

# **Minutes of the Meeting of Bowes Parish Council**

## **held at Bowes Hutchinson's School on 15<sup>th</sup> October 2024**

### **Present**

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

#### **1. Apologies and declarations of interest**

Cllr Hughes sent his apologies. There were no declarations of interest.

#### **2. Minutes of the Meeting**

Minutes of the meeting held Tuesday 17<sup>th</sup> September 2024 (circulated as Appendix A of the agenda) discussed, and Cllr Carlisle queried the absence of a comment upon closing the meeting that all agreed it had had a positive effect. He believed this had been added to previous minutes for at least four years to reflect a new legal requirement. The Clerk stated that he was not aware of any such requirement and had not seen it in minutes for other parish councils. However, he would research the matter, taking legal advice from NALC if necessary, and re-introduce for future minutes if required. Cllr Carlisle endorsed this approach and confirmed that there was no need to amend the September minutes.

Accordingly, it was **resolved to accept the circulated minutes as a true record.** Proposed by Cllr Tipping, seconded by Cllr Redfern.

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

The Clerk provided a verbal update of the training and handover arrangements between his appointment in July 2024 and taking over as clerk and RFO on 1 October 2024. In summary he had:

- attended two in person training sessions and two on-line training sessions run by the former clerk;
- attended a training session run by CDALC in Sedgefield for new clerks;
- dialled into a webinar on gov.uk domains;
- obtained the parish filing cabinet, two crates of documents, two paper files and the parish computer from the parish clerk and reviewed the contents;
- drafted the September agenda and minutes for the former clerk's review;
- arranged with Smaller Authorities Audit Appointments Limited (SAAA) for the transfer of external auditors for the Council from Forvis Mazars to PKF Littlejohn to take effect prior to his start date as clerk; and
- confirmed with SAAA that this transfer had been completed and thus there was no conflict of interest between his current and former roles.

The Clerk said that he would be submitting an invoice for the training costs as agreed at his interview and sought confirmation that he could also claim for travel to the training events. It was resolved that **the Clerk could claim for travel to and from all training events but not to parish meetings.**

Proposed by Cllr Carlisle and seconded by Cllr Tipping.

#### **4. Finance & Accounts – See summary below.**

- |                                 |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| (a) Receipts since last meeting | £51.45 Bank Interest                                   |
| (b) Expenses since last meeting | £500.00 Clerk's salary quarter two                     |
|                                 | £125.00 HMRC (tax deducted in respect of above)        |
|                                 | £204.00 Butler and Gee Internal Audit                  |
|                                 | £499.98 Playdale balance on installation of new swings |
|                                 | £405.00 AR Toward grass cutting.                       |

Confirmed as an accurate and complete record of payments made between the meeting on 17 September 2024 and this meeting.

(c) Payments to approve at the meeting – the clerk confirmed that whilst the external auditor had completed the limited assurance review of the Council’s Annual Governance and Accountability Return for 2023/24, he had not received their invoice for £252. Thus, at this stage there were no payments awaiting approval.

(d) Retrospective approval of urgent payments – all the expenses at (b) above were approved at the September 2024 meeting. No urgent payments have arisen separately.

(e) Budget Monitoring to 30 September 2024 (month 6)

The Clerk presented Appendix B for receipts and payments to date compared with the annual and profiled budget, confirming that the forecast outturn at the midway point of the 2024/25 financial year was close to budget, for which a small use of reserves had been planned. He had noted since preparing the report that the profiling needed refinement as in some cases it assumed an even profile of income and expenditure which was inappropriate and created what appeared to be a significant variance, when in fact the transactions to date were in line with expectations. For example, grass-cutting expenditure was concentrated primarily in the first half of the year and allotments income in the second (as billing took place in November). He asked if members had any additional comments or queries, and they confirmed that they were comfortable with the report.

(f) Councillors considered the audit report and recommendations made by the external auditor Forvis Mazars following conclusion of their 2024/25 review. The report was unqualified (clean) with no ‘*other matters*’ (formal recommendations in the report). This was an excellent result and the certificate closing the audit was issued on 23 September 2024, which was one week before the statutory deadline. Councillors welcomed the findings and agreed with the scope for further improvements recommendations in the auditor’s closure letter. These were to:

- Ensure that the planned move to a gov.uk domain website with generic gov.uk e-mail addresses was completed in 2025/26 (see agenda item 11 below); and
- Ensure that in future the AGAR was fully completed with the sections relating to trust funds marked ‘*not applicable*’ given that the Council were trustees of two charities, but not sole trustees.

It was resolved **that the auditor’s recommendations should be implemented. Cllr Carlisle proposed, and Cllr Tipping seconded.**

(g) Bank reconciliation at 30 September 2024.

The Clerk presented Appendix C, which showed that the bank statements at 30 September 2024 agreed with the cash book balance without any reconciling items. A balance of **£40,853.36** was held. The bank statement was checked against the accounts and **approved by Cllr Carlisle signing the reconciliation.**

## 5 Planning

Nothing to report within the parish boundaries. The clerk confirmed that he had forwarded Cllr Hughes copies of weekly planning applications received from Durham County Council.

