

Minutes of the Meeting of Bowes Parish Council

held at Bowes Hutchinson's School on 12 November 2024

Present

Cllr Carlisle, Cllr Hughes, Cllr Redfern, Cllr White, Cllr Tipping, Mr Ross Woodley (Clerk and RFO)

1. Apologies and declarations of interest

Cllr Hughes had to leave the meeting to attend another meeting after item 5. There were no declarations of interest.

2. Minutes of the Meeting

Minutes of the meeting held Tuesday 15th October 2024 (circulated as Appendix A of the agenda) discussed. Cllr Carlisle remarked that the minutes had been too long to include in full on the noticeboard. The Clerk explained that there was no requirement to publish minutes or agenda papers on the noticeboard if they were on the website. However, the summons and agenda (without supporting papers) did need to be placed on the noticeboard by the Thursday before each meeting. It was **resolved to accept the circulated minutes as a true record. Proposed by Cllr White, seconded by Cllr Redfern.**

3. Matters arising (unless dealt with later in the agenda)

The Clerk provided a verbal update on action requested of him at the October meeting:

- There is a requirement under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 to include a statement noting any impact on crime and disorder at the end of the minutes. There was no requirement for a general statement of the impact of the meeting and small parish councils rarely had a significant impact on crime and disorder. However, he had included a statement confirming no significant impact in the October minutes (Appendix A) and would continue to do so in future; and
- He had reported the damaged gatepost on a DCC bridleway to the Public Rights of Way Officer at DCC.

4. Finance & Accounts – See summary below.

(a) Receipts since last meeting £48.42 Bank Interest £50.00 Headstone Fee

(b) Expenses since last meeting £78.76 Smiths Signs for playground and cemetery. Confirmed as an accurate and complete record of payments made between the meeting on 15 October 2024 and this meeting.

(c) Payments to approve at the meeting – **Cllr Redfern proposed and Cllr Hughes seconded:**

- £364.68 New Clerk training and handover as approved in principle at the October 2024 meeting (timesheet and expense claim provided at this meeting and certified by Cllr Carlisle)
- £10.00 CDALC for clerk training event
- £135.00 AR Toward final grass-cutting invoice received after the agenda published.

(d) Retrospective approval of urgent payments – the expense at (b) above was approved in principle at the October 2024 meeting but retrospective approval agreed for the actual payment following collection of the new signs.

(e) Budget Monitoring to 31 October 2024 (month 7)

The Clerk presented Appendix B for receipts and payments to date compared with the annual and profiled budget, confirming that the forecast outturn at month seven of the 2024/25 financial year was close to budget, for which a small use of reserves had been planned. Members confirmed that they were comfortable with the report and had no questions.

(f) Bank reconciliation at 31 October 2024.

The Clerk presented Appendix C, which showed that the bank statements at 31 October 2024 agreed with the cash book balance without any reconciling items. A balance of **£40,951.78** was held.

(g) Financial Regulations.

The Clerk presented Appendix D, which showed the changes to the financial regulations proposed by the new clerk to correct inconsistencies and reflect good practice that he was aware of at other councils. The regulations were based on the 2024 NALC Model with appropriate tailoring for BPC's size and characteristics. Members confirmed that they were comfortable with the changes, and it **was resolved to approve the financial regulations and publish them on the website. Cllr Carlisle proposed and Cllr Hughes seconded.**

5 Planning

One item to report within the parish boundaries. Cllr Hughes explained that a resident had applied to create three car park spaces in their back garden, which required some modifications to the boundary wall to allow access. Members noted the application but had no observations.

6 Correspondence

(a) CDALC informed the Council of the outcome of the 2024/25 local government pay settlement. The National Joint Council pay scales have been updated and backdated to take effect from 1 April 2024. The increase was £1,290 per full-time employee (pro-rata for part-time employees), which equates to a 5 per cent increase in staff costs for the current financial year. See item 15 for implications on the 2024/25 and 2025/26 salary budget.

(b) The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) have published a consultation on "*Enabling Remote Attendance and Proxy Voting at Local Authority Meetings*" with a closing date of 20 December 2024. The Clerk explained that the additional flexibility to meet remotely and allow proxy votes when a councillor was unable to attend could be useful for example due to sickness or inclement weather and asked if members were generally supportive. All agreed the Council should respond positively to the proposals. **It was resolved that the Clerk answers the consultation questions on behalf of the Council and there was no need to approve a draft response at the next meeting. Cllr Carlisle proposed and Cllr Tipping seconded.**

(c) Durham Community Action have e-mailed the Clerk about a survey they are running into affordable housing in rural parts of the County. The results are expected by the end of November 2024 and the charity wanted to attend a future meeting to explain the results and how BPC could help. Cllr Carlisle asked the Clerk to obtain and review the consultation results before any decision was taken on the charity's request.

