City of Durham Parish Council

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Date of Summons: 9th March 2026

SUMMONS

To all Members of the City of Durham Parish Council's Finance Committee: Councillors S Walker, L Brown, E Hopgood, E Scott, V Ashfield and L Wilson.

You are hereby summoned to attend the **Finance Committee meeting on Monday 16th March 2026 at 11:00am via Zoom** for the purpose of transacting the following Agenda business as shown. The link to join this meeting is below:

Join Zoom Meeting
https://us02web.zoom.us/j/85710139565
Meeting ID: 857 1013 9565

Members of the public and press are also cordially invited to attend. Members of the public may address Council, Committee or Sub-Committee meetings for up to three minutes, with the agreement of the Chair of the meeting, provided that the statement is related to an item on the agenda. The speaker should approach the Clerk before the meeting commences to request to speak during the meeting.

Members are reminded that the Council has a general duty to consider the following matters in the exercise of any of its functions: Equal Opportunities, Health & Safety, Civility and Respect and Human Rights plus Social, Economic and Environmental matters.

Yours faithfully,

A. Shanley

Mr Adam Shanley
Clerk to the City of Durham Parish Council

AGENDA

1. **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

2. **TO RECEIVE ANY DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST FROM MEMBERS**

3. **TO APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 14th JANUARY 2026**

4. **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

5. **REPORT ON THE FINANCIAL POSITION OF THE PARISH COUNCIL**

6. **DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL CONSULTATION ON TACKLING POVERTY IN COUNTY DURHAM** – briefing note included.

7. **UPDATE ON THE WORK OF THE COMMUNITY CENTRE SUPPORT WORKING GROUP**

8. **DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS**

Previously agreed – Wednesday 15th April 2026

CITY OF DURHAM PARISH COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the Parish Council Finance Committee held on Wednesday 14th January 2026 at 11:00am via Zoom

Present: Councillors S Walker (in the Chair), L Brown, G Holland, E Scott, V Ashfield and L Wilson.
Also present: Parish Clerk A Shanley.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor E Hopgood. The Chair accepted that Councillor G Holland was attending the meeting as a substitute for Councillor Hopgood.

2. TO RECEIVE ANY DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST FROM MEMBERS

None received.

3. TO APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 19th NOVEMBER 2025

The minutes of the meeting held on 19th November 2025 were unanimously agreed as a true and accurate record of proceedings.

4. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

None received.

5. REPORT ON THE FINANCIAL POSITION OF THE PARISH COUNCIL

The Clerk presented a detailed report on the financial position of the Parish Council. Members had previously been circulated with the nominal ledger and budget headings for review. The Clerk advised that, as at 9th January, there had been no additional transactions since the financial position was last updated.

Total income received during the financial year to date stood at £312,362. Total expenditure to date amounted to £251,275 against an approved annual budget of £370,710. This meant that approximately 32% of the Council's overall budget remained unspent at that point in the financial year, which the Clerk advised was broadly in line with expectations given the timing of expenditure.

The Clerk explained that certain budgets appeared underspent but that this reflected the timing of payments rather than an absence of commitments. The staffing budget stood at £61,220 against an allocation of £95,000, noting that this included provision for the fundraising role. The Small Grants budget had already been fully committed. Expenditure on events had reached just over £36,000 against a total allocation of £38,000. Members were reminded that the Beacon events allocation included £10,400 which remained ring-fenced as it had been received as a donation.

The Clerk further reported that the administration budget currently stood at just over £23,000 against a budget allocation of £21,000. This reflected the timing of payments for items such as IT provision, insurance, communications costs and the introduction of a new office space which carried a slightly higher rental cost. It was therefore anticipated that some additional funds might need to be transferred into the administration budget before the end of the financial year.

Within the Business Committee budget, expenditure currently stood at £18,630 of an allocation of £20,438, representing around 91.2% of the available budget having been spent or committed. The Environment budget showed expenditure of £56,676 against an allocation of £103,979, leaving £47,303 remaining. The Clerk explained that this apparent underspend was largely due to the timing of invoices rather than the absence of activity. For example, the enhanced policing programme showed expenditure of £3,376 against a £40,000 allocation, but four further invoices were expected which would fully utilise that budget.

