

Minutes of the **WITHYHAM PARISH COUNCIL MEETING** held at **THE OLD STATION, GROOMBRIDGE**
on **7th July 2025** at 7pm

PRESENT Cllrs Emma Bowers, Alan Gaukroger, Robert Gordon-James, Diana Kelly (Chair), Penny Lawne, Jill Pardey, Deviani Parekh-Jones, Beth Rhodes, Judi Tuke

In attendance: Deborah Siddle - Clerk (minutes)
County Cllr Georgia Taylor
District Cllr Jessika Hulbert
2 members of the public

Members of the public are encouraged to attend meetings and there is a 10-minute opportunity for members of the public to address the Council.

There was one member of the public present to speak for item 8 following her submitting a survey that she had undertaken about Groombridge playground. She explained that she felt that there are several problems caused by having no fence. Dogs that are not on leads go into the playground area when it is meant to be dog free and parents with small children are subsequently on alert at all times. A dog had jumped up at her daughter and another had climbed onto the play equipment to approach her daughter when she tried to get away, which had been distressing for both her daughter and her. The resident had needed to ask dog owners to call their dog back when they were off lead in the play area, and she had found that apologies had seemed blasé.

The resident pointed out previous incidents that had been posted on Facebook of dogs interrupting picnics and of two dog bites that had occurred on the wider Recreation Ground. She explained that for children who find dogs intimidating there is nowhere to go to safety, which a fenced playground could allow. In addition, she had noticed dog fouling in the play area, and she outlined the health dangers of dog faeces.

Without a fence, the resident outlined other concerns she feels that parents have with trying to keep an eye on young children as they may roam into other areas of the Recreation Ground.

The resident referenced a 2022 Facebook post where WPC had said that a fence could not be afforded at the time of opening but that residents would be consulted. She felt that the survey she had undertaken shows support for a fence and that it was unusual for a play area in a shared space to not have one.

The resident concluded that WPC has a duty of care for safety and she cited WPC's Safeguarding Policy.

The resident was asked where residents expected funds for a fence to come from. She acknowledged that a fence would be costly and would not expect WPC to fund it all. She would be prepared to help with fundraising and grant applications.

The Clerk clarified that an offer of free fencing from a local fencing contractor had been retracted due to the size and scope.

When asked about how many survey respondents were from the parish, she confirmed that the vast majority were TN3 postcodes. The Clerk had been provided with this information.

District Cllr Hulbert observed that Groombridge has a beautiful play area which is a fantastic asset and felt that it should be a place that parents with toddlers can relax and not worry. For older children, the current format without a fence appears to work but for younger children it does not feel as safe a space as it could. She recognised that adding a fence could be difficult logistically but asked WPC to keep an open mind.

The resident was asked what her expectation was, and she asked WPC to consider the possibility of having a fence and not see cost as a barrier. She confirmed that she would be happy to help with fundraising. She said that she understood why WPC's previous dogs on leads consultation had not resulted in that happening, and that dog owners may not abide by it anyway. Her ideal scenario would be for a fence to be installed as it would be a no-dogs space, and owners could tie dogs to the outside like they used to.

The Chair thanked the resident for her presentation and for sharing the results of their survey.

The member of the public left the meeting.

The meeting opened at 7.20pm.

1. ENQUIRE WHETHER ANYONE PRESENT INTENDS TO FILM, PHOTOGRAPH AND/OR RECORD THE MEETING – none.

2. APOLOGIES – Cllr Nick Anderson – family commitment
Cllr Andrew Fane – illness
Cllr Sue Skinner – family commitment
Cllr Linsey Winter – family commitment

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST – None

4. MINUTES

4.1. Resolve that the minutes of the Council Meeting held on Monday 9th June 2025 be taken as read, confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman

002996 RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 9th June 2025 were approved.

4.2. Matters outstanding from minutes (not listed as separate agenda items)

Matters resolved from previous minutes

Minute no.	Who	Item
002929	Clerk	Blackham bus shelter donated to BETSI on the agreed terms
Pg 3202	Clerk	Registered WPC's interest in the new WDC CLIF funding
Pg 3202	Cllr Gordon-James	Permission not granted for WPC to have a table/gazebo at Withyham Fete
Pg 3202	Clerk	Granted BETSI annual permission to have events on Teasley Mead Recreation Ground, with conditions
Pg 3204	Clerk	Thanked Wild Groombridge for their impressive and thorough report and for making the Park Corner project a success
Pg 3204	Clerk	Thanked the Community Engagement Coordinator for helping to make the Park Corner project a success
002972	Clerk	Adopted the training Policy
002973	Clerk	Adopted the Parish Council-led Consultations policy
002975	Clerk	Proceeded building matters
002976	Council	Approved the flexible working request (Clerk)
002977	Cllr Gordon-James	Delegated recruitment of the Clerk

