centre. (2) Go Ape (3) Forest Holidays lodges

125 year lease proposed, which could leave open the possibility of building further lodges

No planning has yet been submitted

All surveys that have been done will not be released until planning is submitted

Hamsterley Forest falls across two parishes - Hamsterley and South Bedburn

Will resemble a Center Parcs

Whilst not directly affecting Woodland Parish, concerns amongst others are increased traffic locally. Currently the forest has between 180k & 200k+ visitors a year, and the aim is for this to be increased to 270k visitors a year

The forest is the largest in County Durham and is hugely important to the area for wildlife, ecology and biodiversity, and it is felt that the development will have a negative impact on these. Concern is once development has taken place, this could potentially lead to a future expansion of the site.

There is the potential for local employment, but this is not certain. During the building phase it is hoped 409 people will be employed, reducing once development is completed to 135 people. Forest Holidays want to employ 35 full time and 35 part time staff, Go Ape expect 2 full time and 20-30 part time staff, the latter being mainly students

Infrastructure is a problem as only 2 roads in to Hamsterley. Issues anticipated over water & sewerage. Consumption expected to be 60,000 litres of water a day. Sewerage systems will be similar to those on ships where sewerage needs to be fully treated before being released, but there are perceived problems if the system breaks down. Water will be from a borehole, but it is uncertain if this will provide sufficient water to cope with demand

Cllr Rutter understands that discussions are in hand with other investors, which would indicate that there are possibly plans for further development in the future

As there are no formal plans to review at this stage, everything is currently being based on conjecture. Councillors therefore agreed a need to wait until planning has been submitted, and at that time to arrange a further meeting to discuss the proposals and formulate a formal response

**13. Date of next meeting**

Provisionally set for 14 November 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 ……………………………………..**

**Minutes for all Parish Council meetings are available to view once agreed and signed by the council. These are available on the council website woodlandparishcouncil.gov.uk. The minutes will normally be available no later than 4 weeks after the date of the council meeting.**

***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.***