

City of Durham Parish Council

Minutes of the meeting of the City of Durham Parish Council held on Wednesday 23rd July 2025 at 7:00pm in the Main Hall of the Merryoaks Community Hall, Park House Rd, Durham DH1 3QF.

Present: Councillors V Ashfield, L Brown, T Cleaver, R Cornwell, D Freeman, R Handy, E Hopgood, C Lattin, F Robinson, S Walker and L Wilson.

Also present: Parish Clerk Adam Shanley.

1. TO RECEIVE AND APPROVE (OR NOT) APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE FROM TODAY'S MEETING

Apologies were received and accepted from Councillors E Scott, G Bignardi and G Holland.

2. TO RECEIVE ANY DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST FROM MEMBERS

No declarations of interest were received.

3. APPROVAL OF THE DRAFT MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE COUNCIL HELD ON 25TH JUNE 2025

The minutes of the meeting of the Council held on 25th June 2025 were unanimously agreed as a true and accurate record of proceedings.

4. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

No members of the public wished to speak at this point in the meeting.

5. COMMITTEE UPDATES

Planning and Licensing Committee

Councillor L Brown presented the minutes of the meetings held on 22nd April and 27th June 2025.

Proposed responses to the Government consultation on reforming Local Authority planning committees

Councillor L Brown presented the minutes of the Planning and Licensing Committee meetings held on 22nd April and 27th June 2025. There being no queries from Members, Councillor L Brown moved on to Committee updates.

Councillor L Brown introduced the Committee's detailed responses to the Government's technical consultation on planning committee reform. This consultation, issued by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in May 2025 following the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, sought views on a proposed national scheme of delegation for planning decisions,

mandatory controls on the size of planning committees, and nationally administered training for elected members. Councillor L Brown explained that the Committee had reviewed the proposals comprehensively and concluded that they would severely erode local democratic oversight. She emphasised that Durham County Council already delegated over 90% of planning applications to officers, and therefore a mandatory national system was both unnecessary and harmful. It was noted that apparently minor residential developments could be of considerable significance in small communities, while reserved matters applications could raise issues of great local contention.

The Committee's proposed responses therefore strongly rejected the imposition of a two-tier delegation system and called instead for advisory guidance to improve national consistency while preserving local discretion.

The responses supported high-quality, nationally coordinated training, but again stressed the importance of flexibility to reflect the local context of Durham City, including issues around student housing and the World Heritage Site.

Members **agreed** that these responses provided a robust defence of local democracy and endorsed them unanimously. It was further agreed that a formal letter be sent to Durham's Member of Parliament urging her to raise these concerns with the relevant Minister.

Report on licensed *sui generis* HMOs within the City of Durham parish area

Councillor L Brown also presented the Committee's report on licensed Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) operating in the *sui generis* category. She reported that data from December 2024 indicated that at least 150 such HMOs existed within the parish, yet initial research revealed that 103 of these – representing 68.7% – did not have any corresponding planning consent visible on the County Council's online planning register.

The Committee expressed particular concern about properties claimed to have operated as HMOs prior to the 2010 changes in national regulations, where the standard and type of evidence accepted by the County Council's licensing team remained unclear. Concerns were also raised about the lack of transparency of the current HMO register, which required postcode-by-postcode searches.

Councillor L Brown highlighted the serious consequences of any disconnect between the licensing and planning regimes, particularly in terms of community balance, amenity, antisocial behaviour, and confidence in local regulation.

Members unanimously **agreed** that the Parish Council should seek a joint meeting with Durham County Council's HMO Licensing Team and Planning Department to clarify verification procedures, evidence requirements, and steps towards greater transparency. It was **agreed** that the Clerk and Councillor L Brown should meet with officers on behalf of the Parish Council.

Environment Committee

Councillor C Lattin presented the minutes of the Environment Committee meetings held on 8th April and 24th June 2025. There being no queries from Members, Councillor C Lattin moved on to Committee updates.

Proposals to support places of safety and residents during an emergency as part of the Parish Council's Community Emergency Plan.