Actions outstanding from previous minutes

Minute no.	Who	Item	Deadline by which to complete
Pg.3100	Finance Committee	Consider Members Allowances at updated levels, travel and subsistence rates and costs for child/dependants' care in 2026/27 budget setting	Autumn
Pg 3180	Cllr Gordon-James	Become link councillor with WPCIC rather than a Director after a replacement Director is identified	TBC – after recruitment of a Director
Pg 3185	Clerk	Defer Withyham/Blackham Ward Chair until Cllrs Bowers and Skinner return to meetings	July
Pg 3202	Cllr Anderson	Monitor GCC/recreation ground vehicle gate and let Council know if more could be done	July

Pg 3202	Cllrs Bowers & Gaukroger	Arrange to meet with resident regarding issues in Blackham	July
002971	Clerk/RFO	WPC will not fund an extra 4 urban verge grass cuts in 2026	Autumn
Pg 3207	Cllrs Winter & Anderson	Help promote Speedwatch on social media and to the Groombridge WI group	July

Actions from these Minutes

Minute no.	Who	Item	Deadline by which to complete
Pg.3222	Clerk	Update St Thomas' School about FP34	August
002997	Clerk	Should legal advice permit the installation of a fence at Groombridge Play area, the Parish Council conduct its own consultation process	Tbc – when new Clerk in post
002998	Clerk	Adopt the Financial Regulations	August
002999	Clerk	Adopt the Scheme of Delegation	August
003000	Clerk	Adopt the Standing Orders	August
003001	Clerk	Adopt the health and Safety policy	August
003003	RFO	Pay invoices in August in agreement with the Chair and Vice Chair	August
003004	RFO	Transfer funds currently in Nationwide 95 day access account to a higher interest account	August
003005	Clerk	Dispose of WPC gazebos that are broken and with missing parts	August
003006	Clerk	Agree the quote for replacement of streetlight Column 27 at the Victoria bus stop	August
Pg.3226	Clerk	Instruct our streetlighting contractor to return the ornamental lantern from Column 27	August
Pg.3226	Cllr Gaukroger	Join Finance and Staff Committees	August
003009	Council	Appoint the Assistant Clerk as Temporary Proper Officer with clearly limited duties from 1 August	August
Pg.3226	Assistant Clerk	Review arrangement for Proper Officer at September Council meeting	September
003010	Assistant Clerk	Public communications to manage resident expectations during staff changes	August
Pg.3226	Assistant Clerk	Close the office when the Assistant Clerk is on annual leave	August
003013	RFO	Submit Public Works Loan Board application	September

5. COMMITTEE MINUTES

Receive the following draft minutes of committees and to note recommendations contained therein and as far as requisite, the action taken by them.

5.1 Rights of Way Advisory Group - 27th May 2025 – noted

5.2 Finance Committee – 23rd June 2025 – noted

6. REPORTS FROM DISTRICT and COUNTY COUNCILLORS

County Cllr Taylor updated the meeting on Footpaths 25(near the Tanyard) and 34 (between St Thomas' School and Birchden Woods) following a site visit and correspondence with ESCC and the WPC Right of Way Advisory Committee. She clarified ESCC's statutory duty and liabilities for path surfaces and, specifically for FP25, explained that there has been a flooding issue there since the 1950s. The walkway is on the list for repair but ESCC thinks hardcore will just be washed away if used to fill the surface holes so they are looking at a new, higher route. With FP34, ESCC understands that there may be a new 'Ardenvale' planning application and they are therefore waiting for that outcome in case S106 funds are available to contribute to works on the path.

As St Thomas' School has been unable to access Birchden Woods using the path, the Clerk was asked to update the School on the above.

Cllr Taylor explained that the Planning and Infrastructure Bill is now in the House of Lords and wildlife charities are concerned about protections for nature and ecosystems. ESCC will be discussing a motion to consider their protected areas.

Cllr Taylor is trying to find out how Town and Parish Councils can be formally involved in planning for the future of Devolution and Unitisation.

District Cllr Hulbert has now become Vice Chair rather than Chair of Wealden District Council.

