

# MINUTES OF PARISH LIAISON CLERKS ONLY MEETING

Tuesday 3 September

In Person – Council Chamber, Legion House, Ashby

Attendance	
<p><b>Town and Parish Councils</b>                      Deputy Clerk Mel Mitchell - Ashby de la Zouch Town Council                      Clerk Andrea Robinson - Ashby Woulds Town Council                      Clerk Fiona Palmer - Castle Donington Parish Council                      Clerk Fiona Palmer – Coleorton Parish Council                      Clerk Simon Weaver - Hugglescote and Donington le Heath Parish Council                      Clerk Nicola Land - Ibstock Parish Council                      Clerk Donna Griggs - Kegworth Parish Council                      Clerk Kelly Grove - Oakthorpe, Donisthorpe and Acresford Parish Council                      Clerk Mel Mitchell - Osgathorpe Parish Council                      Clerk Fiona Palmer - Swannington Parish Council                      Clerk Sharon Kaye - Whitwick Parish Council                      Interim Clerk Ann Stafford - Worthington Parish Council</p> <p><b>Presenters</b>                      Allison Thomas – Chief Executive, NWLDC                      Elizabeth Warhurst – Head of Legal &amp; Support Services, NWLDC                      Paul Stone – Director of Resources, NWLDC                      Anna Crouch – Head of Finance, NWLDC                      Emma Trahearn – Community Focus, NWLDC</p> <p><b>Officers</b>                      Molly Neeson – Communities Administration Support Officer and note taker, NWLDC                      Jason Knight – Head of Leisure Services, NWLDC                      Cat Ridgway – Community Focus Officer, NWLDC</p>	
Detail	Actions
<p><b>OPENING THE MEETING.</b> Allison Thomas, Chief Executive, NWLDC.                      Welcomes everyone to the meeting.                      Update given by Allison and an offer to visit the NWL town and parish councils is extended. Internally Allison has recruited a new director of resources, Paul Stone, as well as changing responsibilities of the existing directors. Andy Barton has now picked up more responsibility for the communities and front facing services and James Arnold has taken on responsibility for regeneration, property and local plan.</p> <p><u>District Council Elections</u>                      District Council elections were discussed. Allison shares that there is now an alliance administration in place since May 2023. The way the council work with members has changed, it has been a learning curve for all involved.</p> <p><u>New Offices</u>                      Allison shares that the new accommodation is now open, and staff are based on Whitwick Business Centre. A new customer service centre was opened in November 2022, for the public. The member hub was also refurbished in May 2023. Old offices are now vacant, and a planning application will be submitted to redevelop the site, it is part of the regeneration plan for the area.</p> <p><u>Council delivery plan</u>                      A new council delivery plan has been developed to highlight the priorities over the next five years and there will be continuing through to next election. This was approved in November 2023 and has 18 key priorities that members are working towards by 2028.</p>	<p><b>17:45 – 18:00</b></p>

	<p>Performance is regularly reported and updated through the cabinet meetings.</p> <p><u>Political environment</u> The alliance and balance of the council is very precarious, there are currently 19 councillors in the leading group and 19 that are not, as well as a chairman that has a casting vote in every council meeting. It is difficult to try and manage a decision from an officer perspective, it is now not possible to assume what decisions are going to get through. It is very different to the previous situation, where a fair assumption would be made on what the decision would be.</p> <p><u>Growth in the District</u> Growth in the district is on the up, this benefits the council from the growth, however this does make the future uncertain. Should the Government reset the business rates this would have an impact on the council's budget.</p> <p><u>Budget position</u> There is a gap in the finances from 2025/26 of £0.4m which rises to £1.9m by 2028, action is needed on this, and it is a priority and is being worked on to reduce the gap. Tough choices are having to be made, such as fees and charges including pressures on pay, pressures due to inflation and service demand pressures. Council tax has increased for the first time in fifteen years to help bridge the gap. The transformation plan (agreed by Cabinet in June 2024) is working on changing the way the council does business and the way it works with the public. Business rates have gone into reserve, these will be invested wisely to generate income. NWLDC has been focussing on assurance and governance to make sure the budget gap is reduced. OFLOG (Office For Local Government) is looking at best value indicators for the council as well as a housing regulator that is looking at the housing service. The Local Government and Housing Ombudsman Services are looking to ensure complaints are dealt with more efficiently and appropriately.</p> <p><u>Local Plan</u> Growth in the district is still ongoing and will continues beyond the life of the next local plan. This may be difficult due to the new government consultation that was published at the end of July 2024. Officers are working hard to understand what is required and the local plan committee will be briefed when the council knows. Chris Elston and Ian Nelson have made an offer to come and speak at the parish liaison meetings and happy to share our feedback to NPPF consultation.</p> <p><u>Regeneration</u> Coalville regeneration plan is ongoing. Regeneration plans will be extended to the whole of the district, a commitment has been made to take this to scrutiny and cabinet process later this year.</p> <p><u>Local Government Association Peer Review</u> These are due every five years. Draft report has been provided. Allison thanked the attendees for their cooperation and honesty with the reviewers. The report, once completed, will be published along with the action plan later this year and will be in the public domain. Allison addresses the concerns raised about senior management not being present enough, hope to change this going forward.</p>	
	<p><b>THE ROLE OF THE MONITORING OFFICER AT NWLDC.</b> Elizabeth Warhurst, Head of Legal and Support Services, NWLDC. (Requested at the December 2023 Parish Liaison)</p> <p>Elizabeth thanked the attendees for being invited. Presentation shared and discussed.</p> <p>Q - Is there talk of sanctions on councillors being changed?</p>	<p><b>18:00 – 18:30</b></p>