Councillor C Lattin reported on the Parish Council's Community Emergency Plan, which had been developed in partnership with Durham County Council's Civil Contingencies Unit, residents' associations, and other stakeholders. The Plan identified designated Places of Safety across the city, including Durham Cathedral, St Cuthbert's Church on North Road, St Oswald's Institute, the Radisson Hotel, Merryoaks Community Centre, and other key venues.

Councillor C Lattin explained that, following consultation with a residents' working group, it was recommended that emergency supply boxes should be provided at these venues. These boxes would contain A-boards to identify venues, loud hailers, water purification devices, foil blankets, torches, high-visibility jackets, ID badges for volunteers, and non-perishable food.

Each box would be tailored to the most likely risks in the area, such as flooding or power loss. The total budget allocation of £4,000 would allow the provision of boxes to those sites most likely to require them, and basic training would be offered to volunteers in their use.

Members welcomed the proposal as a practical step in improving community resilience and unanimously **agreed** to allocate the £4,000 and to delegate procurement and distribution to the Environment Committee.

Update on the proposal to introduce 3 x new green-roofed bus shelters within the Elvet and Gilesgate parish ward.

Councillor C Lattin went on to update Members on the proposal to install three new green-roofed bus shelters within the Elvet and Gilesgate division, at two locations on Lower Claypath and one on Church Street near St Oswald's Church.

Councillor C Lattin advised that these shelters, which were intended to contribute to improved air quality and biodiversity in line with Durham County Council's Air Quality Action Plan, had received strong support from residents' groups. Durham County Council's Public Transport team had confirmed that the Council would adopt and maintain the shelters themselves, but responsibility for the green roofs would rest with the Parish Council.

A formal quote had been received for 20 annual maintenance visits, at a cost of £1,050 across the three shelters. Councillor C Lattin emphasised that this commitment was essential to secure the Section 106 funding and deliver the project, which would not only improve air quality but also capture carbon and enhance the urban environment.

Members expressed their support for the innovative design and unanimously **agreed** that the Parish Council assume responsibility for maintaining the green roofs at the quoted annual cost, subject to annual review.

Renewing the Service Level Agreement with Durham County Council for an enhanced Neighbourhood Warden service

Councillor C Lattin also presented the report on the renewal of the Service Level Agreement with Durham County Council for the enhanced Neighbourhood Warden Service. She reminded Members that the service, introduced in 2019 and most recently renewed in 2022, had made a significant contribution to tackling littering, fly-tipping, dog fouling, and antisocial behaviour.

The Parish's dedicated Wardens, Kirk Thiis and Antony Waterson, had built strong relationships with residents and were recently recognised with the Good Citizen of the Year Award. The SLA was now due for renewal for a further three years, from July 2025 to July 2028. Durham County Council had advised that the annual cost would increase from £10,000 to £13,000, reflecting inflation and salary pressures.

The Clerk emphasised that this cost had not risen since 2019, that residents consistently valued the service highly, and that continuity was essential.

Members warmly praised the work of the Wardens and unanimously **agreed** to renew the SLA for a further three years, to approve the revised annual cost of £13,000, and to confirm their strong preference to retain Kirk and Antony as the officers delivering the service.

Business Committee

Councillor E Hopgood then presented the minutes of the Business Committee meeting held on 18th March 2025. There were no questions from Members on these minutes.

6. CHAIR'S UPDATE

The Chair began her update by thanking all those who had supported the launch of the most recent landlord appeal. She advised that last year's appeal had enabled the funding of four full days of additional waste collections during student move-out, which had made a very real and visible difference to the City. She was pleased to report that this year's appeal, launched only a few weeks ago, had already attracted contributions of over £3,500. The Chair placed on record her gratitude both to the landlords who had generously donated and to the Members who had worked so hard to ensure the success of this initiative, stressing that such efforts continued to help keep the City clean and green throughout the year.

The Chair also extended her thanks to all those involved in producing the Parish Council's most recent newsletter, which she described as an excellent reflection of the wide-ranging work of the Council. She reminded all Committee Chairs to submit their content for the next edition by no later than the following day at midday, so that the publication could proceed to schedule.

