

CITY OF DURHAM PARISH COUNCIL

Minutes of the City of Durham Parish Council's Environment Committee meeting held on Tuesday 14th April 2026 at 09:30am via Zoom.

Present: Councillors C Lattin (in the **Chair**), V Ashfield, T Cleaver, G Holland and F Robinson.

Also present: Mr Adam Shanley (Parish Clerk), Mr Allan Raby (Houghall College), Mr Reuben Calvert (member of the public) and Mrs Andrea Cairns (Durham University).

1. WELCOME AND APOLOGIES

None received.

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 10th MARCH 2026

The minutes of the meeting held on 10th March 2026 were unanimously **agreed** as a true and accurate record of proceedings, subject to a slight amendment to specify that the Climate Action Durham Clean Air Day is set to take place on 18th June 2026.

In discussing matters arising, the Chair and the Clerk provided an update on the Houghall Discovery Trail, following a site visit undertaken with representatives of the City of Durham Trust. It was noted that while there was potential to further develop the trail as part of the city's visitor offer, significant sensitivity was required due to the presence of vulnerable students at the site. The Committee agreed that a cautious and consultative approach should be adopted, prioritising dialogue with the college and ensuring appropriate boundaries and signage.

Further discussion highlighted concerns regarding inconsistent signage and public access, particularly in relation to traditional walking routes. Members acknowledged the importance of balancing accessibility with safeguarding responsibilities. It was agreed that a small delegation would meet with college representatives to explore options and report back.

4. TO RECEIVE ANY PUBLIC PARTICIPATION ON THE FOLLOWING AGENDA ITEMS

Mr Allan Raby advised that he was the floristry lecturer at Houghall College and was attending to participate in the discussion on item 8 of the Agenda.

Mr Reuben Calvert advised that he was attending with a general interest in how local Government and democracy functioned at a parish/ town council level.

Mrs Andrea Cairns from Durham University advised that she was attending the meeting to participate in the discussion on item 6 of the Agenda.

5. TO CONSIDER THE LATEST NEIGHBOURHOOD WARDEN REPORT

The Committee considered the latest Neighbourhood Warden update, noting that the report had been circulated via the Council newsletter. The Clerk summarised key issues, highlighting that waste management and littering continued to dominate the wardens' workload. Persistent problem areas included Back Western Hill, Mavern Street, Fowler's Yard, and the bus station vicinity.

It was reported that enforcement activity had increased, with multiple fixed penalty notices issued to address ongoing non-compliance.

Members expressed concern regarding the continued prevalence of fly-tipping and improper waste disposal, particularly in high-turnover student areas. It was acknowledged that frequent population changes contributed to recurring issues, necessitating ongoing education and communication efforts.

The Committee discussed confusion surrounding recycling arrangements, particularly changes to bin systems and the introduction of new waste streams. Members agreed that clearer public information was required and welcomed plans for an officer presentation at the Annual Parish Meeting. It was further agreed that Council communications, including recycling guidance materials, should be reviewed and updated accordingly.

A significant concern was raised regarding the future of the Neighbourhood Warden service, with the Clerk reporting anticipated reductions in staffing levels across the county. Members noted the potential impact on service delivery and community outcomes, particularly given the parish's reliance on supplementary warden hours. The Committee agreed that the matter required close monitoring and that further clarification should be sought from the relevant authority.

The Committee formally recorded its appreciation for the work of the wardens.

6. UPDATE ON THE PROJECT TO INSTALL THE BLUE PLAQUE DEDICATED TO FORMER NORTHERN IRELAND SECRETARY DR MO MOWLAM

The Committee received a detailed update regarding ongoing preparations for the installation and unveiling of the blue plaque commemorating Dr Mo Mowlam, recognising her achievements and contribution to public life, particularly her role in securing the Northern Ireland Peace Process. The Chair reminded Members that Dr Mowlam had studied at Trevelyan College, Durham University, and that the project represented an important opportunity both to honour her legacy and to strengthen collaborative working between the Parish Council and Durham University.

