

Minutes of the Ennerdale and Kinniside March 2025 Election Campaign Hustings

Date: Thursday 27th of February 2025

Time: 19:30 – 22:00

Location: The Gather, Ennerdale Bridge, Cleator, CA23 3AR

Chairperson: Mark Denham-Smith & Linda Denham-Smith

Attendees: 50 Parishioners Apologies – 19 Parishioners

List of Candidates

- Mrs Alexandra Young
- Mr Michael Cullen
- Ms Jasmine Hine
- Mr Paul Rowson

1. Welcome & Purpose of Meeting

The meeting was opened by Mrs A. Young who welcomed attendees and outlined the purpose of the hustings: to provide an opportunity for candidates to present their views and engage with the community. Mrs Young introduced the Chair Persons for the evening

2. Chairperson's Introduction & Arrangements

The Chairperson introduced the format of the event, explaining the rules of engagement, time limits for candidate statements, and the process for community questions. Agenda Items 'Community Topics' and 'Question Responses' on the printed agenda were switched for the candidates to respond to community questions first, then open the floor for any members of the community to speak openly on any pertinent topics.

3. Context – Why are we here?

Nancy & Paul Rowson

The reason for the election is the disqualification of two councillors, Nancy and the speaker, due to non-attendance at meetings for six months. The facts are as follows:

- The Parish Council meets bi-monthly.
- Both councillors missed the July 2024 meeting due to Covid-19. They informed the Clerk and Vice Chair in advance.
- The September meeting was cancelled at short notice, and Nancy objected to this, but received no response. The November meeting was also cancelled and rescheduled for early December.
- The first meeting they could attend was on 21st November, the last day of the six-month period, at Gosforth Village Hall, organised by LDPA. In late November, the Clerk notified them of their disqualification, citing failure to attend meetings, this was the first they had heard of the issue.
- The Clerk is responsible for ensuring such issues don't arise. The Council has stated their absence due to Covid was not an approved absence, and the meeting they attended does not count. The Council claims the disqualification was automatic, but this is not the case.
- The decision to declare seats vacant is theirs. Concerns were raised about the fairness of the Council's actions, advice from Cumberland's senior legal officer was to seek independent legal advice, this has not been provided by the clerk.
- It was noted that the Clerk attended Cockermouth Town Council meetings in September and November, despite being involved in the cancellation of Parish Council meetings the following day.
- The Carlisle Monitoring Officer is investigating two separate Code of Conduct complaints against the Chair, including one involving allegations of bullying and misuse of position for personal gain in a planning application.
- The speaker and Nancy submitted witness statements supporting a parishioner's complaint about the Chair's conduct. These statements were submitted in August, four weeks before the first meeting cancellation.

These are the facts regarding the disqualification. The community is encouraged to draw their own conclusions.

Joan & Richard Taylor

Joan Taylor

In 2020, Natural England requested a bridge over the River Ehen to protect freshwater mussels, for which my husband and I funded the project upfront with plans to reclaim the cost upon completion. During the project, the Parish Clerk informed them of complaints but

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provided no evidence or opportunity for the Taylors to defend themselves. Joan's husband was reported to the police under the Localism Act, though no findings were made. The complaints were forwarded to external agencies by the clerk without council approval or knowledge of the Taylors.

A subsequent Freedom of Information request revealed that the clerk had allegedly received a phone call accusing the Taylors of fraud using substandard contractors, using dodgy invoices and harming the mussels—allegations which were untrue. The letter was sent to several agencies, including DEFRA's Rural Payments Agency fraud department, leading to a lengthy investigation. This caused significant financial and reputational damage to the Taylors' business, with recovery only possible through intervention by MP Trudy Harrison. Other council members and the Taylors were not told the detail of this phone call.

The clerk's actions were not authorised by the council and violated both data protection laws and the council's complaints policy. Despite this, the council failed to acknowledge their wrongdoing or engage in resolution. The clerk, supported by the Chair and Vice Chair, received overtime pay for defending her actions, which should have led to disciplinary measures. The Taylors have faced ongoing abuse and reputational harm due to the council's stance. They have reported the issue to the police, and legal proceedings are ongoing.

Key issues: lack of transparency, unlawful actions by the clerk, reputational damage, failure of the council to address concerns, and ongoing legal action.

Richard Taylor

Over the past four years, I have witnessed significant issues within the Parish Council, many of which stem from the actions of the Clerk. In 2021, I worked to secure the village's common land and timber as a valuable asset for the Parish, confirming the ownership of 12.5 acres. However, the Clerk took control of this process without authority, undermining my work and falsely accusing me of bullying when I objected. She then signed a contract with Forestry England to remove the timber without the Council's knowledge or approval, resulting in a loss of £50k-£100k in potential funding for the Parish. Attempts to challenge this were met with defamatory letters, falsified minutes, and ignored investigations, all of which were swept under the rug by the Council.

In 2023, an anonymous defamatory letter was sent to prevent Daniel and me from being re-elected. It was revealed that former councillor Kevin Park, with advice from Steven Parker, had written the letter. Despite evidence proving the letter's falsehood, the Clerk and the Council did nothing to address the issue. I believe the ongoing efforts to remove Nancy and Paul from the Council are partly due to their support for me and my concerns.

These events highlight a pattern of mismanagement, misconduct, and a lack of accountability that must be addressed. I am committed to pushing for change within the Council to ensure better oversight and transparency moving forward.

The clerk did things which were unauthorised, knew what she was doing and without authority on the council – council have mismanaged their staff and have not been a good employer.

4. Candidate Statements - Each candidate was invited to present their statement. A brief summary of their key messages is provided below:

Michael Cullen

I've been involved with the village and the parish since I was 16, starting at the Fox and Hounds, and moving here at 18 with the support of my wonderful sister. Over the past 7 years, my relationship with many of you has grown, and working in the pub has helped me get to know even more of the community. I'm running for council for a few key reasons.

