

At a meeting of the Dene Valley Parish Council held at the Dene Valley Community Partnership One Stop Shop, High Street, Eldon Lane on **Monday 13 April 2026 at 6.00 p.m.**

Present:

Councillor J Clark in the Chair

Councillors T Bird and J Moore

Also in attendance:

South Durham Community Partnership – Cheryl Hudson
County Councillor Michael Ramage
K Beal and B Hutchinson
Ian Croft

1. Arrangements for Clerk to the Dene Valley Parish Council

The Chair reported the following to the meeting.

As Members will be aware an email was sent to various people by the previous Chair of Dene Valley Parish Council which cast doubt on the competency, ability and commitment of our long serving Parish Clerk, Ian Croft.

The Clerk was copied in to this email by mistake we presume and because of its contents the Clerk submitted his immediate resignation on 9 March 2026.

The Council wishes to formally and unequivocally state that none of the three remaining Members of the Parish Council endorse the statements made in the said email, nor do they wish the Parish Council to be associated with its contents in any manner.

In the time between 9 March 2026 and now four Parish Council Members submitted their resignations, leaving only three Members on the Parish Council. Three Members is the minimum number needed for us to be quorate.

The three Members remaining on the Parish Council informally agreed to re-appoint our former Clerk, Ian Croft, to the position of Clerk of the Council.

We then sought advice on this proposed process from the County Durham Association of Local Councils who advised that, while it was unusual for this to

happen, it was within the powers of the Parish Council to follow this course of action.

I have agreed a Contract of Employment which will be issued to Ian Croft and signed by myself and Ian Croft, subject to the Parish Council approval and re-appointment of Ian. Ian will be contracted to work 7.5 hours a week on Spinal Column Point 20. The Contract is based on the National Association of Local Councils model Contract of Employment.

Can I now take the views of Members present on the re-appointment of Ian Croft as Dene Valley Parish Council Clerk. I propose that Ian Croft be offered the post of Clerk to the Council with effect from 1 April 2026.

Seconded by Councillor J Moore. Upon a vote being taken it was unanimously agreed that Ian Croft be appointed to the post of Clerk to the Council with effect from 1 April 2026.

Ian Croft and Councillor J Clark signed the Contract of Employment and both retained a copy.

2 Apologies for absence

There were no apologies for absence

3. Public Participation

Brenda Hutchinson, local resident was in attendance. Mrs Hutchinson informed the Council that she had held the tenancy of an allotment plot on the Grange Avenue site for 7 years and had recently taken on the tenancy of another plot on this site. The site she had taken on needed a lot of remedial work and the Parish Council had already paid for one skip to clear some of the rubbish. However, a second skip was now needed and Mrs Hutchinson asked whether the Parish Council would pay for the second skip. The Parish Council agreed to pay for the second skip and Mrs Hutchinson would arrange for the delivery of the skip.#

Mrs Hutchinson reported that she had not yet received a tenancy agreement for her new allotment plot and the Clerk agreed to ensure an agreement was sent as soon as possible.

Mrs Hutchinson reported there was a water leak on the garden next to her new plot and Councillor Moore agreed to visit the site to turn off the water supply in the interim until the leak was repaired.

4. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 9 March 2026 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

5. Matters Arising

The Chair referred to the Big Spring Clean and reported that she was unaware of anything having been organised for this. Given the current circumstance of the Parish Council, it would be unlikely the Parish Council would be participating in this event as it currently did not have the resources to.

The former Surestart building had been sold to a third party and the Chair did not think it was feasible for the Parish Council to purchase the building. Councillor Bird added that it wasn't only the purchase cost the Council needed to consider but also the manning of it, running costs and volunteers which would be needed. Councillor Moore was unsure what could be done in the building which could not be done in the One Stop Shop. The Parish Council agreed to not pursue any interest in the former Surestart building.

Blackie Woods was mainly in the Eldon Parish area and needed to be dealt with by Eldon Parish Council. The Parish Council had three large boulders left from works it had carried out and the Chair suggested that Edlon Parish Council be asked whether it wanted the boulders, subject to a contribution to a local farmer to move the boulders.

The Chair referred to trespass by South West Durham Hunt. Councillor Moore did not think there was a problem being caused by the hunt and the Council agreed to leave this to rest.

The Chair reported she had received a number of emails from Kate Ward at DCC about money for CCTV cameras and electricity charges for the lighting through Randolph Street footpath.

Councillor Bird replied that the cameras were currently being repaired after being cut down and it was as yet unknown whether any information would be able to be retrieved from the cameras. The manufacturer was looking to obtain equipment to enable the camreras to get a downward view.

The Clerk agreed to contact Kate to provide her with billing information for the electricity charges which the Parish Council had previously agreed to meet.

6. Finance Update

The Clerk provided the meeting with details of income and expenditure for the Council to the end of March 2026. The Chair agreed the balances and signed the accounts and bank statements.

7. Police Update

The Chair reported there had been 63 calls relating to anti-social behaviour matter. No further police update was available.

8. Play areas

The Chair referred to refurbishment of Auckland Park Play Area. The Parish Council still held money in an HSBC account which had been classed as dormant but which needed to be accessed and this could be used to refurbish the Auckland Park Play Area. The Clerk and the Chair agreed that this needed to be progressed once matters at the Council had settled.

Councillor Bird considered there was a need for the Parish Council to do some visible things in the community which it had so far failed to do. This would need to be something which would benefit the community.

Referring to the proposed seat opposite the One Stop Shop Councillor Ramage informed the meeting he would cover the cost of this from his budget and asked that details of seats to be emailed to him. He confirmed that the former Surestart building had been sold by DCC.

Councillor Ramage informed the meeting he may be able to fund planters for the area and reported he would approach the County Council with this suggestion. Such planters could be positioned at the road signs into villages in the Parish area.

The Chair considered the Parish Council should resume with its plans to reinstate the Randolph Street Play Area and requested the Clerk to contact the Parish Council's solicitors requesting that the asset transfer be resumed.

9. Planning Issues

The Chair circulated a list of planning applications recently received or decided within the Parish area or in neighbouring Parish areas.

Mr K Beal circulated an outline document which proposed a development at Coundon Grange. Councillor Bird suggested that Mr Beal speak to Sam Rushmore MP regarding the proposal.

Mr Beal gave the meeting some details of the proposed development and informed the meeting he had attended the meeting to get some preliminary feedback from the Parish Council about it. Following discussion on the proposal the meeting informed Mr Beal that the Parish Council would be broadly supportive of the development.

Councillor Ramage added that he would support the development adding that if communities were not developed they failed to thrive.

10. Footpaths and Highways Issues

Councillor Moore informed the meeting the footpaths he had looked at had no issues.

11. Allotments

The Clerk reported that due to the recent disruption at the Council the allotment rent letters for 2026/27 had not yet been sent. This would be a priority and would be sent out within the next two weeks.

The Chair proposed, and the meeting agreed, that there be no increase in allotment rents for 2026/27, reversing the previous decision of the Council to raise rents by 5%. This was due to the increased precept the Council had received and the Council no longer having an interest in the former Surestart building.

12. Any other business

Cheryl Hudson reported that the next meeting of the South Church Community Partnership would take place this Wednesday at the Red Alligator commencing at 10.00 a.m. and asked whether anybody from the Parish Council would be able to attend. The Chair replied that due to the depleted number of Council Members it was unlikely anybody would be able to attend in the short term but that once Parish Council Members increased then attendance may be possible.

The Chair reported that she would contact the former Chair to arrange for the return of the Parish Council laptop.

The meeting finished at 7.35 p.m.