**WOODLAND PARISH COUNCIL**

**Minutes of General Meeting held on**

**Thursday 14 November 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)

Ten members of the public also present

**2. Apologies**

None

**3. Declaration of Interest**

None

**4. Confirmation of Minutes**

Minutes from the meeting on 12 September 2024 were read out in full for the benefit of members of the public present.

Minutes were accepted by Councillors as a true and accurate record of the meeting, and will be uploaded to the website.

**4. Matters arising**

A member of the public asked whether the issues regarding the website/email had now been resolved. The Clerk confirmed that it had been sorted out, and that the helpdesk were still available if required for any future issues.

A question was asked regarding the playground inspections. It was clarified that it is a requirement for an annual ROSPA inspection to be carried out, and that the two additional inspections a year were required as part of the grant funding from TAP. Confirmed that the PC is still awaiting the funds from TAP

Regarding Hamsterley Forest, Cllr Peckett suggested that as the planning application had only just been submitted, a separate meeting be arranged to canvass the views of the public once everyone has had the opportunity to read all the documents submitted as part of the application. This meeting will be solely dedicated to the proposed Forest development. Simon Land advised that a comprehensive document had been drawn up by Stanley Town Council where a similar large planning application had been submitted, and he will send it to Cllr Peckett as it may be useful when holding the next meeting

Cllr Gardner advised that all the PC policies have now been uploaded to the website.

A member of the public Louise Newton raised an issue that she had spoken about at the AGM regarding the level of discontent apparent between Councillors, and which she felt was still obvious amongst them. At her specific request this section was not recorded on any recording device. It led to a lengthy discussion between her, Cllr Rutter and Cllr Gardner regarding comments made by Cllr Rutter against Cllr Gardner which were minuted at the Parish Council meeting in September 2024. Cllr Rutter restated his position made and minuted at that meeting, and in future said that he would only make any comments to Cllr Gardner through the Chair. In summary Cllrs Rutter and Gardner agreed to disagree over the issues which led to these matters arising.

**5. Playpark**

Cllr Snowdon provided an update.

£18k has now been received from Awards 4 All together with a further £1k from Hadrian Trust. Awaiting formal approval from the other funders, the application has been agreed by the Board, and has now gone back to the funders who will come back to the PC direct with any further questions.

Permission and a 5 year licence has been agreed by Raby Estates for the playpark. It should be noted that any future plans for the playpark will need their written consent, and this includes the proposed playground markings

Cllr Peckett advised that when work starts, the installers have said that they will require a container temporarily siting there. The only site available will be on the grass verge, and we will need to liaise with DCC regarding any requirements such as lighting whilst it is in situ.

The PC will only be able to place an order for the equipment once a formal letter agreeing the funding has been received. It is uncertain when this will come through, and the issue now is that there will be a price increase for the equipment on 2 December. Playdale will put the quote back through their system to extend the quoted price until mid-December. Cllr Cosslett agreed to chase up the finance department to expedite matters regarding the funding, so that the PC can place an order before the price increase takes effect.

50% is to be paid on placing an order, with VAT being immediately claimed back from HMRC. Whilst the PC has these funds, it is unable to commit to an order without receiving notice that the final funding has been formally approved.

**It was formally agreed by the PC that as soon as notice has been received, an order be placed with Playdale with 50% being paid. Proposed by Cllr Snowdon. Seconded by Cllr Gardner**

Cllr Brydon was thanked for repairing the roof on the equipment at the playpark

**6. Training and Code of Conduct.**

Councillors all confirmed that they have all now completed and passed the required training. Agreed that the costs be reimbursed by cheque to each councillor

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**7. Complaints**

The Clerk read out a complaint received from Tim Smith regarding the way he felt he had been treated by Robert Teasdale, Simon Land & Becky Land over damage caused at the rear of his garden and the access rights the property has enjoyed for many years without issue. This is all affecting the sale of his property.

Cllr Teasdale responded that he has no comment to make and that the matter is in the hands of his legal team. Simon Land also responded the same way.

Cllr Gardner sought clarification as to why the issues had suddenly arisen, to which Cllr Teasdale and Simon Land provided the history and background to the rights of way and advised that they have only arisen as the property is being marketed to include the drive and front garden which is not legally owned. Cllr Teasdale advised that he has had a legal right of way over the driveway to access his land for many years. Cllr Gardner challenged as to why this was not noted in the Councillor Declaration of Interest as it does have a value. After a lengthy discussion it was agreed by Councillors that the issues mentioned in the complaint is a matter for legal teams to resolve.

Cllr Gardner mentioned another item she had received from a resident about the Christmas Fair. Cllr Peckett advised that it had been forwarded to the relevant person for comment, no response had so far been received, but anything further would be dealt with by email as the event will take place before the next PC meeting.