	<p>A - There was a recommendation that came out of the committee for standards and public life that the government needed to look at the sanctions that are available, but this was approximately 5 years ago. However, do not believe it is being reviewed again currently.</p> <p>The determination subcommittee can only make recommendations for the parish. The can go to the Local Government of Social Care Ombudsman if they are not happy with how the council has handled the process.</p> <p>Concerns raised that there is no one to one support at parish level. There is no one on site if a councillor was being rude to a clerk. It is felt that the councillors can do what they want to do, limited repercussions. Where can the Clerk seek support? Elizabeth stated that she was able to offer advice to Clerks in terms of conduct issues and the complaints process within the remit of the MO role.</p> <p>Allison thanked Elizabeth for the presentation.</p>	
	<p><b>SPECIAL EXPENSE, BUDGETING FOR 2025/26.</b> Paul Stone, Director of Resources (Section 151 Officer), NWLDC and Anna Crouch, Head of Finance &amp; Deputy S151 Officer, NWLDC. (Requested by several town and parish councils in the June 2024 parish liaison)</p> <p>Allison introduced Paul Stone and Anna Crouch.</p> <p>Paul shared he has been with the District Council for the last year and that he and Anna will return to the December meeting to discuss budgets in more depth.</p> <p>Paul provided background information on the special expenses. Special expenses are there so the ones who pay for them get the benefit. Local councils can allocate funds more efficiently and they are separated out and highlighted in the budget reports.</p> <p>Q – Do all parish know what the special expenses are used for within the parishes? Concerns raised that not all parish councils are aware of what the special expenses are. A – This information can be shared, and we can discuss this in more depth in the December meeting. <b>ACTION</b> – Paul Stone to share with parishes what special expenses are in their area.</p> <p>Calculation breakdown is shared, the five-year planned maintenance is also including. The calculation is then carried out so the only people who benefit from the special expense, pay for it. Everything regarding the special expenses is stated in the local government finance act. Fairness and transparency are crucial, when the increases are set each year, the government’s council tax referendum principles are considered. This does not apply to parishes. It has been argued on multiple occasions that the district should set the council tax, and the district know what us affordable and what is fair.</p> <p><u>2024/25 Budget</u> Closed churchyards have previously highlighted significant grounds maintenance costs. These had previously been allowed as special expenses; however, the legislation states some functions can be excluded and the district took the decision to exclude closed churchyard, maintenance of leisure centre and war memorials and to treat them as a general fund expenditure, i.e. this cost would be picked up by the district council. It was recognised that the costs of liability associated with boundary walls and structures can be high and it would not be able to be met by the special expense precept. The increase that is required to fund the precept would exceed council tax referendum limits. In the particular area of Stretton en le Field, it would result in a council tax to increase to £700 per resident a month. It was not beneficial for the Council to take on the responsibility of the closed churchyards as the financial risks were too high for those living in the parish.</p>	<p><b>18:30 – 19:20</b></p>

Multiple scenarios are considered before excluding the above in the special expense budget.