Cllr Hulbert will be attending a meeting at Eridge Station on 2nd August at 10.30am arranged by local residents concerning the roadside parking issues there. She would report back to WPC as she knows that residents from this parish use that station. She is also aware of residents' concerns about parking in some areas of Groombridge. Cllr Taylor added that parking will come under the responsibility of the new Council rather than the Police due to Unitisation so that Wealden is in line with all other Boroughs and Districts in the new Authority.

7. WARD REPORTS

7a) Groombridge Ward (Groombridge)

It was reported that a Tennis Club will be run for children in the summer holidays, and that the new Padel court is open and well used.

7b) Groombridge Ward (Withyham/Blackham)

The Blackham summer solstice party organised by BETSI went well. The next event will be Fireworks in November.

Withyham Fete had not granted permission for WPC to have a table so sadly WPC had not had a presence again.

There is a Go Fund Me page for the Withyham ANPR cameras that WPC has contributed a grant to.

7c) Marden's Hill Ward

Nothing to report.

8. CONSIDER RESULTS OF CONSULTATION ORGANISED BY RESIDENTS 'PLAYGROUND FENCE AND DOGS ON LEADS SURVEY' (GROOMBRIDGE RECREATION GROUND)

A paper in support of this item had been circulated prior to the meeting and included the results of the survey which had been undertaken by residents.

The meeting acknowledged the survey and thanked the residents.

The meeting ruled out any further action being taken on "Dogs on Leads" as this had already been consulted on by the Parish Council and a decision made at that time.

In terms of the request for a fence around the play equipment, individual councillors made the following comments:

- A fence would prevent dogs from free access for the play area and if residents would help fundraise that would be helpful
- It wasn't clear if residents understood how much funds need to be raised and whether it would be achievable to fundraise. Also a wooden fence would require maintenance
- In terms of costs of a fence, an initial quote based on health and safety requirements for fencing at children's playgrounds was £20,000 including VAT
- A consultation would need to give some idea of where funding would come from as residents should know if it might require funds from Precept
- In order to meet safety requirements a fence would take up a large part of the recreation ground. The resident's survey did not take size of area or cost into consideration
- Councillors undertake regular inspections and have found that dog faeces are rare in the play area. Badger and deer droppings are more common
- Confidence amongst parents is important, but scope and funding might make a fence problematic
- The play area might have been designed differently if a fence had been planned from the start. Consideration would need to be given to the size and for example whether there could be space for picnicking inside
- When we worked with the group of residents on the design there were other places where the play equipment is not fenced, so it is not unusual for this to be the case
- The Cricket Club leave the vehicle gate open on match days which may concern parents. The Clerk clarified that it is not close enough for ROSPA to highlight it as an issue, but the Cricket Club had been asked to keep it closed and Cllr Anderson is monitoring it

It was pointed out that the current meeting should not be considering whether to have a fence, but rather whether for WPC to hold its own consultation. Questions regarding a consultation might be about the cost of that consultation to WPC, what expectations WPC should have about response rates and that WPC has no funds in this financial year to take any results forwards if there was public support for a fence. It would also be important that any consultation takes into consideration demographics and why responders use the space, to help interrogate the results.

Further, it was noted that WPC is under no obligation to do anything. There is no actual Health and Safety issue raised by ROSPA and there is nothing illegal about the current situation. However, the survey demonstrates that some residents have concerns, and a fence would resolve the concerns raised by the member of the public who attended the meeting.

Cllr Hulbert mentioned that WDC is launching its CLIF fund for infrastructure projects that are important to communities. She clarified that Councils could apply for more than one project.

Taking the above into account, Council noted that legal advice is pending. They also recognised that the playground is on WPC land and, should a survey demonstrate that a majority wanted a fence, there may be a call on Precept. They therefore AGREED that a consultation should be undertaken by WPC itself.

002997 **RESOLVED** that, should legal advice permit the installation of a fence, the Parish Council conduct its own consultation process to ensure transparency, public engagement, and access to complete information (including design visuals, proposed fence location and possible sources of funding)

It was recognised that, due to staff changes, this would be picked up when a new Clerk is in post.

Cllrs Taylor and Hulbert and the member of the public left the meeting.

9. WPCIC UPDATE – quarterly update for Groombridge Post Office and Shop

A paper from the CIC had been circulated prior to the meeting and was noted. A query about shop sales compared to last year was clarified.