The Chair went on to offer congratulations to Canon Pastor Michael Everitt of Durham Cathedral on his appointment as Interim Dean of Carlisle Cathedral. She noted that Canon Everitt had been a longstanding friend of the Parish Council, providing support with the delivery of numerous events, and she wished him and his family every success in this new role.

The Chair further thanked those Members who had participated in the recent meeting with Durham University regarding the proposed redevelopment of the Hild/Bede site. She observed that this was a project of major strategic significance for the University, but also one that faced significant challenges. She reported that it was unlikely that firm updates would be available for at least the next 12 months.

On the issue of student housing, the Chair expressed her delight at the announcement during the recent Annual Housing Group meeting of the forthcoming launch of the "Rate Your Landlord" scheme by Durham University and the Durham Students' Union. She explained that this scheme would function in a manner similar to TripAdvisor, allowing students to rate their landlords and thereby improve transparency and standards. The Chair noted that the Parish Council's Environment Committee had championed such a scheme for some time, and she encouraged colleagues to work with partners to develop it further into a formal awards programme.

The Chair expressed her deep disappointment at the announcement of the closure of the Customer Access Point at Clayport Library. She reminded Members that this building also housed the Parish Council's offices and noted that this development raised fresh concerns about the long-term future of the site. The Chair reported that she had therefore requested that the Clerk include this matter on the agenda for the following day's strategy session, in order that Members could begin planning appropriate contingencies.

The Chair also reminded Members of the Parish Council's forthcoming beacon lighting event to mark the 80th anniversary of Victory over Japan Day. She emphasised the national and local importance of this commemoration and strongly encouraged all Members to support the Clerk in ensuring the event's success.

The Chair highlighted that Neville's Cross Community Association would be holding a public meeting on highway safety along the A167 on 3rd September at Merryoaks Community Hall. She explained that proposals to reduce the speed limit to 30mph along certain stretches of the road would be discussed and she urged local Members in particular to attend this important meeting.

Finally, the Chair offered her congratulations to Steve Cronin and his team on the launch of this year's Durham Fringe Festival. She noted that the festival, which would run until 27th July, had already generated strong interest and carried the ambitious target of exceeding 10,000 ticket sales. The Chair commented that the Parish Council wished the organisers and all performers every success with this year's event.

7. ANNUAL REVIEW OF PARISH COUNCIL STANDING ORDERS, FINANCIAL REGULATIONS, COMMITTEE TERMS OF REFERENCE AND COUNCIL POLICIES

The Clerk presented the report of the Working Group on the annual governance review. The Clerk advised that this review had incorporated statutory updates and introduced a number of significant changes, including increasing the membership of the Personnel Committee from five to six, requiring the election of Committee Chairs and Vice-Chairs at the Annual Meeting of the Parish Council, and requiring members of the public to register in advance if wishing to speak.

The Clerk advised that the Communications Policy had also been updated to include explicit reference to the Nolan Principles of Public Life, and the Grants Policy now required the refund of funds where an organisation failed to provide an impact report.

In addition, it was agreed that all Section 106 consultations should henceforth be delegated to the Finance Committee.

The Working Group also proposed a new Gifts and Hospitality Policy, setting clear expectations for Members on the receipt and declaration of gifts.

The Chair highlighted that she had proposed an amendment to the Planning and Licensing Committee's Terms of Reference, such that the membership would be reduced from 7 Members to 6 Members. Councillor D Freeman proposed this as an amendment and this was seconded by Councillor S Walker. Following a vote of Members, it was **agreed** by majority, that the membership of the Planning and Licensing Committee should remain at 7 Members.

Members unanimously **approved** all revised documents and formally **adopted** the new Gifts and Hospitality Policy.

8. REPORT ON GRANT FUNDING IMPACT FROM 2024/25

The Clerk presented the report on the impact of grants awarded in 2024-25. Members noted that projects supported had delivered significant community benefits, including volunteer engagement, enhanced wellbeing programmes, improvements to local facilities, and cultural activities. Members welcomed the evidence of positive outcomes and unanimously endorsed the report.