The Clerk reported that substantial progress had been made in partnership with university colleagues, particularly Andrea Cairns and Vicky Burns, both of whom

had played a major role in coordinating arrangements. Andrea Cairns advised the Committee that the unveiling ceremony had now been provisionally confirmed for the afternoon of 15 June 2026 at Trevelyan College. A specific location for the plaque had been identified on an external wall immediately outside the college reception area, ensuring both prominence and accessibility.

Members were informed that the format of the event would include a formal unveiling ceremony followed by a reception and light afternoon tea hosted by the University within the college bar area. Andrea Cairns explained that the Vice-Chancellor was personally enthusiastic about the event and was keen that it should provide an opportunity not only for formal recognition but also for networking and informal reflection among attendees. The venue selected for the hospitality element had been chosen because it allowed sufficient circulation space and would create an appropriate atmosphere for guests and invited dignitaries.

The Committee noted that extensive work had been undertaken on compiling the guest list. Andrea Cairns advised that a draft list had already been submitted to the Vice-Chancellor for approval, with input having been provided by The Clerk on behalf of the Parish Council. Invitations were expected to be issued as soon as final approval had been received, given the relatively short timescale remaining before the event.

The Clerk highlighted the significance of the high-profile guests who had already agreed to attend or support the project. Particular reference was made to Sir Adam Ingram, former Armed Forces Minister and Northern Ireland Minister during the Good Friday Agreement negotiations, whose attendance was regarded as especially meaningful given his close political association with Dr Mowlam. Members noted that Dr Mowlam's sister, Jean, would also be attending the event with her husband and that Durham University had generously offered accommodation for them at Hollingside Lodge within the Vice-Chancellor's residence facilities.

The Clerk further advised that attempts had been made to secure the attendance of additional prominent figures associated with Dr Mowlam's career and legacy. While some invitees were unavailable due to existing commitments, messages of support had nevertheless been received. Members particularly welcomed confirmation that Baroness Hilary Armstrong, former Member of Parliament for Durham North West and a close political colleague of Dr Mowlam, was expected to attend.

Andrea Cairns also reported that the University archives team had begun searching for photographs and historical material relating to Dr Mowlam's time as a student at Durham University. The Vice-Chancellor was particularly keen that archival photographs showing Dr Mowlam participating in university life should be displayed during the reception, both to personalise the event and to celebrate her connection to Durham. Members agreed that this would add considerable value and warmth to the occasion, particularly for family members and former colleagues.

The Committee then considered the practical arrangements surrounding the physical unveiling of the plaque. The Clerk raised concerns regarding the suitability of the current unveiling curtain that had been used for previous Parish Council

plaque ceremonies. While acknowledging that the existing arrangement had served well over many years and numerous unveilings, he expressed concern that the informal nature of the temporary curtain and adhesive fixings might not be appropriate for an event of this profile and significance, especially in the presence of senior university representatives and invited dignitaries.

A discussion then followed regarding possible alternatives. Councillor F Robinson suggested that the unveiling could instead incorporate a banner associated with the Women's Banner Group, reflecting Dr Mowlam's political values and legacy rather than relying upon a conventional ceremonial curtain. This proposal received considerable support from Members, who felt that the symbolism of using the women's banner would be particularly appropriate given Dr Mowlam's lifelong commitment to equality, social justice, and progressive politics. Members agreed that such an approach would create a more meaningful and distinctive ceremony than a traditional unveiling arrangement.

Andrea Cairns indicated that she considered the idea to be both creative and fitting, although she suggested it should first be discussed with the relevant banner group representatives. The Clerk agreed to pursue these discussions, particularly with Lucian and other representatives connected to the Women's Banner Group, while retaining the existing unveiling arrangements as a fallback option if necessary.

During the wider discussion, Members reflected upon the success and growing profile of the Parish Council's blue plaque programme more generally. The Clerk advised that another nomination for a future plaque had recently been received concerning artist and curator Nerys Johnson after an unsuccessful application elsewhere. This prompted a broader strategic discussion about the future direction of the blue plaque scheme.