Additional environmental projects were also expected to generate expenditure shortly. The River Wear programme was due to incur significant upcoming costs, and the Blue Plaques programme included works relating to the Mo Mowlam Blue Plaque, the Shincliffe boundary stone project and works associated with the Gilesgate duck pond. The Green Move-Out programme had also been pursued, with the Clerk confirming that an invoice for the Green Move-In project had been chased. The Emergency Plan budget had effectively been fully allocated but some expenditure still required processing due to VAT arrangements.

Members were also advised that a significant invoice was expected for professional planning support relating to the Article 4 Direction report, which would shortly be presented to Full Council.

The Clerk reported that expenditure from earmarked reserves totalled £28,000, comprising £24,745 from the Election Reserve and £3,312 from the Contingencies Reserve. Approximately £16,943 remained in the earmarked reserves.

The Clerk concluded that the Parish Council remained in a strong and stable financial position. Income had been received early in the year, while a proportion of expenditure remained to be delivered later in the financial year. The current financial position therefore reflected the expected phasing of income and expenditure. The level of uncommitted funds and underspent budgets also provided flexibility for the Council to progress projects, respond to emerging priorities and reallocate resources where required.

Members discussed several aspects of the report. Councillor Walker raised the small budget allocated for the use of drug detection dogs and asked whether the budget would be utilised. The Clerk advised that some expenditure would occur but that the full allocation was unlikely to be spent.

The Clerk also advised that an additional £3,000 to £4,000 might need to be allocated to the events budget to support Chinese New Year activities, particularly as the cost of installing banners along North Road had proven higher than originally anticipated. However, he noted that approximately £12,000 remained within the Council's contingency budget, which could be used to support both events and administrative costs if required. Members expressed support for using contingency funds where necessary, noting that contingencies existed precisely to support such requirements.

The Clerk also confirmed that Durham BID had agreed to contribute £1,000 towards the cost of banners along North Road. Members welcomed the collaborative work undertaken by partners and the strong level of cooperation across organisations involved in planning the celebrations.

The Committee noted the report on the financial position of the Parish Council.

The Committee **agreed** that the contingency fund should be used to support events and administration expenditure this financial year.

6. REPORT FROM THE COMMUNITY CENTRE SUPPORT WORKING GROUP

The Clerk presented a report on the work of the Community Centre Support Working Group. Members were advised that the Council had received eight expressions of interest from community organisations seeking support.

Following consideration of all submissions, the Working Group had decided to invite three organisations to progress to the next stage of the process during the current financial year. These organisations were St Giles Church, Waddington Street United Reformed Church, and the Allington House Community Association. The Clerk emphasised that progressing to this stage did not guarantee that financial support would be awarded, as final decisions would depend on the quality and strength of the applications submitted.

The Working Group had observed that the most significant challenge facing community centres at present was the rising cost of energy and operational running costs. In response, the group had prioritised proposals that aimed to improve both environmental and financial sustainability. One key area of focus was the potential installation of solar panels to reduce energy costs and improve long-term resilience.

The Clerk reported that initial work had already been undertaken with Allenton House to explore solar panel installation and wider sustainability improvements. Some staffing changes within that organisation were also expected to contribute to improved financial sustainability.

The Working Group had also considered an application relating to the City Theatre. While members had recognised the importance of the theatre and its cultural value to the city, it was concluded that the scale of its financial requirements was significantly greater than the Parish Council could realistically support through direct grants.

Instead, the proposal was that the Parish Council should support the Theatre by appointing a fundraising contractor who could assist in developing large funding bids to external bodies such as the National Lottery and the Cultural Growth Fund, which was expected to open for applications later in February. The proposed allocation for commissioning this work was approximately £5,000.

The Clerk noted that when the Parish Council had previously agreed to employ a fundraiser, three priority themes had been identified: environmental sustainability, cultural support and heritage. Work on environmental initiatives was already underway, and the proposed support for the City Theatre would form part of the cultural strand of that programme.

Members were also informed that unsuccessful applicants had been encouraged to apply again in the future and had been directed towards alternative funding sources which might be able to support their projects.

During discussion, Councillor Walker confirmed that none of the applications involved grants being used to promote any particular religious faith. The Clerk confirmed that this was correct and that the support being considered related solely to community use of facilities and sustainability improvements.

Councillor G Holland welcomed the focus on solar panel installations but asked what proportion of costs the Parish Council might be expected to cover. Councillor Walker explained that projects often involved match funding, with other organisations such as Northern Power Grid offering grants which the Parish Council could supplement.

The Clerk added that the Parish Council had a total fund of approximately £40,000 available for this programme and that allocations would be made on a competitive basis depending on the strength of applications submitted. For example, an application demonstrating match funding and detailed planning work would likely be prioritised over one with limited preparation.