9. MOTION BY COUNCILLORS R CORNWELL AND V ASHFIELD ON THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY

Councillor R Cornwell introduced the motion, supported by Councillor V Ashfield, deploring Durham County Council's decision of 16th July 2025 to rescind its Climate Emergency Declaration of 2019.

Councillor R Cornwell addressed the Council in detail, noting that the County Council's decision did not alter the scientific reality of the climate emergency or the pressing need for action. Councillor R Cornwell observed that Durham had

experienced extreme weather events in recent years, including flooding and heatwaves, and stressed that these were likely to intensify.

Councillor R Cornwell stated that the decision sent the wrong message to residents and young people who were looking for leadership and reassurance on environmental issues. He argued that rather than stepping back, councils at all levels should be accelerating action, particularly through planning policy, investment in sustainable infrastructure, and community-led initiatives.

Councillor R Cornwell reaffirmed the City of Durham Parish Council's own Climate Emergency Declaration made in March 2019 and emphasised that the Parish Council had a duty to continue championing local responses, however modest, as part of a global effort.

Councillor R Cornwell urged Members to approve the motion and to ensure that the Council's position was widely publicised.

Councillor R Cornwell's remarks were echoed by Councillor V Ashfield who advised that she was proud to support a motion reaffirming the Parish Council's commitment to addressing the climate emergency. Councillor V Ashfield highlighted that one did not need to rescind the climate emergency declaration to also acknowledge that there is also a care emergency in County Durham and that both have serious importance.

Members unanimously **agreed** the motion as follows:

This Parish Council:

- 1. Deplores the decision of Durham County Council on 16th July 2025 to rescind the Climate Emergency Declaration it made on 20th February 2019;*
- 2. Notwithstanding the DCC resolution, the climate emergency continues, so the Council reaffirms the City of Durham Parish Council Climate Emergency Resolution of 28th March 2019.*
- 3. Instructs the Parish Clerk to publicise the Parish Council position through the Parish website, newsletter and social media channels, and to the print and broadcast media."*

10. RECRUITMENT OF PARISH COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVES TO DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL'S STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Members noted the recruitment process for parish and town council representatives to the County Council's Standards Committee. Members unanimously welcomed the opportunity to contribute to upholding high standards of conduct and **agreed** to nominate Councillors S Walker and G Holland as representatives of the Parish Council to go forward for consideration by CDALC.

11. TO APPOINT A CITY OF DURHAM PARISH COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVE ONTO THE CDALC EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

This item was deferred.

12. CONSULTATION ON PROPOSED CHANGES TO COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT

The Clerk presented a report on Durham County Council's consultation regarding the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme (LCTRS) for working age residents from 2026/27.

Members were advised that since 2013 local authorities have been required to design and operate their own schemes for working age claimants, while pension age residents remain protected under national rules. Durham's current scheme has remained unchanged since its inception and continues to allow up to 100% support, mirroring the former national Council Tax Benefit system. The Clerk explained that almost 80% of claimants were now in receipt of Universal Credit, a figure expected to rise to 96% by 2026.

The current model has therefore become increasingly administratively complex, generating on average eleven council tax bills per claimant per year due to fluctuating Universal Credit payments. This cycle has created confusion for residents, considerable costs for the authority, and growing pressures on collection and enforcement.

The Clerk outlined the four options under consultation: Option 1a, an income-banded scheme retaining up to 100% support for eligible households; Option 1b, a banded scheme capped at 90% support, requiring a 10% minimum contribution from all working age residents; Option 1c, capped at 80% support with a 20% minimum contribution; and Option 1d, capped at 75% support with a 25% minimum contribution. All options would simplify administration by replacing the current means-testing system with fixed income bands, disregarding Department for Work and Pensions benefits and £10 of weekly earnings, and ensuring minor fluctuations did not require reissued bills.

However, the Clerk stressed that three of the options introduced a minimum contribution requirement for all working age households, which would reduce the overall cost of the scheme but risk increasing council tax arrears and enforcement actions.

Following consideration of the consultation and the Equality Impact Assessment, Members unanimously agreed to support Option 1a. Members noted that this option retained the principle of up to 100% support for the most financially vulnerable, safeguarding households already struggling with basic living costs. It was highlighted that capping support, as proposed under Options 1b to 1d, would inevitably impose new liabilities on low-income households, exacerbate debt, and increase the need for costly recovery actions, including enforcement by bailiffs.

