

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 October 2025 at 6.00 p.m.**

Present:

Councillor J Nicholson in the Chair

Councillors T Bird, J Clark, R Coleman, T Mitchell and J Moore.

Also in attendance:

Clerk Ian Croft
South Church Community Partnership - Cheryl Hudson
County Councillor – James Stephenson

1. Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Ashmore and Simm.

2. Public Participation

There were no members of the public in attendance.

3. Minutes

The minutes of the 8 September 2025 were approved by the Council as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4. Any issues to be raised with local County Councillors

County Councillor James Stephenson was in attendance to discuss local issues with the Parish Council.

The Chair stated to Councillor Stephenson that it was nearly six months since the County Council elections which saw a new administration at Durham County Council with Councillors who were new to the role. All three local Councillors for the Dene Valley Parish area were newly elected and the Chair asked what they knew of the Parish and its needs and what they were doing for the Parish.

Councillor Stephenson replied that the new administration was in the process of producing a new County Durham Plan which would be a template for all of County Durham. He had not yet had sight of the new County Durham Plan and was unsure when it would be going out for consultation. The new administration was focussed on the issue of anti-social behaviour and one other issue.

He added that a target had been set by National Government to build 33,000 new houses in County Durham in the next 5 years. There were a lot of applications currently being submitted and some of these were being refused, but planning law was changing in November which would make refusal of applications more difficult.

The Chair responded that Dene Valley had housing needs and the Parish Council had submitted various sites to the County Council 'Call for Sites' which it considered would be suitable for development. The Parish Council would welcome appropriate new development within the Parish.

Councillor Stephenson informed the Council he was aware that there were a lot of empty properties and derelict homes in the Parish area and he was aware of the area because he had friends who lived in Coronation and Close House. He was aiming to get the park in South Church revamped and also Riverside refurbished. Referring to the refurbishment of Riverside the Chair informed Councillor Stephenson that it was important the local Members worked with the Parish Council so that both bodies were aware of what the other was doing.

Councillor Stephenson informed the meeting that he was looking to get play equipment refurbished. The Chair replied that from experience there were not many companies who carried out play equipment repairs/refurbishments. The Chair said she could send a list of streets to Councillor Stephenson so that he was aware of the extent of the Parish Council area. The Parish Council was keen to help the three local County Councillors in any way it could.

Councillor Stephenson informed the Council that he was aware that there was not a lot within the Parish area. Councillor Bird replied that Durham County Council planners had deemed the area as not being viable for investment in 2017. While the Chair responded that this was historical, Councillor Bird stated that this put people in a mindset.

The Chair informed Councillor Stephenson that the area had a lack of infrastructure and that the loss of s106 money had been a blow to the Council which had plans to use the money to carry out improvements to the area. There needed to be a change in planning issues going forwards, with more engagement of Parish Councils regarding s106 monies and changes to conditions of planning permission. As an

example, the Chair referred to a change to the planning conditions for the Bishops Park development which had led to the loss of a long stretch of hedgerow. The Parish Council was not made aware of this change which it would have objected to if made aware. Although the Parish Council was encouraging of development in the area there was a need for greater consultation with the Parish Council both during and after the planning process.

Councillor Mitchell asked whether the County Council was able to improve public transport in the area. Councillor Stephenson replied that the County Council had no input to public transport which was operated by a private company. Councillor Mitchell asked whether the County Council was able to provide any subsidies to improve transport. The Chair replied that the County Council had appointed a person to carry out an analysis of public transport and she thought this may have been paid for by the regional mayor. Councillor Stephenson added that increased housing for the area could lead to increased demand which may make public transport more attractive to bus operators.

The Chair reported there were 111 empty homes within the Parish because they were not habitable. Landlords paid for a license and had responsibilities but tenants did not look after their properties and eventually these were left empty. There was a need for a heavier emphasis on social houses.

Councillor Stephenson asked who built social houses. The County Durham Plan was looking for land to build on and there was a need to build 700 homes a year. The Chair agreed to send Councillor Stephenson details of the sites put forward by the Parish Council for potential development.

The Chair reported that the Parish area experienced problems with anti-social behaviour with Millbank currently the worst area. Incidents were reported to the police but there never seemed to be any response. Councillor Bird reported that the problem of quad bikes took place at 4 p.m. every evening and this was reported to the police. This had been taking place for 7 years. The Chair reported that Councillors Simm and Moore had met with Sam Ashworth MP and Joy Allen, PCC about the problems of anti-social behaviour but there appeared to be no outcome. Although matters are reported to the police there was a feeling that the victims of ASB were being penalised. The Chair informed Councillor Stephenson that she had reported an incident to the police and when they attended, they were only interested in her binoculars. She had raised this with Councillor Potts who had suggested she should complain to Joy Allen. Councillor Stephenson replied that issues should be raised at PACT meetings adding that he would speak to Councillor Potts about the specific incident mentioned by the Chair.