Members also discussed the broader benefits of solar energy systems, including the potential for community centres to generate electricity and sell surplus power back to the grid. Councillor Walker shared her experience of solar panel installations at another community building, noting that energy costs had previously exceeded £1,000 per month but were expected to reduce significantly following installation.

Councillor G Holland highlighted that older buildings such as Allenton House could also face challenges relating to heat loss and building insulation, and suggested that energy efficiency improvements could also form part of sustainability discussions with community organisations.

The Clerk confirmed that full applications from the shortlisted organisations were expected by mid-February, allowing the Committee to make funding decisions later in the year.

Finally, the Clerk asked Members to approve the proposal to advertise for a fundraising contractor to support the City Theatre project. Members indicated their support for the proposal.

The Committee **agreed** to progress the Community Centre Support programme as outlined and also **agreed** to approve the advertisement for a fundraising contractor to support major funding applications for the City Theatre.

7. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

Wednesday 15th April at 11.00am via Zoom.

There being no further business, the Chair thanked Members for their attendance and contributions and closed the meeting.

Signed,

Chair of the Parish Council Finance Committee
(16th March 2026)

ITEM 6: DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL CONSULTATION ON TACKLING POVERTY IN COUNTY DURHAM

Durham County Council is currently consulting residents and stakeholders, as part of its work to develop a refreshed countywide strategy covering the period 2026 to 2030.

Full details about this consultation can be found here:

https://letstalkcountydurham.co.uk/en-GB/folders/tackling-poverty-in-county-durham

As Members are aware, Durham County Council has operated a Poverty Strategy since 2012, with the current strategy running from 2022 to 2026. In accordance with the agreed timetable, the Council has undertaken a comprehensive review and evaluation of the existing strategy to assess progress, identify gaps and respond to significant changes in the social and economic context.

This review has been overseen by the Poverty Action Steering Group, a cross-council senior officer group working closely with elected members, statutory partners and voluntary and community sector organisations. The outcome of this work is a proposed refreshed strategic approach, which is now subject to public consultation prior to final adoption

The consultation has been formally approved by Durham County Council's Cabinet and is being delivered through the Let's Talk County Durham engagement platform. It seeks views from residents, community organisations, partners and local councils on the proposed vision, priorities and structure of the new strategy, as well as on how effectively it reflects lived experience and local need. The consultation period runs from January to March 2026, after which responses will be analysed and used to inform the final strategy and a supporting action plan, with a view to adoption later in 2026.

The evidence underpinning the refreshed strategy demonstrates that poverty and financial insecurity remain significant and persistent challenges across County Durham. Latest data shows that over 112,000 residents, representing approximately 21.3 per cent of the population, are living in absolute poverty after housing costs. Child poverty remains a particular concern, with more than 31,000 children, over one in four, living in relative poverty. These figures highlight the scale of financial hardship experienced by families and the long-term implications for health, education and life chances.

Fuel poverty continues to affect a substantial number of households, with an estimated 26,600 to 27,500 homes, around 11.5 per cent of the total housing stock, struggling to afford adequate heating and energy. This is compounded by the age and condition of housing in many parts of the county, including a high proportion of older, energy-inefficient terraced properties, as well as by off-gas rural areas where energy costs are typically higher. Fuel poverty is closely linked to poorer physical and mental health outcomes, particularly among older residents and those with long-term health conditions.

Employment and income data further illustrate the complexity of poverty in County Durham. While overall unemployment levels are relatively low, in-work poverty has increased markedly. The number of residents in employment who are claiming Universal Credit has more than doubled since March 2020, rising from around 9,500 to almost 20,000 by late 2023. This reflects the growth of low-paid, insecure and part-time work, alongside rising living costs that erode household incomes. Economic inactivity also remains high, with around one quarter of working-age residents not in the labour market, often due to long-term illness, disability or caring responsibilities.

County Durham is ranked among the more deprived upper-tier local authorities in England, currently placed around 40th out of 153 on national deprivation measures. Income deprivation and employment deprivation rankings similarly indicate entrenched disadvantage across many communities. These challenges are not evenly distributed and are shaped by place-based factors, including rural isolation, limited access to services and transport, digital exclusion, and local labour market conditions. Nearly half of the county's population lives in rural areas, where these barriers can intensify the experience of financial insecurity.

