

City of Durham Parish Council

Minutes of the City of Durham Parish Council's Business Committee meeting held on Tuesday 17th March 2026 via Zoom.

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

Also present: Mr Adam Shanley (Parish Clerk), Councillors V Ashfield and G Holland and Mr Paul Howard (Durham BID) and Lewis Wilkinson and Ellen Olley (North East Film Orchestra).

1. Welcome and Apologies

The Chair opened the meeting and welcomed all Members and attendees. Apologies for absence were received from Councillor L. Wilson, who had been called away due to work commitments. The Committee also noted apologies from Graham Soult, who had been due to present his regular commercial update report but was unable to attend the meeting at short notice.

2. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made by Members present.

3. Minutes of the Meeting Held on 20 January 2026

The minutes of the meeting held on 20 January 2026 were **agreed** as a true and accurate record of proceedings.

4. Public Participation

None received.

5. Discussion with Lewis Wilkinson, Manager of Student Music at Durham University, Regarding Plans for a New Orchestral CIO

The Committee received a detailed and highly enthusiastic presentation from Lewis Wilkinson and Ellen Olley regarding the establishment and rapid growth of the North East Film Orchestra and associated plans to formalise the organisation as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO).

Lewis Wilkinson began by outlining his personal and professional background, explaining that he had grown up in County Durham and first developed his musical interests through Durham Music Service and participation in local brass bands. He described how this early involvement in music had eventually led him to study music at Durham University before pursuing a professional career in music education and conducting. Members heard that he had worked extensively across the region as both a conductor and music teacher, including roles within Durham Music Service and collaborations with numerous schools and ensembles across the North East.

The Committee heard that following postgraduate conducting studies at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama and subsequent employment at Durham University, Lewis and Ellen had identified an opportunity to create a new large-scale orchestral project rooted in Durham City but accessible to a broad public audience. The resulting organisation, the North East Film Orchestra, had been formally established during 2024 with the aim of combining high-quality orchestral performance with popular film music programming in order to engage audiences who might not traditionally attend orchestral concerts.

Members were given a detailed overview of the orchestra's development and achievements to date. The first performance, "Halloween in Hollywood," had taken place at the Gala Theatre in October 2024 and featured film music associated with Halloween-themed cinema and fantasy productions. Lewis explained that the event had attracted over 330 attendees and had significantly exceeded expectations in terms of audience engagement and public response.

The Committee heard that the orchestra's musicians were drawn predominantly from highly experienced professional and semi-professional performers across the North East, including music service teachers, university staff, and freelance musicians from throughout the region. Lewis emphasised that many participants travelled considerable distances in order to take part, reflecting both the quality and uniqueness of the project.

Members were advised that subsequent productions had built substantially on the success of the initial performance. "Hollywood in Space" had incorporated scientific and educational partnerships with Durham University academics and had achieved a complete sell-out audience at the Gala Theatre. The production also featured extensive audience engagement elements, including participation from Star Wars costuming groups and collaborations with university cultural engagement staff.

The Committee then heard about the orchestra's most recent production, "Hollywood Magic," which had combined orchestral film music with vocal performances and North East folklore themes. Lewis described how the programme had deliberately sought to integrate regional cultural heritage into the productions, including adaptations linked to the Lambton Worm legend and references to Lewis Carroll's North East connections. Members noted that this approach demonstrated a strong commitment not merely to entertainment but to celebrating regional cultural identity through accessible performance.

Particular attention was given to the orchestra's forthcoming production, "Hollywood Musicals," scheduled for April 2026 at the Gala Theatre. Members heard that demand for tickets had already been exceptionally strong, with approximately 800 tickets sold at the time of the meeting across two performances. Lewis advised that the event was likely to become one of the most commercially successful productions staged at the Gala Theatre outside of the annual pantomime season.

The Committee discussed the organisational development of the project in considerable detail. The Chair sought clarification regarding governance arrangements and future financial sustainability. Lewis explained that while the

orchestra had initially operated on a relatively informal basis, significant work had now been undertaken with support from Durham Enterprise to establish a formal CIO structure. He advised that constitutional documents, governance arrangements, and plans for appointing directors were already in preparation and that the organisation intended to become formally incorporated in the near future.

Extensive discussion took place regarding the financial model underpinning the orchestra. Lewis explained that one of the major operational costs related to licensing orchestral film scores from major international rights holders. However, he advised that the organisation had deliberately chosen to purchase much of its music outright rather than hire scores repeatedly, believing that this represented a more sustainable long-term financial strategy. Members welcomed this prudent approach and noted that it would help reduce costs over time by enabling previously acquired material to be reused in future productions.

The Committee discussed the commercial viability of orchestral programming in Durham City and the extent to which the orchestra might ultimately become financially self-sustaining. Lewis acknowledged that orchestral music would likely always require some level of external support but argued that the project had already demonstrated unusually strong audience demand and broad demographic appeal. Members agreed that the orchestra's combination of popular film music, strong production values, and accessible programming had successfully overcome many traditional barriers associated with classical music events.