10. POLICIES

10.1 Financial Regulations (recommended by Finance Committee)

002998 **RESOLVED** to adopt the Financial Regulations.

10.2 Scheme of Delegation

002999 **RESOLVED** to adopt the Scheme of Delegation.

10.3 Standing Orders

003000 **RESOLVED** to adopt the Standing Orders.

003001

10.4 Health & Safety Policy (recommended by Finance Committee)
RESOLVED to adopt the Health & Safety Policy.

11. FINANCE

11.1 Note the report showing payments made to date against budgets
 This report had been circulated prior to the meeting and was noted.

11.2 Authorise the payment of July invoices/note regular payments

Date	Payee Name	Reference	£ Total Amnt	£ Creditors	£ VAT	A/c	Centre	£ Amount	Transaction Details
08/07/2025	Viking Direct	BACS58	544.99		90.83	4016	101	65.98	webcam
						4064	101	19.78	cafe supplies
						4015	101	368.40	Stationery, chair, desk screen
08/07/2025	Society - Local Council Clerks	BACS59	253.20		42.20	4040	101	211.00	Recruitment advert
08/07/2025	FIX LINK M Anderson	BACS60	228.00		38.00	4503	101	190.00	Boiler service & cert
08/07/2025	SME IT Solutions	BACS61	527.56		87.93	4018	101	9.99	website
						4013	101	112.16	Phones, Bband
						4021	101	317.48	IT support
08/07/2025	Staff	BACS62	88.50			4007	101	80.00	CPD 121
						4064	101	8.50	keyring
08/07/2025	Mulberry Local Authority Servi	BACS63	54.00		9.00	4007	101	45.00	Training RGJ
08/07/2025	Groombridge Village Hall	BACS64	37.38			4064	101	37.38	Community Cafe hire Jun
08/07/2025	East Sussex Association of Loc	BACS65	48.00		8.00	4007	101	40.00	Training PL
08/07/2025	R Carr Partnership	BACS66	360.00		60.00	4260	203	300.00	Blakcham hedge
08/07/2025	Omni Waste Management	BACS67	37.32		6.22	4506	101	31.10	Waste collections May
08/07/2025	Wealden Citizens Advice	BACS68	900.00			4101	102	900.00	Grant towards running cost
08/07/2025	BETSI	BACS69	750.00			4101	102	750.00	Grant towards resources
08/07/2025	Groombridge Preschool	BACS70	243.16			4101	102	243.16	Grant towards sports equipment
08/07/2025	Action Against Abuse	BACS71	500.00			4101	102	500.00	Grant towards support service
08/07/2025	Staff member	BACS72	21.40			4064	101	15.00	Cafe crockery
						4510	101	6.40	milk
08/07/2025	Staff member	BACS73	19.80			4407	401	19.80	Mileage
08/07/2025	Staff member	BACS74	21.60			4009	101	21.60	Mileage Wealden Clerks mtg
08/07/2025	Various	BACS75	4,955.35			4003	101	379.17	Salaries Jul25
						4000	101	4,576.18	Salaries Jul25
08/07/2025	Crowborough First Responders	BACS76	130.80			4406	401	130.80	Defib battery & pads
08/07/2025	Becky Walsh Courses	BACS77	360.00			4007	101	360.00	CPD 121s
08/07/2025	UK Power Networks	BACS78	4,232.40		705.40	4452	402	3,000.00	Replacement streetlight 27
						4451	402	527.00	Replacement streetlight 27
08/07/2025	Prepaid card	CB1PPC0725	488.12			203		488.12	CB1 to PPcard Jul
08/07/2025	Everflow	DDEFPO0725	39.27			5101	500	39.27	Post Office water
08/07/2025	Nest Pensions	DDNEST0725	505.21			4001	101	505.21	pensions Jul25
08/07/2025	The Premier Trust N A Houghton	SONH0725	666.66			4012	101	666.66	Office Rent Jul
08/07/2025	The Premier Trust T J Newman	SOTN0725	666.67			4012	101	666.67	Office rent Jul
Subtotal Carried Forward:			16,679.39	0.00	1,047.58			15,631.81	

003002

RESOLVED to pay the July invoices listed above totalling £15,631.81 + VAT; to pay by BACS or sign the cheques accordingly.

11.3 Delegate authority to the RFO to pay invoices in August in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair, and to report to September Council

As there will be no August Council meeting this was agreed, and the list should be reported to September Council.

003003

RESOLVED that the RFO should pay invoices in August in agreement with the Chair and Vice Chair.