## 6 Correspondence

(a) Durham County Council wrote to the Parish Council as part of the consultation on the 2025/26 budget. The Clerk explained that as with most local authorities the County Council was continuing to face extreme budget pressures and was proposing significant budget cuts and the maximum council tax increase permitted without a referendum to avoid the reserves falling below prudent levels. It had written to all parish councils as statutory consultees seeking their views on the potential savings identifies and inviting ideas for alternatives. There were no budget cuts directly impacting on the parish, but council taxpayers would be impacted by rising bills and reduced services at a county level. The Council considered whether to reply, noting that the deadline is 1

November 2024 and resolved that in common with previous years **it would not participate in the consultation.** Proposed by Cllr Carlisle and seconded by Cllr Tipping.

b) North Pennines National Landscape have informed the Council that a North Pennines Stargazing Festival is to be staged between 25 October and 3 November. The Council noted that this was an annual event that was already well publicised and thus did not require additional publicity from the Council.

## 7 Cemetery & Village maintenance

(a) Councillors considered options for clearing overgrowth at the cemetery this winter as discussed at the September meeting. Cllr Carlisle stated that he thought the grass cutter might not be sufficiently qualified and insured to undertake work involving chainsaws and tree surgery. Cllr White suggested he was approached and asked about this rather than simply appointing the firm that the Council had used previously for similar work. Cllr Carlisle explained that he had visited the cemetery before the September meeting and the extent of work was quite substantial so he would prefer to approach a specialist. The Clerk said that in accordance with financial regulations he would seek two written quotations so they could be compared with the firm used previously and the Council make a decision at the next meeting that ensured value for money. It was resolved that Cllr Carlisle would show at least two specialised contractors the work required so they could provide quotes in accordance with financial regulations. Proposed by Cllr Carlisle and seconded by Cllr Redfern.

(b) Cllr Carlisle updated the Council on progress quantifying the cost of extending the cemetery in the medium to longer term. He said that he was confident that the purchase of a plot of land to the West of the cemetery was feasible and would cost significantly less than that received from the sale of land in 2023/24 as the site was considerably smaller. However, this was the tip of an iceberg. The site would need an access road, pathway, significant legal, planning, and other professional fees and probably an archaeological dig and ecological survey. He thought that the total cost could exhaust reserves and there was little value in negotiating to buy the land many years in advance of need as the land would need maintaining and the Council's expenditure already exceeded its income. Councillors discussed alternative options, but none were considered viable at this point. The Clerk reminded councillors that there was an earmarked reserve for the cemetery, which needed to relate to a realistic future project and without the cemetery reserve the Council may not have the power to maintain reserves at the current level. Reserves were only permitted for earmarked projects and '*reasonable working capital*.' Cllr Carlisle said that his preference was to keep the cemetery reserve because it was still probable that in the long-term it would be needed to extend the cemetery. However, at the current burial rate this would not be in the next few years, so a land purchase and planning application were not required. This could be reviewed annually as part of budget setting. It was resolved to **maintain the cemetery reserve but not to initiate negotiations to purchase land and instead to review annually whether an extension was likely to be needed in the next five years.** Proposed by Cllr Carlisle and seconded by Cllr Tipping.

(c) The Clerk confirmed that he had received a request to erect a headstone with inscription on behalf of two Bowes residents and shared the design with councillors. The supplier wished to be invoiced in advance of burial so fees could be finalised with their client. It was resolved to **accept the headstone proposal and invoicing arrangement.** Proposed by Cllr Carlisle and seconded by Cllr Redfern.

(d) The Clerk revealed that cemetery fees had not been increased since 2008 and since then inflation had increased by 92 per cent. The fees now seemed extremely low compared to other cemeteries in the area and there wasn't much difference between the total cost of reserving a plot and paying for burial in a reserved plot and paying for burial in an unreserved plot, which gave residents little incentive to reserve a plot and help the Council plan future need. Cllr Tipping requested benchmarking and a narrowing of the gap with other local cemeteries and Cllr Carlisle agreed but said that the differential between residents and non-residents should be increased. The Clerk added that the existing fee scale was complex as sometimes a '*clerk's fee*' was added and sometimes it was not. All agreed the clerk's fee was historic and should be abolished. It was resolved that **the Clerk**

would undertake benchmarking of cemetery fees and produce a suggested revised fee scale for 2025/26 for consideration at the November meeting that met the principles discussed above.

Proposed by Cllr Carlisle and seconded by Cllr Tipping.