Councillor R. Handy questioned Lewis regarding future ambitions and the potential scale of future programming. Lewis explained that discussions with the Gala Theatre had thus far focused upon delivering approximately two productions annually, although he suggested there was likely capacity for larger or additional events in future depending upon demand and venue support. He also indicated an ambition to explore performances beyond Durham while retaining the city as the orchestra's principal base.

Members expressed strong interest in the possibility of outdoor or city-wide orchestral events, including potential "Proms in the Park"-style performances or productions linked to major Durham festivals. Lewis suggested that film music could provide an ideal vehicle for large-scale public engagement events due to its broad familiarity and appeal.

The possibility of staging performances within Durham Cathedral was also discussed. Lewis explained that he believed certain productions, particularly those connected to fantasy and cinematic themes, would work exceptionally well within the Cathedral setting. However, significant practical and financial barriers remained, including high venue costs and restrictions associated with particular intellectual property themes.

The Clerk spoke very positively regarding his own experience attending one of the orchestra's productions, describing the quality of performance as comparable to professional West End productions. He praised both Lewis and Ellen for the professionalism of the events and particularly commended their thorough approach to audience engagement and data collection.

The Committee heard that audience surveys undertaken following performances had demonstrated substantial economic benefit for the city centre, with attendees making extensive use of hospitality businesses before and after events. Members agreed that this represented a particularly strong justification for continued support from the Parish Council through its Business Events Grant programme.

Discussion also focused on opportunities for closer partnership working between the orchestra and Durham city centre businesses. The Chair suggested that hospitality partnerships, ticket-linked discounts, and coordinated promotions with local restaurants and bars could significantly strengthen the wider economic benefits associated with the performances. Lewis welcomed these suggestions enthusiastically and indicated that the organisation had not yet fully explored such opportunities but would be keen to do so in future.

Paul Howard and the Clerk agreed to work collaboratively to explore potential partnership arrangements between the orchestra and Durham businesses, including the possibility of restaurant promotions linked to matinee performances.

The Chair concluded the discussion by warmly thanking Lewis Wilkinson and Ellen Olley for attending the meeting and congratulating them on the remarkable success of the North East Film Orchestra. Members agreed that the organisation represented an exciting and innovative cultural development for Durham City and expressed strong support for continued partnership working in the future.

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

In the absence of Graham Soult, the Clerk presented a detailed update regarding current commercial property developments and city centre occupancy trends.

The Committee heard that a number of independent business enquiries had recently been received regarding premises within Durham City and that Prince Bishops Place in particular had experienced exceptionally strong occupancy demand. Members noted that the retail centre was now effectively fully occupied, with only very limited short-term availability remaining.

The Clerk advised that several temporary cultural and festival uses were planned for currently vacant units within Prince Bishops Place, including accommodation for Durham Fringe Festival activities and Durham Jazz Festival operations. Members welcomed this continued creative use of vacant retail units and recognised the positive contribution such activity made to city centre vibrancy.

The Committee also noted that the former H&M premises would shortly be occupied by the Fans Museum, representing another significant cultural addition to the city centre offer.

Discussion took place regarding Silver Street and associated city centre regeneration developments. Members heard that the former Carphone Warehouse unit was to become a new Mother Mercy cocktail venue, with Members generally agreeing that this would provide a high-quality addition to the city centre hospitality offer and contribute positively to the ongoing improvement of Silver Street.

The Committee discussed the continuing uncertainty surrounding the proposed Stack development. Members noted that while the developers continued publicly to express commitment to Durham City, there remained significant uncertainty regarding funding arrangements and delivery timescales, particularly given linked developments in Bishop Auckland. Several Members expressed concern that the project appeared likely to remain delayed for a considerable period.

Discussion also took place regarding Milburngate, the Passport Office building, and other major city centre sites. Members expressed frustration regarding the slow pace of redevelopment activity and the apparent lack of progress on several long-standing projects. Particular concern was expressed regarding the extensive scaffolding and delayed refurbishment works at the Home Office building.

Members also considered emerging uses for several other vacant units, including new hospitality venues, fitness studios, specialist retail operations, and hobby-based businesses. While Members welcomed the high level of occupancy activity, some concern was expressed regarding the continued concentration of hospitality and alcohol-related uses within certain parts of the city centre.

The Committee agreed that in future a standing “commercial update” item should remain on the Business Committee agenda to allow ongoing monitoring and discussion of city centre developments following the conclusion of the arrangement with Graham Sault.

7. Report on the work of Durham BID

The Committee received a detailed report from Paul Howard regarding the recent work and activities of Durham BID.

Paul Howard advised Members that Prince Bishops Place had seen a substantial increase in occupancy levels, with several new businesses either recently opened or preparing to commence trading. These included hospitality venues, independent retailers, specialist hobby stores, and fitness businesses. Members welcomed the increasing diversity of the city centre commercial offer and recognised the positive momentum currently evident within several parts of the retail sector.