The pressures facing households have been intensified in recent years by a combination of factors, including the long-term effects of the coronavirus pandemic, sustained inflation in food, energy and housing costs, global economic uncertainty, and domestic policy changes. In particular, the ongoing managed migration from legacy benefits to Universal Credit is expected to continue through 2025 and into 2026, bringing further risk of financial disruption for some households. At the same time, reductions in national funding and increasing statutory pressures limit the resources available to local authorities, reinforcing the importance of targeted, preventative and partnership-led approaches.

In response to these challenges, Durham County Council has delivered a wide range of interventions under the current Poverty Strategy, including the distribution of over £30 million through the Household Support Fund since 2022, targeted benefit take-up campaigns, crisis grants, food and fuel support, employability programmes and digital inclusion initiatives. While these actions have provided essential support, the Council's review recognises the need to move further upstream, reducing reliance on crisis responses and strengthening pathways out of poverty.

The refreshed strategy therefore proposes a framework built around five strategic pillars: prevention, protection, pathways, participation and partnerships. This approach combines short-term support for households in immediate difficulty with longer-term action to improve skills, access to good quality employment, affordable housing, financial capability and community resilience. The strategy also places a strong emphasis on co-production, lived experience and collaboration with partners across the public, voluntary and community sectors.

As part of the consultation, Durham County Council is also seeking views on the potential renaming of the strategy. This reflects evidence that the term "poverty" can carry stigma and may discourage engagement from some residents. A working title focused on financial resilience and opportunity has been proposed, with the final decision to be informed by consultation feedback.

Town and parish councils are recognised within the consultation framework as important partners in both engagement and delivery. It is therefore proposed that the City of Durham Parish Council engages positively with the County Durham consultation on tackling poverty and financial insecurity and responds accordingly to this consultation.

The deadline for responding to this consultation is the end of March 2026. This consultation was considered at the February meeting of the Parish Council and it was agreed to delegate responsibility for responding to this consultation to the Finance Committee. In advance of this meeting, the Clerk has circulated the following proposed response to this consultation based on feedback from Members at the Full Council meeting and in writing:

RE: Consultation on tackling poverty in County Durham (County Durham Poverty Strategy 2026-2030)

The City of Durham Parish Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to the proposed Poverty Strategy and wishes, at the outset, to express its broad support for the intention behind the Strategy and for the recognition that poverty in County Durham is deep-rooted, complex and structural rather than short-term or individualised. We commend DCC's Poverty Action Steering Group (PASG) for their work on this important Strategy to date.

The evidence set out within the Council's own analysis demonstrates clearly the scale of the challenge. Over 112,000 residents, representing more than 21 per cent of the county's population, are living in absolute poverty after housing costs, while more than one in four children are growing up in relative poverty. Fuel poverty affects in excess of 26,000 households, many of them in poorly insulated housing stock, and in-work poverty continues to rise, with the number of residents claiming Universal Credit while in employment having more than doubled since 2020 (rising from 9,500 in March 2020 to 19,900 by September 2023). These figures alone underline why a refreshed, coherent and ambitious approach is essential if the stated objective of building financially resilient communities is to be realised.

The Parish Council particularly supports the emphasis placed within the Strategy on skills, training and access to secure, skilled and properly paid employment. County Durham's economic inactivity rate remains high at just under 26 per cent, and while headline unemployment is relatively low, this masks widespread underemployment, insecure work and low pay, especially in former industrial communities and rural areas.

Educational attainment for disadvantaged pupils continues to lag behind national averages, and too many residents remain locked out of progression opportunities due to health, caring responsibilities, transport barriers and digital exclusion. A serious focus on skills development, adult education, careers pathways and employer engagement is therefore central to any credible route out of poverty, and the Parish Council welcomes this aspect of the Strategy as both necessary and long overdue.

However, the Parish Council is concerned that some recent and proposed policy decisions risk directly undermining the very aims of the Strategy. In particular, the proposed removal of the local Council Tax Reduction Scheme for the lowest earners and those on benefits, replacing it with a requirement for these households to pay a minimum of 10 per cent council tax, while council tax overall is increased by 1.99 per cent for social care, appears fundamentally counterproductive. Council data shows that more than 53,500 residents currently receive council tax support, with around 25,000 receiving a full discount. These households are already among those most exposed to food insecurity, fuel poverty and debt. Requiring the poorest residents to contribute proportionally more, while increases for higher-income households remain capped, risks pushing more people into arrears, enforcement action and crisis support, increasing pressure on exactly the services this Strategy seeks to reduce reliance upon. This approach risks shifting costs rather than reducing hardship, and sits uneasily alongside a stated commitment to prevention and early intervention.