The Chair expressed the view that, while the programme had been highly successful, the Parish Council needed to begin considering long-term sustainability, including financial implications and maintenance responsibilities. Councillor V. Ashfield reminded Members that the Council had originally envisaged a phased and selective approach to plaque installations rather than an unrestricted expansion programme. She suggested that the Council should revisit the criteria and process for future nominations, potentially pausing further installations temporarily while undertaking a wider review.

Members generally agreed that future plaques should be considered within a clearer strategic framework, potentially involving broader public consultation and a more structured nominations process. Concerns were also raised regarding the future maintenance burden associated with an increasing number of plaques, particularly as warranties expired and repair obligations eventually transferred fully to the Parish Council.

Despite those broader considerations, Members were unanimous in their enthusiasm for the Dr Mowlam plaque project itself. The Committee warmly welcomed the partnership working that has developed with Durham University and recorded its appreciation for the considerable efforts being made by university staff, the Clerk, and all those involved in organising what Members agreed would

be a significant and fitting tribute to one of Durham's most distinguished former students.

7. PROPOSAL TO CREATE A DURHAM CITY PLAQUES WALKING TRAIL MAP

The Committee considered in detail the proposal to develop a dedicated Durham City Blue Plaques Walking Trail Map, intended to link together the various blue plaques installed by the Parish Council and potentially other historic plaques situated throughout the city. The Chair explained that the matter had arisen following discussions with David Miller, who had previously undertaken successful heritage trail mapping projects for the Council, including the Heritage Trail and the *7 Hills of Durham* trail publications. Members acknowledged the high quality and popularity of those earlier projects and recognised that there was considerable potential public interest in a dedicated blue plaques trail.

The Chair advised that preliminary exploratory work had already been undertaken by David Miller, but that a number of practical and conceptual difficulties had emerged. In particular, it had become apparent that the Parish Council's existing plaques did not naturally lend themselves to a single coherent walking route. While some plaques were geographically clustered, others were widely dispersed across the city, resulting in routes that would require participants to move between areas lacking continuity or visual interest. The Chair observed that, in several instances, the connections between plaques would involve walking through relatively unattractive or heavily trafficked sections of the city, which could detract from the overall visitor experience.

Members discussed the challenge of balancing completeness against usability. The Chair explained that one option considered had been to include not only the Parish Council's plaques but also the substantial number of older commemorative plaques already installed throughout Durham by other organisations and institutions over many decades. However, when this possibility had been explored in more detail, concerns had emerged about both scale and relevance.

The Committee noted that the City of Durham Trust had supplied a list of approximately one hundred plaques and commemorative markers located across the city. However, the Chair commented that a large proportion of these related to historical figures or events that were now relatively obscure and would likely hold limited recognition or resonance for many modern residents or visitors. Members reflected on whether the purpose of the trail should primarily be educational and comprehensive, or whether it should instead focus on accessibility, public engagement, and recognisable stories.

The Chair acknowledged that there was an argument in favour of encouraging public discovery of lesser-known historical figures, but equally cautioned that attempting to incorporate all one hundred plaques into a single publication or route would produce an unwieldy and impractical trail. It was felt that such an approach could overwhelm users and dilute the distinctiveness of the Parish Council's own blue plaque programme.

Councillor V Ashfield suggested that a more manageable and attractive approach might be to divide the plaques into two or three smaller themed or geographical

trails rather than attempting to force all locations into a single route. She felt that smaller, self-contained walks would be more inviting and practical for residents and tourists alike. Councillor Ashfield also raised the issue of the plaque located at Hild Bede College, noting that it was currently inaccessible and effectively invisible due to both its elevated positioning and the restricted nature of the site itself.

The Chair confirmed that discussions had already taken place with representatives of the college regarding the plaque's current siting. Members were informed that the Principal had openly acknowledged that the plaque had originally been installed in an unsuitable location and was willing, in principle, for it to be removed and repositioned elsewhere in future.

