

CITY OF DURHAM PARISH COUNCIL

Minutes of the City of Durham Parish Council's Business Committee meeting held on Tuesday 20th January 2026 via Zoom

Present: Councillors E Hopgood (in the Chair), P Layton, D Freeman, R Handy and L Wilson

Also present: Mr Adam Shanley (Parish Clerk), Councillors V Ashfield and G Holland and Mr Paul Howard (Durham BID) and Graham Soult (Canny Insights).

1. Welcome and apologies

None received. In the Chair's absence, Councillor E Hopgood took over the chairing of the meeting as Vice-Chair of the Committee.

2. To receive any declarations of interest from members.

None received.

3. To receive and approve as a correct record the minutes of the meeting held on 18th November 2025

The minutes of the meeting held on 18th November 2025 were unanimously **agreed** as a true and accurate record of proceedings.

4. To receive any public participation comments on the following agenda items.

None received.

5. Report by Graham Soult on the filling of vacant premises in the City

The Chair welcomed Graham Soult to the meeting. Graham presented his update on vacant premises in the city, explaining that this was the penultimate report he would deliver in his current role.

Graham reported that he had recently met with the owner of a proposed coffee and doughnut business who had been referred to him by Durham BID. The most suitable potential premises, Tealicious, was already under offer by the time enquiries were made and no alternative unit had yet been identified. Mr Soult reiterated the importance of maintaining an appropriate balance between retail and hospitality uses in the city centre and noted that he remained cautious about directing additional food and drink operators into retail units where this could further shift that balance.

Graham also reported discussions with Durham Fringe regarding the possibility of securing a more permanent base for rehearsals and meetings. The Clerk noted, while declaring his involvement with Durham Fringe, that a lease and licence arrangement for the former H&M store was progressing which could provide space for the organisation.

Graham also highlighted April 11 in Fowler's Yard as a positive addition to the city, explaining that although he had not directly matched the business to that unit, he had supported its establishment and had promoted it through his own channels.

Graham then provided updates on potential future occupiers and live leads. He advised that Durham Coins remained a prospective occupier and that discussions were continuing regarding suitable premises. Graham also confirmed that the retailer Søstrene Grene had publicly identified Durham as one of the locations it wished to enter, which he considered a very positive development as the brand would appeal to a broad range of visitors and residents. Graham expressed hope that progress could be made on this opportunity before the end of his commission in March.

Members were also updated on recent changes in city centre premises. Graham referred to Mustard Social Kitchen opening on Silver Street, Durham City Barbers occupying the former Durham GInstitute premises, and Porcelain Coffee appearing likely to open at 3C Old Elvet.

Graham also noted that Urban Chai on North Road had reopened following a change in franchise arrangement. Concern was expressed regarding the former Kemble Gallery, which was now being marketed for sale and had become subject to significant fly-posting which was damaging the appearance of the building.

Graham further noted that the former Dawson and Sanderson premises appeared likely to become another wine bar premises. The former Barclays building had also disappeared from the market after previously being listed as under offer, although neither the Clerk nor Durham BID had any further information about its status.

Graham concluded by highlighting a number of wider concerns affecting the city centre. At Riverwalk, he reported that Rio had opened in the former Estabulo unit but that Meeple World had closed and entered liquidation. He also confirmed that both Meeple World and Moon would now operate online only, noting that the changing environment around the Market Place and the deteriorating appearance of the former Marks and Spencer site were likely affecting footfall.

The Committee expressed strong frustration at the situation with STACK at the former Marks and Spencer building, noting that despite earlier efforts to improve the appearance of the site, the current condition of the hoardings and lack of progress had created a poor impression for visitors. Members shared these concerns and discussed the need for action to address the condition of the site and the wider issue of stalled developments in the city centre. Following on from this discussion, the Clerk **agreed** to write directly to the company behind STACK in order to try and resolve this. The Chair thanked Graham for his report.

6. Report on the work of Durham BID

Mr Paul Howard presented the Durham BID report. Paul advised that the independents campaign during the Christmas period had again been very successful. The level of demand had been so high that additional campaign materials had needed to be printed.

Paul also reported that the Christmas light switch-on had been very successful. Although such events were not major direct revenue generators in themselves, he said the restaurants and cafés were full, which demonstrated their value.

Paul added that BID would ideally like to make more of the light switch-on as an all-day event, but was constrained by road closure arrangements, which limited what could be delivered.

Paul also updated the Committee on Restaurant Week, which would run from 30th January to 6th February. Thirty restaurants were already signed up, with two more about to provide menus and the expectation that several further late entries would follow. BID had increased the marketing budget for both the January and September Restaurant Week programmes, including more social media promotion, greater online advertising spend, and an enhanced radio campaign on Smooth FM at the request of several participating businesses.

Paul also provided an update on Fire and Ice, to be held on 27th and 28th February. Paul advised that two new locations had been added this year. One, with the support of the Parish Council, would be in Fowler's Yard outside April 11; the other, after years of pressure to bring part of the event closer to North Road, had been secured near Head of Steam in order to create a route towards that part of the city.