The Chair raised the issue of the fly grazing of horses, a lot of which took place on DCC land. This was a revenue loss for the County Council which was, in allowing this, complicit in fly grazing and poor animal welfare. Councillor Mitchell added that signs had been erected to say horses would be removed if they were not gone by a certain date, the horse owners were telling people they owned the land. Councillor Stephenson responded that he would ensure signs were erected on County Council land which sated No Grazing.

The Chair raised the issue of s106 money which was in the region of £76,000 and was to be used by the Parish Council to refurbish play areas. Part of this process involved the asset transfer of a play area to the Parish Council which had taken an eternity to be dealt with by the County Council. Just before the transfer was to be completed the Parish Council discovered that the s106 money had been spent on a project in Shildon, which resulted in the Parish Council not being able to complete the asset transfer and spending a considerable amount on legal fees. Thso was not an acceptable situation. Councillor Stephenson replied that he did not know the specifics of the s106 money in question.

The Chair said residents had been promised refurbishment of sites and was keen to obtain the neighbourhood budgets of all three local County Councillors to enable some refurbishment works to take place. Each County Councillor had a neighbourhood budget of £20,000. Councillor Stephenson replied that each Councillor received a neighbourhood budget of £12,000 and he was to meet with Peter Garrod on Wednesday to discuss possible ideas for the neighbourhood budgets. Councillor Stephenson was firmly of the opinion that neighbourhood budget money should stay within the Ward. Councillor Nicholson informed Councillor Stephenson that historically the Parish had received no neighbourhood budget funding.

Councillor Stephenson informed the meeting that a decision on the former Surestart building would happen this week.

The Chair referred to the TSOS within the Parish which used to be open for six months a year but now was only open for two weeks before and two weeks after Appleby. It cost the County Council thousands of pounds to clear the site which was supposed to be monitored but was not. Visitors to the site actually did house clearances and tipped on the site. This year the site had been visited by 5 travellers. There was no legal obligation on the County Council to provide these sites and this site came at a great financial cost to the County Council and a great cost to the local community. There appeared to be a mindset that because it was located in Dene Valley then there was no need to address the problems nor consider alternative locations which would be

more visible. The Chair wanted all local County Councillors to be aware of this problem.

5. Matters arising/Chairs Update, to include update of former Surestart Building

The Chair informed the meeting that she and Councillor Simm had pulled together additional information on the former Surestart building bid which had been requested at very short notice. The decision on the building should have been made last Friday but Councillor Stephenson had just informed the meeting that the decision should be made by the end of the week.

6. Finance Update

The Clerk provided the meeting with details of income and expenditure for the Council to the end of September 2025. The Chair meeting agreed the balances and the Chair signed the accounts and the bank statements.

The Council noted the feedback letter received from Mazars on the AGAR for 2024/25 and suggested that a copy of the letter be sent to the Council's internal auditor for information.

7. Police Update

Councillor Bird circulated notes from the PACT meeting held on 2 October 2025 (for copy see file of Minutes).

Councillor Bird informed the meeting that a presentation on the use of drones had been made and he would forward the PowerPoint presentation to the Clerk for circulation to all Members. Funding for drones was being sought at a cost of £1,300 for the drone and £1,600 for training.

8. Play Areas

The Chair informed the meeting that she would speak to Peter Garrod tomorrow regarding the use of Members' neighbourhood budgets. It was important that until the decision was made on the former Surestart building the Parish Council did not commit funds elsewhere.

Councillor Coleman reported that the repairs to Auckland Park had been changed to 28 October. Councillor Coleman had obtained details of

another company which carried out play area repairs. The toddler swings at Auckland Park had been vandalised despite being tied up.

9. Planning Issues

Councillor Clark circulated details of planning applications which had been received or determined in the Dene Valley Parish and surrounding areas since the last meeting (for copy see file of Minutes)

10. Footpaths

The Chair referred to the Footpath update email circulated by Councillor Simm.

Councillor Moore reported that the footpath at Richard Terrace remained blocked. The Chair suggested he raise this with Kate Ward as the Parish Council had already sent a letter.

11. Allotments

The Chair reported that no progress had yet been made on the possible Close House Allotment meeting.

12. Such other business as, in the opinion of the Chair, is of sufficient urgency to warrant consideration

Cheryl Hudson reported that the next meeting of the South Church Community Partnership would be held on Wednesday at 10 a.m. at The Red Alligator.

The Chair informed Cheryl that she would resend a list of streets and house numbers at South Church.

Councillor Clark raised the issue of Christmas presents for pupils at Prince Bishops Primary School. The Council agreed that these should be purchased and Councillor Clark agreed to source the presents.

The Service of Remembrance on 9 November 2025 would be attended by the Chair who would lay a Wreath on behalf of the Parish Council.

13. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting would take place on Monday 10 November 2025 commencing at 6.00 p.m.