Members further noted that Option 1a delivered administrative savings of over £131,000 through simplification without reducing entitlement, offering a more stable and predictable system for residents and the authority alike.

In particular, Members recognised that 44.7% of claimants were from households with a disability, and over 62% of claimants were women. Any reduction in support would disproportionately affect disadvantaged groups and risk worsening inequality. Members also drew attention to the high levels of deprivation in parts

of the County where council tax support claims are concentrated, emphasising that the Council had a responsibility to protect residents in those communities.

The Parish Council therefore unanimously **agreed** to endorse Option 1a as the Council's preferred option for reform of the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme.

13. REPORTS FROM PARISH COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVES ON EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS

Report by Councillor E Scott on the most recent meeting of Durham University's Community Engagement Task Force's economic sub-group

In her absence, Members noted the written report provided by Councillor E Scott from the latest meeting of the University's Community Engagement Task Force's economic sub-group. Members warmly welcomed the visitor stats numbers in particular and the contribution of the visitor economy to the wider county.

Report by Councillor S Walker on the most recent meeting of the County Durham Association of Local Councils (CDALC) meeting

Councillor S Walker presented the following report to Members from the most recent meeting of the County Durham Association of Local Councils (CDALC) meeting:

Report to Member Councils – CDALC Executive and Ordinary Meetings (June–July 2025)

CDALC Executive Committee Meeting – 18 June 2025

The Executive Committee agreed to support the City of Durham Parish Council's motion to lobby for the inclusion of health as an additional criterion in determining licensing applications.

2. CDALC Ordinary Meeting – 17 July 2025

CDALC AGM and Future Executive Structure

It was noted that the current CDALC Constitution references Area Action Partnerships (AAPs), which have now been replaced by 11 Local Networks (LNs). AAP groupings currently form the basis for 13 of the Executive Committee's 22 seats. Reducing this to align with 11 LNs raises concerns about reduced representation and an increased risk of meetings being inquorate.

The meeting agreed that CDALC should consider moving away from a structure dependent on criteria set by Durham County Council. A final decision on the future structure will be made at the CDALC AGM.

3. National Updates of Interest to Parish and Town Councils

Neighbourhood Planning – Withdrawal of Government Funding

As part of the Chancellor's Spending Review announced on 11 June, the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government has cut funding for neighbourhood planning.

Remote Meetings

The government plans to amend legislation to allow councils to hold remote and hybrid meetings. Proposed changes would give councils the power (not obligation) to implement proxy voting for members unable to attend due to serious illness or parental leave.

*New NALC publication – Local Councils Explained
The latest version of this booklet is available [here](#).*

4. Guest Speaker Reports

Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS) – Patrick Hetherington, DCC Resources Durham County Council is consulting on proposed changes to its CTRS to simplify the scheme and reduce administrative costs. Since its launch in 2013, CTRS has provided up to 100% discount for eligible working-age residents and now supports over 32,000 households. However, the move to Universal Credit has created complexity and high admin costs, with over 190,000 updates processed in 2024/25.

From April 2026, four income-banded options are under consideration:

- Option 1a: Up to 100% support*
- Option 1b: Up to 90% support (10% minimum contribution)*
- Option 1c: Up to 80% support (20% minimum contribution)*
- Option 1d: Up to 75% support (25% minimum contribution)*

These changes would simplify the process and reduce the number of revised bills. Pension-age households are unaffected, and exemptions may apply for vulnerable residents. Public consultation runs from 16 July to 23 September 2025.

Council Plan Consultation – Simon Moss, DCC Corporate Policy & Partnerships

The current Council Plan ([DCC Council Plan](#)) was ratified in February but is now being revised by the new administration. While detail in the presentation was limited, the consultation period will run from 21 July to 18 August 2025. Member councils are strongly encouraged to respond to ensure local priorities are heard.

End of report

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

Signed,



**Chair of the City of Durham Parish Council
(24th September 2025)**