

Minutes of the Meeting of Hexhamshire Parish Council held on Thursday 11th January 2024
in the Malcolm Caisley Meeting Rooms, Whitley Chapel Parish Hall

- 1.1 Present –Marge Rastall (Chair), John Austin, Davy Short, Roger Rutherford, Gill Whatmough, Hilary Kristensen; Ed Parker; Colin Horncastle (County Councillor); Jonny White (Clerk)

Apologies for Absence – Lauren Porteus, Greg Finch, Nicola Matthews.

- 1.2 Minutes of the previous meeting of the Parish Council held on Thursday 14th December 2023

It was agreed the minutes were a true record of the meeting.

- 1.3 Declarations of Interest

- 1.4 Matters Arising

The chair spoke to Monica Haigh from the Basketry group, regarding the Willow on the Wetland, after concerns had been raised that it was becoming overgrown. Monica said they are happy to leave the willows as they are, as they shouldn't grow any further (but may fill out and need some maintenance in the future). As such, they will not need to be cut for now.

- 1.5 Resilience Hub

The clerk inquired with the parish council's insurance provider, to see whether they would require a cage or tracker to be placed on the generator, in order for it to be covered by the insurance. They said none was needed, but the annual price of our insurance would increase (by £51.36). However, a cage may still be needed to protect the fuel.

Donations of sleeping bags have been made to the Resilience Hub. Boxes have also been obtained from a charity shop to store everything.

An inventory will need to be kept of what we have.

- 1.6 Public Participation

There were no members of the public present.

- 1.7 Matters for discussion with the Unitary Councillor

Colin apologised for not attending for a while; other parishes had changed their meeting times or County Council matters took priority. The NCC budget is to be agreed mid-February. The council aim to make £30 million savings over the next 10 years, though there will be no cuts to frontline services, and another £2.5 million is being invested into highways. The Government settlement for NCC was about £1 million less than it was last year. Compared to other councils, Northumberland County are relatively financially healthy, with several leisure centres and schools being built in the area, while others are closing them.

Colin expressed that the NCC accepts it has been a terrible month weather-wise for the roads. There are only 4 'gully-sucker' wagons for the entirety of Northumberland's 3000 miles of roads. At Christmas time, the drivers were put on winter services (gritting etc), so the gully suckers didn't get out as much as they were needed. Potholes were also lessened in their priority, with only the most hazardous being dealt with.

A consultation is beginning next month to see what can be done with the Hexham Middle School site, which has been empty for a couple of years. The council admit they have been slow off the mark, but when a school closes an application must be made to the government to close it as an education place, and the Sportsfield had to be cleared with Sport England as it is no longer necessary.

The NCC can't currently do anything about the old bus station in Hexham as it isn't NCC property; it belongs to a company called Dysart. They are asking for more than it is valued, and the NCC can't legally pay more than it's worth.

The NCC are building a new high school in the Seaton Valley, with another one coming in Berwick. A fire station is also being planned for Berwick. Council tax is likely to increase this year.

A peer review of the council will also take place later this year.

John Austin brought up the highways with Colin, acknowledging his points about winter working and priorities. He expressed the parish's frustrations, asking whether the highways department was competent and cared about the roads out here. He told Colin about the serious crash that took place past the Dipton mill and the house that is getting gradually flooded, as well as emphasising the need for the trees to be cut back. Colin claims that the issues are mainly to do with a lack of money, and staff being too sparsely spread. The parish council were also angry that they received no warning about the road closures. Marge has found out that Northumbrian Water plans to close the road again in late January, but we haven't received an official warning. The clerk will contact Northumbrian Water regarding further closures of the Dipton Mill Road, and request alternatives, such as a traffic light system.

John also brought up our complaint with the planning department, after we were told by the local enforcement officer that we would not receive any updates on the open enforcement cases that we have raised with the NCC. Colin said he would look into the matter.

1.10 Correspondence

No correspondence was received.

1.9.1 Finance

- Additional Insurance for covering the generator: £51.36 Approved.
- Precept will be kept the same as last year (£9000).
- Zen domain renewal: £14.39 (inc. £2.49 VAT) Approved.
- Parish Hall cost - £67.50. Approved.

1.9.2 Balances as of 5th January 2023

Treasurer's Account	£15,123.88
Sportsfield Account	£2,090.93
Dukesfield Account	£5,097.79
Wetlands Account	£1,186.20
Resilience Account	£6,990.13

1.10 Planning

- Two storey extension to rear and conversion of existing attached barns at Mollersteads, Hexhamshire. – The parish council have no objections.
- Listed building consent for two storey extension to rear and conversion of existing attached barns, also Mollersteads. – The parish council have no objections.

1.11 Highways, footpaths and BOATS

Footpaths/BOATS:

Roads:

- Windy Hill
No updates. Clerk contacted the council and environment agency but haven't had a reply yet, other than the EA asking whether we knew what the spoil was made from. Colin said he would chase Alex Campbell, the local enforcement officer, and get her to chase the Environment Agency too, and try to get them to take a sample of the spoil. The parish council also expressed their anger at the state of the road, leading from the Dipton Mill to Windy Hill, which Colin said he would also follow up on.
- Dipton Mill Road
PC expressed their anger at the condition of this road. Further work, including the removal of various trees, is to be scheduled on the Dipton Mill Road. See above (1.7, Matters for Discussion with Unitary Councillor) for more on this.
- Grit
The clerk inquired with the County Council regarding the acquisition of a new grit bin for outside the front of the parish hall. The council responded, by explaining that the criteria for a new grit bin is points-based, and the area by the parish hall fell short of these criteria. However, the parish council can purchase a new grit bin for £250, with the ongoing maintenance liability falling to the PC. Additional refills can be purchased from the County Council at a cost of £125 for 3 refills.
The Parish Council believed the need for an additional grit bin by the parish hall was worth this price and will seek to purchase one at the earliest opportunity.

1.12 Reports

Wetlands: No reports.

Dukesfield Arches: No reports

Hall: A ceilidh was due to be held next month but will now be held in November. A race night and a quiz will take place at the end of the month.

Sportsfield: Gill has paid Mathew Hope for the maintenance for 2023.

School: Headteacher is still on sick leave. A new teacher has started. Claire Parker has taken over as school chef since Linda Harrison retired.

1.13 Any Other Business:

A private meeting about the BOATS took place on the 8th of January, which was well attended by local landowners, and a representative of the police. They had hoped to completely close Slaley Forest to all traffic in an effort to curb its misuse, but that looks unlikely, as the county council does not believe there has been significant damage to the main arterial BOATS into the forest, and so won't close them. However, they are looking into protecting the area from a noise perspective, putting noise prevention orders in place. No progress has been made on getting licence recognition cameras in the forest.

Meeting closed at 9:15pm.