Members then considered the broader purpose and identity of the trail itself. There was discussion around whether the publication should remain tightly focused on the Parish Council's own plaque scheme or evolve into a wider heritage resource encompassing the city's broader commemorative landscape. While some Members saw value in eventually integrating other plaques into the project, there was general agreement that the initial publication should retain a clear identity centred around the Parish Council's blue plaque programme.

The Committee also reflected on the symbolic significance of the current number of plaques. Members acknowledged that the trail map itself represented more than simply a navigational aid. It was seen as an opportunity to shape how the city's recent and historic stories were presented to residents and visitors alike. The Committee therefore agreed that careful thought should be given not only to geography and practicality but also to narrative coherence, accessibility and historical balance.

The Chair further explained that one advantage of proceeding now was that the underlying mapping infrastructure already existed, as David Miller intended to use the same high-quality cartographic base that had been successfully employed for previous Parish Council trails. This meant that the technical production of the map itself would not be especially difficult or resource-intensive once strategic decisions regarding scope and format had been made.

Members **agreed** that the preferred way forward would be for David Miller to continue developing options based around smaller linked routes centred primarily on Parish Council plaques, while retaining flexibility for future expansion or revision. It was also **agreed** that the current phase of work should focus on creating an engaging and manageable visitor experience rather than attempting an exhaustive historical inventory of every commemorative marker within the city.

The Committee concluded that further refinement and consideration would be required before any final publication was commissioned, particularly in light of the wider review Members wished to undertake regarding the future direction of the blue plaque scheme itself. Nevertheless, there was broad support for continuing the development work, and the Chair **agreed** to relay the Committee's guidance and observations back to David Miller for further exploration.

8. PROPOSED JOINT 'SUNFLOWERS FOR SOLAR PANELS' PROJECT WITH HOUGHALL COLLEGE

The Committee considered an innovative environmental and community engagement proposal entitled "Sunflowers for Solar Panels," presented by Councillor V. Ashfield in partnership with representatives of Houghall College.

Introducing the proposal, Councillor V. Ashfield explained that the original inspiration for the project had come from a film shown by Climate Action Durham. The film documented a successful community initiative in Walthamstow, London, where residents had collectively raised funds to install solar panels across an entire street and at a local school. As part of the celebrations surrounding that initiative, local people and schoolchildren had grown sunflowers, which were then displayed throughout the street after cars were temporarily removed for a community event. Councillor Ashfield described the visual impact of the sunflowers as striking, joyful, and highly effective in drawing attention to environmental issues in a positive and accessible manner.

Councillor Ashfield explained that, while replicating the exact London initiative in Durham would not be practical, she had been exploring ways to adapt the concept into a Durham-specific project which would combine climate awareness, public participation, horticulture, and charitable fundraising. She noted that discussions had already taken place with Climate Action Durham, which had expressed support for the idea.

The Committee heard that the proposal centred around distributing sunflower seeds as widely as possible throughout the community, encouraging individuals and organisations to grow sunflowers during the spring and early summer months. Councillor Ashfield envisaged involving residents' associations, schools, community groups, and particularly Houghall College students in nurturing the plants before eventually displaying or distributing the flowers as part of a wider awareness campaign connected to renewable energy and sustainability.

Members noted that the project would also seek to generate donations for "Big Solar," a charitable initiative operated through Climate Action Durham. Councillor Ashfield explained that the charity collected donations which were then used to support the installation of solar panels on public buildings unable to fund such works independently. The intention was that people receiving or purchasing sunflowers would be encouraged, though not required, to make donations to the fund. She emphasised that even relatively modest fundraising totals would still serve the broader purpose of raising awareness about climate issues and renewable energy in a creative and community-focused way.

A substantial part of the discussion focused on the practical delivery of the scheme and the potential role of Houghall College. Councillor Ashfield proposed that the college's extensive horticultural facilities and expertise made it an ideal partner for the initiative. She suggested that sunflower displays could potentially be located along the green spaces adjacent to the college frontage in order to create a visible and attractive public display.