Paul explained that previous attempts had been blocked on policing grounds because of crowd concerns on a busy road. Paul said the sculptures had only just been confirmed that morning and that the theme, not yet public, would be "out of this world," with an alien and science-fiction style.

Finally, Paul reported on footfall. He said that, to the end of the year, performance had been about 2.7% down overall compared with the previous year, but that this was not a disaster and that conditions had improved as the year progressed.

The Clerk thanked Paul for the report and raised one particular promotional initiative that had taken place during the Christmas period, namely the free tree giveaway linked to spending over £20. Mr Howard said he had not chased formal feedback afterwards, although there had been a lot of positive comments on the day and the campaign appeared to have worked very well.

The Clerk said the Parish Council had received a great deal of feedback, especially from market traders, and that he had been struck by the size of many of the receipts shown by participants, with some people having spent £80, £100 or even £120 in the market. Councillor V Ashfield added that a coffee shop just inside the Market Hall had reported takings around 50% above normal and that outdoor market traders had described it as their best Saturday of the year. Councillor Ashfield said it had also simply been good fun and had captured people's imagination because it was something new.

Paul agreed that it had been an excellent campaign, and the Clerk confirmed that the Parish Council was committed to continuing it in November in future years.

The Chair welcomed the report, remarked that the Restaurant Week plans were encouraging and thanked Durham BID for its work.

The Committee **agreed** to note the Durham BID report and welcomed the success of the Christmas campaign activity, the forthcoming Restaurant Week and Fire and Ice events, and the intention to continue the tree giveaway initiative in future years.

7. Consultation on proposed visitor levy in England

The Committee considered the national consultation on the proposed introduction of an overnight visitor levy in England. The Clerk explained that the proposal would require accommodation providers such as hotels, Airbnbs and holiday lets to collect a levy from visitors and pass it to the relevant authority. The consultation allowed a significant level of local discretion, likely to be exercised through the North East Combined Authority, and would permit revenues to be used not only for tourism promotion but also for wider infrastructure that supports the visitor economy.

Members discussed the potential benefits and concerns associated with the proposal. Several members were broadly supportive of the principle, noting that similar levies operate successfully in other areas and that the additional funding could help support local infrastructure and visitor-related services. However, concerns were raised about how the revenue would be distributed, with members emphasising that a significant proportion of funds raised in County Durham should be spent locally. Some members also highlighted the potential administrative burden on accommodation providers and the lack of clarity around how short-term lets would be monitored without a national register.

The Committee also discussed how the levy should be structured. Members considered that a charge applied per person could be disproportionate, particularly for families or group bookings, and instead expressed a preference for a per-booking, per-night approach. Members further emphasised that any future increases to the levy should be subject to consultation and that greater transparency was needed regarding how the proposed £2 charge and the projected revenue estimates had been calculated.

The Committee **agreed** that the Parish Council should support the principle of the visitor levy, subject to several conditions being reflected in its consultation response. These included ensuring that funds raised locally benefit the local area, allowing parish councils and community organisations to access funding for initiatives that support the visitor economy, adopting a per-booking charging model, requiring consultation on any future increases, and seeking greater clarity around the assumptions used to calculate the proposed levy and projected revenues.

The Committee **agreed** that the response would be drafted by the Clerk and referred to Full Council for approval.

8. Events report

The Clerk presented an update on recent and upcoming city events. Members were informed that the Christmas light switch-on had been highly successful, with an estimated 6,500 people attending in the Market Place. The Clerk also reported that the Christmas Festival had attracted significant regional and national attention after being ranked number one, resulting in very high visitor numbers. On one day alone approximately 29 coaches arrived, meaning ticket sales to the public had to be temporarily paused due to demand. Members noted that traders had reported strong sales and that planning for the next festival would begin in February.

The Clerk then provided an update on preparations for Chinese New Year. The Parish Council would be supporting the event through city dressing, including the installation of lanterns along Silver Street and Sadler Street, banners on North Road and the booking of the Town Hall for the tea dance. An organised fireworks display would take place at the Rowing Club on 16th February, funded by the University, with measures taken to avoid the late-night disturbance issues experienced in the previous year. Members also discussed the possibility of additional cultural activities alongside the fireworks event and opportunities to encourage local businesses, particularly Chinese restaurants on North Road, to participate in the celebrations.

The Committee welcomed the success of the Christmas programme and supported the ongoing preparations for Chinese New Year. It was **agreed** that Members would help promote the event and communicate details of the organised fireworks display to residents' groups, and that further low-cost cultural activities would be explored to complement the celebrations and encourage participation by Durham businesses.

9. Dates of future meeting(s) of this Committee:

17th March 2026 – 11:00am
19th May 2026 – 11:00am
21st July 2026 – 11:00am

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

Signed,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G. Scott', with a stylized flourish at the end.

**Chair of the City of Durham Parish Council's Business Committee
(Tuesday 17th March 2026)**