11.4 Confirm transfer of Nationwide funds (recommended by Finance Committee)

Finance Committee had recommended that funds are transferred from the existing Nationwide account to a higher interest account.

- 003004 RESOLVED** to transfer funds currently in a Nationwide 95 day access account to a higher interest account.

11.5 Confirm disposals of gazebos (recommended by Finance Committee)

Finance Committee had recommended that the three gazebos that are broken and with missing parts should be disposed of.

- 003005 RESOLVED** to dispose of WPC gazebos that are broken and missing parts.

11.6 Consider any quotes - to include streetlight Column 27 (recommended by Finance Committee)

June Finance Committee had recommended to Council accept the quote for replacement of the column and lantern at the Victoria bus stop, including disconnection/connection and traffic management at £5,042 + VAT utilising budget lines 4452, 4451 and EMR340.

- 003006 RESOLVED** to agree the quote for replacement of streetlight Column 27 at the Victoria bus stop as above.

The Clerk was asked to instruct our contractor to return ornamental lantern from Column 27 to WPC.

12. FINANCE AND STAFF COMMITTEES - confirm Cllr Gaukroger membership

- 003007 RESOLVED** that Cllr Gaukroger will join the WPC Finance and Staff Committees.

13. CONSIDER WHETHER TO EXCLUDE THE PRESS AND PUBLIC FROM THE MEETING DURING CONSIDERATION OF THE FOLLOWING ITEMS 14-15 PURSUANT TO SECTION 1(2) OF THE PUBLIC BODIES (ADMISSION TO MEETINGS) ACT 1960 ON THE GROUNDS THAT PUBLICITY WOULD BE PREJUDICIAL TO THE CONFIDENTIAL NATURE OF THE BUSINESS

- 003008 RESOLVED** to exclude press and public.

14. STAFFING MATTERS

Confidential papers had been circulated prior to the meeting regarding the interim period between the existing Clerk leaving post and a new incumbent starting.

- 003009 RESOLVED** to appoint the Assistant Clerk as Temporary Proper Officer with clearly limited duties from 1 August.
This arrangement would be reviewed prior to the September Council meeting and considered there.

It was noted that during the staff transition WPC will not have the capacity to undertake its normal workload. It will also be necessary to close the office when the Assistant Clerk is on annual leave.

- 003010 RESOLVED** to approve public communications to manage resident expectations during staff changes.

Council received a list of matters for Staff Committee to consider (as they will become the line manager of all staff members during the interim), and of tasks that would be pending for the new Clerk when they come into post.

15. BUILDING MATTERS

A confidential paper had been circulated prior to the meeting. A Confidential File Note contains further information for future reference.

003011 RESOLVED to proceed as outlined in the confidential file note.

16. INVITE THE PUBLIC TO RETURN TO THE MEETING IF THEY WERE EXCLUDED FOR THE PREVIOUS ITEMS

003012 RESOLVED to invite press and public to return.

17. AGREE PUBLIC WORKS LOAN APPLICATION

17.1 Resolve application to PWLB

003013 RESOLVED unanimously to seek the approval of the Secretary of State for Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to apply for a Public Works Loan Board loan of £240,000 over the borrowing term of 50 years for the purchase of the freehold of Groombridge Old Station, Station Road, Groombridge TN3 9RD. The annual repayments will come to around £15,446.24; Council recognises interest rates can change. It is not intended to increase the Council Tax Precept for the purposes of the loan repayments.

17.2 Delegate to RFO to compile and submit application

003014 RESOLVED that the RFO write and submit the PWLB application in August 2025.

18. CLERK'S REPORT

The office would close on 10th July due to a combination of annual leave and off-site training.

The Clerk confirmed that this had been their last Council meeting as Clerk and thanked the Chair and Councillors for all their support. Councillors thanked the Clerk for all their work.

19. REPORTS FROM MEETINGS AND TRAINING ATTENDED BY COUNCILLORS

Cllr Gordon-James had attended training 'Effective Meetings' which had been a good session. Cllr Lawne had attended a Planning update and had circulated notes to the Planning Committee. Councillors are encouraged to attend training.

20. MATTERS OF URGENT IMPORTANCE FOR NOTING OR INCLUSION ON FUTURE AGENDA:- Review arrangement for Proper Officer at September Council meeting

21. DATE OF NEXT MEETING - Monday 8th September 2025 at Groombridge Old Station at 7pm unless otherwise notified by the agenda
The meeting ended at 8.40pm.