Legal advice was taken on this matter. Due to legislation stated the closed churchyard is passed onto the local council to manage and there is a time frame around acceptance of the closed churchyard. Within three months a parish or town council can approach the district council to ask them to take on the ground and pay the maintenance fees. When a churchyard is closed the parish/town council receive notice.

Q – Why were the parishes were not considered when the decision was made? Also there was no communication from the district councillors on this matter, are they informed?

A – Paul advises due to the time frames around this the decisions needed to be made very quickly; district councillors are aware of budget matters. All the budgets are open for consultation during the consultation period in January.

Q – Concerns raised that this was not publicised very well, the parish councils found out by accident. The residents are already paying huge amount of money on the church yard.

A – Paul confirms NWLDC will provide an opportunity for parishes clerks to hear the budget proposals for 2025/26. It was initially looked at, to provide a briefing at the forum in early December 2024.

Q – Concerns raised that there is too much on one Clerk to look at the budget as well as manage everything else. It is stressed that there is no capacity for the Clerks to manage all of this. Concerns raises that public services will be lost if communication is not given that the Clerks need to allow for it in the budget. An example of this is public toilets. They have previously been lost due to this situation before.

A - As above, the forum in December will be an opportunity to highlight budget proposals which affect the parishes.

Allison, Paul and Anna sympathise with the Clerk and reiterate, Paul and Anna will be present in the December meeting to share an update and communicate more.

#### 2025/26 Budget

Anna gave a brief explanation of the council tax setting. The slide was discussed and read through by Anna.

Council tax base reports are produced on 1<sup>st</sup> December.

District go to full council on the 20<sup>th</sup> of February and that is the date the Council approve the council tax. Anna shares she is always happy to help and support when needed.

Q - How are the council tax worked out to the number of house and buildings etc?

A - Council tax base is done on a band D equivalent. There are different percentages, a band H is double a band D so this would count twice. If anyone is on a band A it is 0.7%, the number of properties to the band D equivalent as it depends on what bands there is across the parish. Council tax support reduces the support, the areas that have high council tax support bring down the base. Pensions will also bring this down.

Q - Please can this be shared with the clerks? Some literature to be shared with Councillors and members of the public it would be useful to be able to explain why the council tax is worked out the way it is.

A - Anna can share this by early January. It may not be on the letters that are sent out 20<sup>th</sup> December letter. **ACTION**

Clerks agree that a paragraph to share is needed for the councillors and for members of the public in the parish.

**ACTION** - Anna will try to put a crib sheet together that can be applied to all parish/town council.

Q - As the council tax base is determined as of 1<sup>st</sup> of December, does this mean that any new builds ongoing after the 30<sup>th</sup> November are not included?

	<p>A - Any that revs and bens know will be built by the end of the year will be added on and included. We do not include 100% of them, we only include 70% of the new builds in the base calculation.</p> <p>Paul recapped that himself and Anna will be at the December parish liaison to give another update. The draft budget report for scrutiny will be available for the next parish liaison meeting so this can be discussed. It has been agreed with Cabinet that a 2.75% increase is planned over the period of the plan. This is subject to change due to referendum and principles, but all changes will be communicated.</p> <p><b>ACTION Clerks</b> - Paul asks the attendees to let Emma know what they want to hear about in December so Paul and Anna can prepare.</p> <p>Concerns raised that services are being devolved into parishes; in order to save money for the Council, this is a huge impact and if the Clerks are aware in advance they can prepare. Paul confirms no services are being devolved to parishes.</p> <p>Allison also shares that it would be useful to share any upcoming consultations with the town and parish councils through Emma's team.</p> <p><b>ACTION</b> – Paul and Anna will do so.</p>	
	<p><b>REFRESHMENT BREAK</b></p>	<p><b>18:55 – 19:00</b></p>
	<p><b>ANY OTHER BUSINESS</b>  <b>Forward Plan</b>, Emma Trahearn, Community Focus NWLDC.</p> <p>Emma rans through the forward plan; a list will be shared for the parish and town councils to tick which ones they wish to hear about.</p> <p>Emma shared the agenda for the December meeting which is hybrid. Finance colleagues will be attend as well as Chris Elston (Head of Planning) and Ian Nelson (Team Manager for Planning Policy) to share updates on the Local Plan and Planning Reforms.</p> <p>LCC highways team have been invited however they have advised that this is not something the team are able to attend. Emma asks the Clerks to speak to Donna Rist at Leicestershire County Council about this.</p> <p>Emma shares that if it is require to share other topics which might be a bit too long for a parish liaison or do not fit the timescales then we can look at scheduling additional online session but need parish and town councils views on topics to arrange these.</p> <p>All future topics for next year's meetings are to be decided.  Rupert Matthews can be invited to a March meeting as it will be time to set priorities again if it is something the parish and town council are interested in.</p> <p>Q - Will they all be on Tuesday's?  A - Emma shared how the meetings are planned and how they are scheduled to avoid parish and town council meetings, SLCC, LCC Operational meeting etc. Open to changing the meeting days and times to work alongside the majority, please let us know.</p>	<p><b>19:00 – 19:10</b></p>
	<p><b>CLOSE AND THANKS</b> – Allison Thomas, Chief Executive, NWLDC.</p> <p>Allison shared some final points before closing the meeting.</p> <p><u>The Boundary Commission Consultation</u>  The electoral commission has landed early. The boundary commission have looked at councils that are plus/minus 10%. In the district case it was 30% that was not meeting the threshold for Councillors. It runs for 10 weeks until mid-November. There is a council meeting early November to review what NWLDC thinks of it and submit a response.</p>	<p><b>19:10 – 19:15</b></p>