Allan Raby responded positively to the proposal and expressed enthusiasm about the potential involvement of Houghall College students, particularly foundation students with learning difficulties and additional support needs. He explained that participation in the cultivation and care of the sunflowers could provide valuable educational and therapeutic opportunities for those students while also allowing

them to contribute visibly to a community environmental project. Members welcomed this aspect of the proposal warmly, regarding it as highly consistent with the Committee's broader ambitions to strengthen partnerships with Houghall College and support inclusive community engagement.

Mr Raby further advised that Houghall possessed substantial greenhouse facilities and irrigation systems capable of supporting the project on a large scale. He suggested that the flowers could ultimately be distributed or sold directly from the college site, potentially through organised public collection days during the summer period. He felt that this arrangement would provide a more practical and manageable model than attempting to stage displays in more constrained city-centre locations.

The Committee discussed issues of public access and parking, with Councillor T Cleaver seeking reassurance that members of the public would be able to visit the college site conveniently if public collection events were organised there. Mr Raby confirmed that sufficient parking facilities existed and that arrangements could be made to accommodate visitors without difficulty, provided the college had advance notice of planned events.

Members were particularly enthusiastic about the educational and symbolic dimensions of the project. Councillor Ashfield highlighted the parallels between growing sunflowers and cultivating wider public awareness about climate change and renewable energy, observing that the project had the potential to create a highly visible and optimistic environmental campaign rooted in community participation rather than protest or negativity.

The Clerk strongly endorsed the initiative, describing it as a low-cost but potentially high-impact project which aligned closely with the Parish Council's environmental priorities. He noted that the proposal brought together several important objectives simultaneously: climate action, partnership working, student involvement, public engagement, and practical environmental education. He also commented favourably on the opportunities it created for strengthening links between the Parish Council and Houghall College.

Discussion then turned to the destination of any funds raised through the project. Members expressed some concern regarding the fact that Big Solar operated nationally rather than exclusively within Durham. The Chair in particular felt that residents and donors might be more motivated if there were a stronger guarantee that money raised locally would directly support local projects within Durham itself. In response, Councillor Ashfield explained that while the charity itself operated nationally, local organisations within Durham—including Allington House and potentially Waddington Street facilities—could be encouraged to apply for support. She also noted that Climate Action Durham, as a significant supporter of the charity, could advocate for Durham-based projects to receive favourable consideration.

The Clerk added that a number of organisations within Durham were actively exploring solar installation projects and could potentially benefit from the scheme if successful applications were made. Members generally accepted that while direct guarantees could not be provided, there was a realistic prospect that funds raised locally could ultimately support local initiatives.

Financial arrangements were also discussed in detail. Councillor Ashfield indicated that the overall costs of the scheme would likely be modest, largely relating to seeds, compost, containers, stakes, and associated growing materials. The Clerk confirmed that funding could be made available from the Parish Council's planting budget and proposed an indicative allocation of £500 to support the initiative. Members agreed that this level of support would demonstrate the Council's commitment while remaining proportionate and financially manageable.

Practical responsibilities were then considered. Allan Raby agreed to consult with Houghall College's horticulture management team regarding the availability of containers and growing materials, as well as possible sourcing arrangements for seeds through the college's suppliers. Councillor Ashfield offered to assist with sourcing if required, while Members recognised the importance of moving quickly given the seasonal timetable for planting sunflowers.

Throughout the discussion, Members repeatedly emphasised the positive and uplifting nature of the project. Several observed that the proposal built effectively upon the success of previous environmentally focused community initiatives undertaken by the Parish Council, particularly the tree giveaway programme, which had generated strong public engagement and goodwill.

The Chair concluded the discussion by expressing delight at the prospect of developing another collaborative project with Houghall College, noting that the Committee was increasingly keen to build sustained partnerships with the institution across environmental, educational, and community themes. Members agreed that the proposal reflected precisely the kind of imaginative and partnership-based initiative the Committee wished to encourage.

It was ultimately **agreed** that the proposal should be progressed further, with the Clerk undertaking to present the project to Full Council for formal endorsement and approval of the proposed funding allocation. The Committee thanked Allan Raby for his attendance and contribution, and Members expressed enthusiasm about continuing to work closely with Houghall College as the project developed.