The Committee heard particularly positive feedback regarding the success of the Fire and Ice Festival. Paul Howard reported that footfall figures during the event had increased by over 20% compared to previous years, with businesses throughout the city reporting exceptionally strong trading conditions. Several businesses had indicated that trading levels during the event had rivalled Christmas periods in terms of customer numbers and revenue.

Members also heard that the revised event layout, including additional installations at locations such as Fowler’s Yard and the Radisson area, had succeeded in dispersing visitors more effectively across the city centre and increasing footfall in areas which had previously experienced lower levels of engagement.

The Committee discussed plans to further expand and develop Fire and Ice in future years, subject to funding availability. Paul Howard advised that discussions were ongoing regarding additional regional support and future investment opportunities.

Members also heard updates regarding Durham BID's Independent Campaign initiative and future plans for restaurant weeks and city centre promotions. The Committee welcomed the continued emphasis on supporting independent businesses and encouraging local spending within Durham City.

The Chair sought clarification regarding Durham BID's current working relationship with Durham County Council. Paul Howard advised that operational relationships with officers remained generally positive, although there continued to be high staff turnover within certain departments which sometimes complicated continuity and long-term partnership working.

The Clerk commended Paul Howard for the success of both Fire and Ice and Chinese New Year events, observing that both festivals had made a substantial positive contribution to city centre footfall and visitor activity during traditionally quieter trading periods.

Members agreed that Durham BID continued to play a critically important role in supporting city centre vitality and encouraging collaborative partnership working across Durham's business community.

8. Business events grant funding for 2026/27

The Committee received an update from The Clerk regarding the operation and success of the Parish Council's Business Events Grant scheme during the current financial year.

Members heard that the scheme had initially experienced a relatively slow start but had subsequently grown significantly following revisions to the application criteria and improved promotional activity. The Clerk advised that a total of twelve events had been supported during the year, encompassing cultural, creative, hospitality, retail, and community-based activities across multiple locations within Durham City.

The Committee was informed that supported events had included craft workshops, visual arts exhibitions, literary events, hospitality showcases, snooker competitions, and orchestral concerts. Collectively, these events had directly attracted approximately 1,500 participants, with substantially wider indirect economic impact through associated city centre spending.

Members discussed the clear success of the programme and the strong value for money achieved through relatively modest grant allocations. Particular praise was given to the North East Film Orchestra project for its extensive audience engagement work and measurable economic impact.

The Committee considered whether the current grant budget and maximum award limits remained appropriate. Members generally agreed that the scheme had

exceeded expectations and that there was a strong case for increasing both the overall allocation and the flexibility available for supporting larger-scale events.

The Clerk indicated that there may be scope to increase the programme budget from £15,000 to £20,000 subject to wider financial discussions and contingency arrangements. Members broadly supported exploring this possibility further.

Discussion also took place regarding the importance of encouraging funded organisations to diversify their funding sources and develop wider commercial partnerships rather than relying solely upon Parish Council support.

The Committee reaffirmed its strong support for the continuation and potential expansion of the Business Events Grant programme for 2026/27.

9. Events Report (including planning update for Durham Pride, Durham Fringe Festival and proposals for events during Summer and October Holidays)

The Committee received a wider update from The Clerk regarding the Council's broader events programme and ongoing discussions concerning future cultural programming within Durham City.

Members discussed concerns surrounding the future of Lumiere and the possibility that major external events funding could be redirected away from Durham City. The Chair advised that she had sought clarification regarding Arts Council funding arrangements and expressed disappointment that there appeared to be a preference for importing replacement events rather than investing in locally developed cultural programming.

The Committee strongly supported the principle that Durham's future cultural offer should increasingly prioritise homegrown creative organisations and local partnerships rather than relying exclusively upon externally produced events.

Members also discussed future opportunities for events linked to school holiday periods during the summer and October breaks. There was broad agreement that additional family-oriented and city centre-focused programming would be beneficial both economically and socially, particularly during quieter trading periods.

The Committee noted ongoing planning work relating to Durham Pride and Durham Fringe Festival activity, with Members recognising the increasing importance of both events within the city's cultural calendar.

The Clerk advised that discussions remained ongoing with a range of partners regarding future funding opportunities, event programming, and potential collaborations designed to strengthen Durham's year-round cultural offer and support city centre footfall.

Members agreed that continued partnership working between the Parish Council, Durham BID, cultural organisations, and local businesses remained essential to sustaining the city's growing programme of events and festivals.

10. Dates of Future Meetings

The Committee noted the dates of future meetings as follows:

- 19 May 2026 – 11:00am
- 21 July 2026 – 11:00am
- 15 September 2026 – 11:00am

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

Signed,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G. Scott'.

**Chair of the Parish Council's Business Committee
(19th May 2026)**