7 Cemetery & Village maintenance

(a) Councillors considered the proposed 2025/2026 fee increases for the cemetery (Appendix E) following the Clerk's benchmarking and indexation to account for inflation since the fees were last increased 17 years ago. All agreed that fees needed to at least be uprated for inflation except where doing so made the new fees above average (which it rarely did). However, they asked the Clerk to explain why the fees for burials and cremations in unreserved plots were increased to the average for the comparator group, which was considerably higher than uprating for inflation. The Clerk explained that he wanted to create a greater incentive for clients to reserve plots. Cllr Carlisle agreed with the sentiment but thought the resultant fees were too high for residents; he was supportive of using the average for non-residents. Cllr White said that he agreed the fee increase was much too high for residents and would be comfortable with using the average solely for non-residents in unreserved plots, providing the definition of 'residents' could be clarified. All agreed residents should mean "*living within the parish boundaries most of the year at the time of purchase*" and disputes about residency should be discussed on a case-by-case basis at future meetings.

It was resolved to accept the fee increases at Appendix E subject to reducing the resident fees for burials and cremations in unreserved plots from £925 and £325 to £350 and £300, respectively. Cllr Carlisle proposed and Cllr White seconded.

(b) The Clerk noted that the award of contracts for one-off tree surgery and groundworks at the cemetery was covered at Item 14, but given that whichever quote was accepted the cumulative expenditure after the work would be significantly less than the cemetery and village budget he wondered if any further expenditure in this budget head could be foreseen in 2024/25. Cllr White said that the cemetery walls needed repairing but the cost would be well below £500, and he favoured asking the contractor for the grant funded work at item 11 to undertake the work as he had provided good value for money when carrying out similar work in the past. **It was resolved that the Clerk approaches the contractor for the work at item 11 to order the cemetery wall repairs without the delay arising from seeking alternative quotes. Cllr White proposed and Cllr Carlisle seconded.**

8 Allotments

- (a) The Clerk revealed that he had sent out the 2024/25 allotment bills for the year commencing 1 November but the two applicants on the waiting list offered the two vacant plots were both unable to take them on until well into 2025 due to valid personal reasons. As this was the first time, they had declined an offer of an allotment they should remain on the waiting list, but the plots would remain vacant until a new applicant applied, or the waiting list applicants contacted him to say they were ready to take them on. This was a concern because a renewing allotment holder had complained about the condition of some other allotments and vacant plots were likely to contribute to further decline in the condition of the site. Cllr Carlisle said that he thought the current condition was generally acceptable but agreed that there should be an unannounced inspection before Spring 2025 to ensure allotment holders were compliant with current rules and consider action if they were not and the two plots remained vacant. **It was resolved to discuss action to improve the allotment site condition following an unannounced inspection early in 2025. Proposed by Cllr Carlisle and seconded by Cllr White.**
- (b) The Clerk disclosed that a retiring allotment holder had offered to donate two sheds to the Council, but as they were attached to a vacant plot, they would be vacant unless rented or allocated to other allotment holders. Cllr Carlisle stated that whilst the sheds were in reasonable condition, and we should accept their donation he did not think they were such an asset to justify renting separately and should instead form part of the rental for the adjacent plot. If the plot was still vacant in Spring 2025, he proposed advertising their availability free of charge to the first allotment holder to apply. It was resolved that **the Clerk offers the sheds as an incentive to take on the adjacent vacant allotment plot but if unsuccessful by 31 March 2025 advertises their availability free of charge to the first allotment holder to apply. Proposed by Cllr Carlisle and seconded by Cllr White.**

9 Play Park

Cllr Redfern circulated a post-completion inspection sheet for the playground and noted that a washer was missing on the multi-play equipment. The Clerk said that the same issue had been raised by Durham County Council's annual inspection, but they had deemed the issue 'low risk.' Thus, repair was not urgent, but Cllr Redfern was authorised to make enquiries about the cost of repair and report back to the next meeting.

10 Bank accounts, payment authorisation and financial regulations

- (a) Councillors considered progress updating the bank mandate so the new clerk can initiate payments. The Clerk explained that the latest version of the electronic online banking and mandate change forms had been rejected because the signatures of Cllr Carlisle and Cllr Hughes did not match the signatures on the mandate from 2012. Cllr Carlisle said that signatures inevitably change over 12 years and if the bank doubted their authenticity, they could contact him via the phone number and e-mail address provided. The Clerk said that regrettably the outcome of the former clerk's latest

conversation with the bank was that a new form needed completing to update the signatures and make any other changes to the mandate before a form giving him online banking access could be approved. He was meeting the former clerk to arrange this.