9. UPDATE ON PLANTING PRIORITIES FOR 2026-27

The Committee received an update on the Parish Council's planting programme and environmental enhancement priorities for the 2026–27 financial year. The Chair introduced the item by noting both the scale of the programme now being delivered by the Parish Council and the considerable amount of work that had already been undertaken behind the scenes, particularly by The Clerk. The Chair remarked that while the programme was exciting and ambitious, it was also demanding in terms of organisation, coordination, and practical delivery.

At the invitation of the Chair, The Clerk provided Members with a detailed progress report on current planting initiatives and preparations for the forthcoming season. He advised that all major planting proposals previously approved by Full Council were now progressing according to schedule and that implementation work was well underway across multiple strands of the Council's environmental programme. Particular attention was given to the expanded hanging basket scheme for Durham City. The Clerk confirmed that arrangements had now been finalised for the

installation of a significantly increased number of hanging baskets throughout the city centre shopping streets and commercial areas. Members were informed that approximately ninety additional hanging baskets would be installed, representing a major enhancement to the city's floral display provision.

The Clerk explained that the addresses and installation locations had already been supplied to the contractor responsible for delivery and that preparations were progressing "full steam ahead" in anticipation of installation during the early summer period. Members agreed that the expanded scheme would make a substantial visual contribution to the city centre environment during the busy tourist and visitor season between June and October.

The Committee reflected positively on the wider civic and economic value of floral displays within Durham City. Members noted that the enhanced planting programme would not only improve the visual appearance of the city but would also contribute positively to civic pride, visitor experience, and the attractiveness of the retail environment. There was recognition that the Parish Council's increasing investment in planting and environmental improvements was becoming one of the Council's most visible and appreciated areas of work.

The Clerk thanked Members who had assisted with identifying locations and supporting the expansion of the programme. It was acknowledged that considerable collaborative work had taken place between councillors, officers, contractors, and community groups to bring the programme to this stage.

The discussion then moved to the future use and redistribution of a number of wooden street planters currently in use for spring planting displays. Members recalled that the Council had previously agreed, once the spring displays had concluded, that a number of these planters would be offered to residents' associations and community groups for ongoing local use and planting projects.

The Clerk advised that practical arrangements for the redistribution now needed to be confirmed relatively quickly so that operational instructions could be issued to the Neighbourhood Wardens. In particular, he noted that clear direction was required regarding where the planters would ultimately be delivered and which community organisations would take responsibility for them.

Members discussed the importance of ensuring that the planters were distributed fairly and used actively within local communities rather than simply stored or underutilised. It was recognised that many residents' groups had shown enthusiasm for environmental improvement projects and that the planters could help support locally-led greening initiatives in neighbourhoods throughout the parish.

The Committee also reflected more broadly on the success of recent planting and greening initiatives undertaken by the Parish Council. Members noted that projects such as the tree giveaway scheme and expanded floral displays had generated very positive feedback from residents and had helped reinforce the Council's growing reputation for visible environmental action within the city.

Although the item was primarily an operational update rather than a decision-making report, Members discussed the importance of continuing to balance

decorative planting with wider biodiversity and sustainability objectives. There was recognition that future planting priorities should continue to support pollinators, improve urban greening, and contribute positively to climate resilience where possible.

The Committee acknowledged that the planting programme was becoming increasingly ambitious in scale and visibility and expressed appreciation for the substantial organisational work involved in coordinating contractors, suppliers, residents' groups, and seasonal planting schedules. Members agreed that maintaining momentum on the programme would remain a key environmental priority for the Council throughout the coming financial year.

In concluding the discussion, the Committee reaffirmed its support for the ongoing planting programme and agreed that The Clerk should continue progressing implementation arrangements, including liaison with residents' groups regarding the redistribution of planters and continued oversight of the expanded hanging basket scheme.

10. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

12th May 2026 at 10:30am via Zoom

9th June 2026 at 10:30am via Zoom

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

Signed,



**Chair of the Parish Council's Environment Committee
(12th May 2026)**