## 8 Allotments

- (a) The Council reviewed the allotment fees to apply from 1 April 2025 and resolved that they remain unchanged. **Proposed by Cllr Carlisle and seconded by Cllr Tipping.**
- (b) The Clerk confirmed that he had offered the soon to be vacant allotment to the next person on the waiting list as agreed at the last meeting and that they had replied saying they had already taken over an allotment (in August) so should have been removed from the waiting list. The Clerk sought approval to offer it to the next person on the waiting list and to also offer the long vacant half-plot to the only other person on the list. Councillors agreed subject to confirmation that the applicants were Bowes residents and had the time to maintain the allotments in accordance with allotment rules. Cllr White queried whether the half allotment should be charged as a full allotment as its actual size was closer to a full plot, but Cllr Carlisle noted that some of it was for common use as a manure heap and it had previously been rejected even when offered as a half plot, so all agreed it was best to let as a half plot. It was resolved that **the Clerk offers the full and half allotment plot to the next two applicants on the waiting list and reminds them of allotment rules.** **Proposed by Cllr Carlisle and seconded by Cllr Tipping.**

## 9 Play Park

Cllr Redfern circulated a post-completion inspection sheet for the playground and noted that a sign was missing. Cllr Redfern explained that he had removed the sign to update the clerk's contact details and was waiting on a quotation. The playground sign needed to be replaced, whilst the cemetery sign changes were small enough to adapt the existing sign. As the signs were urgently required and the cost would be low it was resolved that **an order could be placed and any invoice settled in advance of the next meeting without seeking further quotations.** **Proposed by Cllr Carlisle and seconded by Cllr Redfern.**

The Clerk explained that the 'free' play equipment discussed at the next meeting required a cleared 30m x 5m footprint, which would mean removing all existing play equipment including the recently installed swings at the Council's expense. Accordingly, it was resolved to **reject the play equipment.** **Proposed by Cllr Carlisle and seconded by Cllr Redfern.**

## 10 Bank accounts, payment authorisation and financial regulations

- (a) Councillors considered progress updating the bank mandate so the new clerk can initiate payments. Cllr Carlisle stated that he had signed the electronic bank mandate form that he had received from Nat West, and it had been routed to Cllr Hughes. The Clerk agreed to e-mail Cllr Hughes to ensure that the workflow progressed. He added that Barclays had sent him a hard copy bank mandate form for the John Bousfield Charity, but this required a personal details form for each signatory with identity checks using an app or in branch. Cllr Carlisle said that these accounts were rarely used and all that was needed was updating the mandate for the new clerk. If this could not be done without personal details forms and id cheques on existing signatories, he felt that the account should be closed. The Clerk agreed to clarify the position with Barclays and if necessary, call a meeting of the charities to discuss the issue.
- (b) The Clerk outlined options for updating financial regulations given the 2024 NALC model financial regulations require dual authorisation of electronic payments, which Nat West do not provide. It was resolved that **the Clerk reviews financial regulations for any other inconsistencies and presents revised financial regulations for approval at the November 2024 meeting.**

**Proposed by Cllr Carlisle and seconded by Cllr Tipping.**

- (c) Councillors considered in the light of (b) whether to change the bank used by the Parish Council to one which did allow the recommended dual authorisation of electronic payments. They agreed that this represented tighter internal control than relying on hard copy authorisations from two signatories, but the risk was too low to justify an immediate change, especially as e-mail addresses were changing.

The Clerk briefed councillors on his research of bank accounts used by parish councils, fees and services and satisfaction levels and recommended a move to Unity First (the most popular bank used by parish councils due to the user-friendly electronic dual authorisation facility and relatively low monthly fee) from 1 April 2025. It was resolved that **the Council changes from Nat West to Unity First for its current account from 1 April 2025.**

Proposed by Cllr Carlisle and seconded by Cllr Tipping.

## 11 Domain and Generic E-mail Account

The Clerk confirmed that as agreed at the September meeting he had applied to the existing website provider (Hugo Fox) for a gov.uk domain with up to five gov.uk e-mail addresses. The transfer was free and would take about six weeks. However, there was an annual fee of £119.99 in addition to the existing hosting fee. In 2024/25 there was a £100 grant available so the net cost would be just £19.99. The Council noted this update.

## 12 Clerk Training and Memberships

The Clerk noted that most parish councils pay an annual subscription to the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC), and he was surprised that whilst Bowes Parish Council used to do this there had been no such payment in the last year. He presented a SLCC paper illustrating costs and benefits and added that SLCC provide training leading to a basic qualification aimed at new clerks (ILCA), which clerks can do in their own time through on-line modules. Cllr Carlisle asked if the Clerk would like to join SLCC and do ILCA and he replied affirmatively. It was resolved that **the Council pay for the Clerk to join SLCC and complete ILCA and that this should be sufficient to perform a training gap analysis in 2025/26.** Proposed by Cllr Carlisle and seconded by Cllr Tipping.

## 13 AOB

Cllr White declared that a gate on a Bowes Bridleway had a rotting post making it unstable. The Clerk agreed to report this to Durham County Council's highways department.

The Clerk described an e-mail he had just received about rural affordable housing, which indicated that a county councillor had discussed a scheme with a parish councillor. None of those present were aware of this so the Clerk agreed to discuss with Cllr Hughes before the next meeting.

## 14 Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting would take place on Tuesday 12 November at 7.30 pm at Bowes Hutchinson's School.

Meeting closed at 20.55. There were no members of the press or public present. 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.