Before reducing the LCTRS, the local authority consulted on this in late 2025 as part of its Medium-Term Financial Plan consultation. As you will recall, the City of Durham Parish Council objected to any changes in the 100% relief and this remains our position still. As that consultation specifically highlighted in its Equality Impact Assessment at the time, 44.7 per cent of claimants have a disability or are part of a household where *disability-related benefits are in payment, and over 62 per cent of claimants are women. Durham County Council's now adopted policy on the LCTRS is completely counterproductive to the aims of this Strategy.*

The Parish Council is also concerned by the growing narrative that frames reindustrialisation around the reopening of mines and the scaling back of commitment to renewable energy and climate action. Such an approach represents short-term thinking and fails to recognise the long-term economic opportunities presented by the green transition. County Durham has a significant stock of older, energy-inefficient housing, contributing directly to fuel poverty, poor health outcomes and excess winter deaths.

Investment in renewables, energy efficiency, retrofit programmes and low-carbon infrastructure would not only reduce household bills and emissions but would also create skilled, future-proof employment opportunities across construction, engineering, maintenance and technology. Green energy and climate resilience are not distractions from tackling poverty; they are among the most effective tools available to do so, particularly in a county where fuel poverty and low wages intersect so strongly.

The delivery of genuinely affordable council and social housing must also be accelerated if poverty is to be addressed in a meaningful way. While County Durham remains more affordable than many parts of the country on paper, rising private rents, limited supply and an ageing housing stock continue to place significant strain on low-income households. Nearly half of the county's population lives in rural areas where access to affordable housing is even more constrained, and where transport and service access issues compound financial insecurity.

As you are aware, the City of Durham Parish Council very much welcomed the news in August 2024 that Durham County Council had initiated a five-year program to build 500 new, energy-efficient council homes. This marks the local authority's first direct housing construction since selling housing stock in 2015. We understand that DCC is working with T Manners & Sons and that construction has begun on sites in Burnhope and Seaham, with projects featuring bungalows and family homes designed for sustainability. Whilst this news is highly welcome, construction rates appear to be progressing at a glacial pace and without a substantial increase in the supply of secure, energy-efficient social housing, the cycle of high housing costs, fuel poverty and poor health outcomes will persist, undermining progress across all five pillars of the Strategy.

To highlight the scale of this issue, in a recent Freedom of Information response (Ref: 5796513), Durham County Council highlighted that, as at 31st January 2023, there were 10,271 individuals on the waiting list for social housing in our county alone (a high number of whom were Band 1 top tier priority for housing).

Finally, the Parish Council wishes to highlight the critical importance of accessible, high-quality advice and information in preventing poverty from escalating into crisis. The Strategy itself acknowledges that removing barriers to accessing services is essential, yet recent decisions to reduce the availability of customer access points, including limiting the Clayport Library service to appointments-only one day per week (Thursdays) alongside the cancelling of the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) contract, appear to move in the opposite direction.

The Citizens Advice Bureau has over 60 highly trained volunteers that help people every week and last year the CAB helped 1370 people in the Durham City area alone. Mercifully, they have managed to secure some temporary funding to relocate their services to North Road Methodist Church but further support is needed if this Strategy is to truly realise its aims.

Evidence from previous advice provision shows that support delivered through advice services has increased household incomes by hundreds of thousands of pounds and written off millions in unmanageable debt. For residents facing digital exclusion, language barriers, disability or complex life circumstances, face-to-face advice remains indispensable. Reducing this provision risks increasing under-claiming of benefits, deepening debt and driving greater demand for crisis interventions.

Conclusion

The City of Durham Parish Council supports the overarching aims of the Poverty Strategy and welcomes its recognition of the scale and persistence of poverty across County Durham. However, we urge that the Strategy be aligned consistently with wider fiscal, housing, climate and service-access decisions, so that actions taken in one area do not undermine progress in another. Tackling poverty requires not only strong intentions but policy coherence, long-term thinking and a willingness to protect those least able to absorb further financial pressure.

We offer these comments constructively and in the hope that they will strengthen the final Strategy and its capacity to deliver lasting change for residents across the county.

End of response

DECISION REQUIRED	For Members to consider the content of the above report and agree a formal response to this consultation on behalf of the City of Durham Parish Council.