	<p>Q - Who made the comments that were in the report?  A - It was a mix, between the Labour group, individual councillors and more. The council resolved to have 38 Councillors, but the boundary commission suggests 39.</p> <p>Council resolved single member wards are desired, and the boundary commission have stuck with that.</p> <p>Q - Is Diseworth still with Long Whatton?  A - No it is now called Breedon and Long Whatton. There is also a new ward in Ashby Hastings and there are also updates to Packington, Ravenstone and Coleorton. Hugglescote has also been split into two wards due to the 6,000 houses. Polling station review will also need to be reviewed off the back of the boundary review commission report.</p> <p>There are 10 weeks lefts to make the clerks views known. Allison asks for all clerks to put in their views.</p> <p><u>Parking review</u>  Allison shares there were 4,200 responses received and this will be taken to Cabinet towards the end of the year.</p> <p>Q - Will this affect budget setting?  A - Yes, but it is not believed to affect the parish council budget, only the parish council residents as it is district council car parks.</p> <p><u>Waste Bins</u>  A workshop is going ahead on 4 of September to discuss the 2,000 consultation comments on the bins, this will go through closed scrutiny and then Cabinet later in the year. It will impact the residents but not the services they provide.</p> <p>Q - Has trade waste been consulted on?  A - No, only domestic.</p> <p>Allison thanked everyone for coming.</p>	
	<p><b>A.O.B</b>  Q - Concerns raised about the peer review and the middle management being the issues not senior members of staff.  A - The feedback did not reflect this, but Allison thanks the clerk for bringing it to her attention and Community Focus will look into with the clerk.  Q - An example was given of a recent case has seen three weeks before a clerk had to chase for a response from members of staff at the district council.  A - Allison asks for all clerks to speak with their Community Focus Officer who go through the generic email (<a href="mailto:community.focus@nwleicestershire.gov.uk">community.focus@nwleicestershire.gov.uk</a>) as they are the team that can chase.</p> <p>Emma shared that perhaps more work needs to be done internally to educate staff on the roles of parish and town councils. The Joint Charter has been shared with team leaders, managers and corporate leadership team.  <b>ACTION</b> – Emma to look at ways to engage/educate internal staff.</p>	<p><b>19:15 – 19:25</b></p>
	<p><b>FINISH TIME</b></p>	<p><b>19:25</b></p>
	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>FUTURE AGENDA ITEMS</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Tell us who you would like to hear from or what information you want to know in 2024 and beyond – <a href="mailto:community.focus@nwleicestershire.gov.uk">community.focus@nwleicestershire.gov.uk</a></p>	
	<p><b><u>Future Parish Liaison Dates</u></b></p>	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Tuesday 3 December 2024</b> – Stenson House, Coalville. Hybrid. NWL Parish Liaison meeting (Clerks, Chairperson and Cllrs welcome).</li><li>• <b>March 2025</b> – location TBC online (Clerks, Chairperson and Cllrs welcome).</li><li>• <b>June 2025</b> – location TBC in person (Clerks, Chairperson and Cllrs welcome).</li><li>• <b>September 2025</b> – location TBC in person (Clerks only)</li><li>• <b>December 2025</b> – location TBC (Clerks, Chairperson and Cllrs welcome).</li></ul>	
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