(b) The Clerk explained that the new form required the Council to approve the changes to the mandate including any changes to the complicated signing rules. Cllr Carlisle said that we needed to add the Clerk and councillors Tipping and Redfern to the mandate as authorised signatories and take off former councillors Wake and Brown, but other changes such as removing the former clerk and simplifying the signing rules should wait until the Clerk had online banking access to avoid further delay.

It was resolved that the Clerk and former Clerk liaise to prepare a new bank mandate form with no changes to the signing rules but adding Mr Woodley, Cllr Redfern and Cllr Tipping and taking off Mrs Wake and Mr Brown as well as updating the signatures of Cllr Carlisle and Cllr Hughes to those that they currently use. Proposed by Cllr Carlisle and seconded by Cllr Tipping.

11 Grants and Donations

- (a) Cllr White provided an update on the application for grant in respect of parish paths and utilisation. He had made an application to Durham County Council to fund repairs to three stiles and a way-marker. The total cost was about £700 plus VAT and DCC had approved the grant for the full amount excluding VAT upon receipt of an invoice showing the completed work. The cost was based on an estimate from a contractor that had previously delivered value for money for similar work. **It was resolved that as the work was specialised and grant-funded the Clerk orders the work without seeking alternative quotes. Proposed by Cllr White and seconded by Cllr Carlisle.**
- (b) Members considered the budget (if any) for making grants or donations to local not for profit organisations in 2025/26 noting that the Council's latest Section 137 limit for such expenditure is £3,772, but no such expenditure has been approved for 2024/25. Cllr Carlisle said that the Council's policy for grants and donations was only to make them upon consideration of an application and business case citing their benefit to Bowes residents and not to set a budget that might encourage applications or to proactively identify organisations to assist. The Clerk agreed that balancing the budget was challenging without allowing for grants or donations to not for profit organisations, but members may wish to consider the one-off use of reserves to fund a good cause where there was a strong business case and cited an example of funding security lights for the school, which the Council used for meetings. Members considered this option, but decided they did not wish to change the existing policy for 2024/25 or 2025/26.

12 AOB

Cllr Tipping sought permission to cut a key for the noticeboard and claim reimbursement. It was resolved to approve this. **Proposed by Cllr Carlisle and seconded by Cllr Redfern.** All agreed that there was no other business for the public section of the meeting. The member of the public present left the meeting.

13 Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting would take place on Tuesday 10 December at 7.30 pm at Bowes Hutchinson's School.

14 To award contract for one-off tree surgery and groundworks for the cemetery

The Clerk explained that in accordance with financial regulations for work that could potentially exceed £2,000 he had sought written quotations from three suitably qualified contractors. Two had agreed to inspect the work required with the Chair and provide written quotations to the Clerk. He had received quotations of £350 and £900, respectively. The latter included £150 of VAT, which the Council would be able to reclaim. Cllr Carlisle said that whilst the former did not include spraying the elderberry stumps this could not account for the remaining difference, and he was satisfied with the credentials of both potential contractors.

It was resolved that once he has received an updated quote including the spraying of the bushes, so the comparison was like for like the Clerk would place an order with the cheapest contractor.
Proposed by Cllr Tipping and seconded by Cllr Carlisle.

15 2025/26 Salary Budget

The Clerk explained that financial regulations required the salary budget to be considered separately in advance of the precept and full budget due to consideration at the December meeting. The first stage was to project the 2024/25 staff costs and then to increase for an estimate of the 2025/26 pay award and add a small contingency in case of overtime. Now that the 2024/25 pay award was known he could estimate an outturn for 2024/25 of £2,715 (including tax payable to HMRC). He estimated that the pay award in 2025/26 would be about 5 per cent, which was the current average of pay awards. This took the budget to £2,850. He proposed allowing a £150 contingency for overtime and setting the budget at £3,000. He also proposed making a payment of £69.73 (before deducting tax) to the former clerk to cover the impact of the 2024/25 pay award on the salary paid to her prior to leaving the Council.

It was resolved to set the 2025/26 salary budget at £3,000 and authorise back-pay to the former clerk in respect of the 2024/25 pay award.

Proposed by Cllr Carlisle and seconded by Cllr Tipping.

Meeting closed at 20.30. In accordance with the Crime and Disorder Act (1998) the impact of resolutions on crime and disorder in the parish was considered but no significant impact was identified.