**8. Finance & Accounts**

Bank balance currently £31,796.04

Since last meeting, receipts are £18k Awards 4 All, £1k Hadrian Trust and £400 raised from the race night held at The Edge which is for the playground fund

Payments out have been £10 new Clerk training and £290 for 2x grass cuts

Payments due: £95 to Woodland Village Hall for meetings from March. **Agreed by Councillors.**

Still to be paid: Donation to Woodland Show and also £840 to Woodland Community Group as previously agreed. Beneficiaries will send details of bank accounts to be credited to Clerk for payment.

Matters arising: A question was raised as to whether the bank balance included reserves. The Clerk confirmed that it does, and that reserves within the bank balance are held at £4k

**9. Precept and future budgetary items**

The Clerk has produced an initial draft document that has been circulated to councillors, which details an estimate of costs for the next financial year. The precept request has to be with DCC by 17 January 2025.

Due to an increase in band D properties offset by a removal of the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme, there is a small increase in revenue of £96.48. However, the PC will incur additional costs next year compared with this year, primarily due to the planned upgrade of the playpark. Insurance costs will rise as a higher level of cover is required for the new equipment as required by the funders. Additional inspections required by funders of the equipment will also increase costs.

Cllr Peckett is to write to Lynesack & Softley asking for a contribution towards the insurance, as a large proportion of playground users come from their parish, and half of the village falls within their parish boundary.

Initial projections for expenditure as a whole show a potential additional spend of approximately £1k. This would equate to around a 30% increase in precept request.

Suggestions to reduce costs include more focussed and shorter PC meetings which would reduce the hall hire costs, The PC could use monies held from the residual amount remaining of the Covid grant of £10k that was given at the time, and whilst it is not sustainable, it could be used to cushion the level of increase immediately required, with a staged progressive increase in precept in future years.

It was raised that DCC will question precept request increases above 10%, and that the auditors will also question large bank balances being held when at the same time large precept requests are being made. There is also the possibility that a cap may be introduced to precept rises in future years which needs taking in to consideration.

Clerk to investigate savings accounts, so that money can be taken out of the bank balance and ‘ring-fenced’ for specific reasons, ie reserves that are required to be held: future elections: planned future playground upgrades, etc. This would give a truer picture of ‘surplus’ working balance monies held by the PC.

A question was raised regarding the level of budget for grass cutting, as this forms a large part of the overall expenditure. It was suggested that possibly part of the area currently being cut could be turned over to wild flower. A tender request will be sent out next year to include an extensive cut

Councillors agreed to discuss further in January at which time a final decision will be taken on the level of precept request.

**10. Planning**

No local planning applications received

Hamsterley Forest development – a separate meeting will be held on 5 December 2024

**11. AOB/Correspondence**

The Clerk updated the meeting on Angela Rayners speech to Local Government Association where she talked about proposals for council meetings to be held remotely if required, voting by proxy in certain circumstances, councillor home addresses not requiring to be made public, and the ability to suspend local councillors for bad behaviour.

The Clerk also mentioned WCAG 2.2 compliance, which is a legal requirement to make websites more user friendly and easily accessible to everyone, including those with various impairments. We have been advised that the people who we pay for the website are doing the necessary work to ensure that the website is fully compliant. This is free, but that they can also offer a full website audit to ensure that it complies with government standards (cost is £50 plus VAT). If it fails, they can fix (cost £25 plus VAT), with common issues found relating to colour contrast. It was suggested that we review the original contract with the company who set up the website as a first step, as all the PC does is to add documents without making any changes to the actual website itself.

The Clerk advised that the bin at the playground that was damaged in the recent storm has now been replaced by DCC, and has been securely fixed to the railings.

Councillors were reminded of the trees that were kindly donated by Chris & Susanna Baker. They are currently storing them until Councillors decide where to put them. Suggested that Woodland Village Hall may want some for the field that they have. Cllr Cosslett suggested an arbour day involving local children helping to plant them. Councillors agreed to include as an agenda item for further discussion in January.

NALC & CDALC each year are given 2 tickets for a Royal Garden party at Buckingham Palace, They have asked for any nominations to be sent to them for inclusion in a draw. Open to ex Chairs who have not previously attended one. Councillors agreed that Cliff Harding and his wife would be perfect candidates in light of Cliff’s dedication to the PC over many years. Cllr Peckett to contact him to see if he would like to be nominated. Closing date 31 January 2025

The Clerk finally mentioned the vast amount of old PC documents currently being stored in the cemetery chapel, which is not ideal. Currently awaiting a document from CDALC detailing retention periods, and once this has been received we will need to arrange to go through everything carefully to separate those documents which need to be kept from those which are no longer required to be retained, with a view to then getting them archived in Durham.

**12. Performance review of Clerk**

It was agreed that the Clerk has made a good start to his role. Support is always available from the Councillors and CDALC if required.

**13. Date of next meeting**

Provisionally set for 9th January 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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***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.***