First, I recently discovered that our parish clerk is also working full-time for Cockermouth Town Council, which I believe is a breach of her contract. This has led to several cancelled meetings as she prioritises Cockermouth, and there has been no effort to find a new clerk. I believe we need to address this issue and find solutions to ensure proper representation for our community.

Communication has been a major problem, with a lack of connection between the council and parishioners. As a younger member of the community, I believe I can bring new perspectives, ensuring that the youth of today have a voice in decisions that will affect our future. There's also a lack of initiatives for young people in the village, and we need to work on creating spaces and activities to attract young families and retain the next generation.

The property ladder is another significant issue. Affordable housing options for young people are limited, and we need small-scale developments to ensure the younger generation can remain in the parish and contribute to its growth. Lastly, I want to improve transparency and trust within the council. It's time for less secrecy and more openness. If elected, I'll bring new ideas, ensure better communication, and fight for the interests of all ages in the community.

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Thank you for your consideration. Let's work together to make this parish a better place for everyone, now and in the future.

Jasmine Hine

Jasmine, co-owner of The Fox and Hounds, is standing for election to the Ennerdale Parish Council to restore trust, reliability, and a positive community spirit. Having lived and worked in the parish for over a decade, she believes her organisational skills and business acumen would benefit the council.

She expresses concerns over the current state of the parish council, particularly regarding transparency, accountability, and financial management. She questions the clerk's salary increases and expense claims, arguing that salaried workers should not receive separate holiday pay. She also highlights a lack of clear budgeting and up-to-date financial records, raising concerns about the 2025-2026 precept.

Jasmine criticises the handling of council matters, including the cancellation of a meeting on 30th December 2024, and the perceived lack of responsiveness from the clerk. She advocates for a more open and inclusive council where residents can freely discuss issues without fear of being ignored.

Her primary goal is to rebuild trust, transparency, and integrity within the council, ensuring that all parishioners feel represented and heard.

Alex Young

Alex has lived in the village for over 20 years, she shared her deep-rooted connection to Ennerdale and her professional background as a secondary school teacher working with children with special education needs and behaviour needs. She highlighted her family's commitment to the village and her involvement in community events, emphasizing a desire to bring positive change to the parish council. Concerned residents approached her with frustrations about the council's lack of transparency, engagement, and accountability, prompting her to take action. She stressed the need for a more open, community-focused council that listens to and represents all residents, including those from surrounding areas who come to Ennerdale.

A group of over 40 people met informally where they voiced their concerns they included restrictions on public participation, the suppression of critical voices, and a culture of decision-making without full council involvement. Many parishioners feel the council operates defensively, discouraging open dialogue by shutting down discussions, labelling concerns as vexatious, stop you from speaking and delete social media comments. There are fears that important complaints are not reaching all council members, leading to a lack of transparency and a loss of trust. Alex discussed that council members should actively engage with the community, listen to concerns in a fair and open manner, and restore decision-making processes that reflect the public's voice.

Alex committed to restoring integrity, transparency, and accessibility within the council, advocating for regular community engagement events and an open-door approach. She emphasised the need for practical improvements in planning, environmental services, and local projects that directly impact daily life. By fostering trust, encouraging cooperation, and addressing local issues collaboratively, she believes the council can better serve all residents. She called on the community to support her candidacy, ensuring the council returns back to the old way a council that listens, represents, and actively works for the people of Ennerdale and surrounding areas.

Paul Rowson

I have serious concerns about the workings of our parish council. I believe the style is far too defensive, secretive and is becoming confrontational. This has been clearly demonstrated in the council meetings over the past year. The spiralling administration costs are I believe a result of this style. If you decide to be confrontational with members of the parish don't be surprised if they reciprocate. We need far more transparency and less secrecy in the council operates and the decision making. I am pleased that the parishioners have demanded an election rather than co-option. This has enabled three impressive young people to put their names forward. I was one of the first to put my name forward and am happy to serve my community. But I also believe we need to be looking to the future and perhaps it is time to pass the baton on to that future and not pick the easy option and stay with the status quo.

7. Closing Statements

At the conclusion of the hustings, no formal closing statements were given by the candidates. Instead, they chose to remain engaged in the ongoing discussions, demonstrating their commitment to the debate and continued involvement with the community throughout the event

Meeting Close

The Chairperson thanked all attendees and candidates for their participation and formally closed the meeting at 9:45PM.

Appendix – 5 Questions and Responses, 6 Community Topics, – can be seen on Facebook page, in the Fox and Hounds and The Gather.

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5. Question Responses

A Q&A session followed, where candidates responded to community questions. The questions recorded in these minutes were submitted by members of the public and are documented in their original wording as written. Below is a summary of key topics, and candidate responses:

Number of Candidate

- Is it not better just to choose 2 candidates rather than dilute the vote
 - There are six candidates in total, and selecting two still leaves four in the running. Each candidate has made their points throughout the meeting, and the choice is down to the electorate.
1. With 4 candidates in this group are you risking splitting the vote and losing to the other 2 candidate/I would like to see 2 of these 4 candidates elected, but I am concerned about the votes being split. How should we try to ensure 2 of the candidates here get elected?
 - While there may be concerns about vote splitting, we are confident that our shared commitment to the community will benefit all. We stand firm in our values and are dedicated to representing Ennerdale and Kinniside with integrity and transparency

It is a great pity that there are only 2 vacant seats, we have some very good candidates - This was taken as a statement from the community to compliment the candidates.

2. Have the other 2 candidates been invited? Muir and Chris.
 - All candidates were invited to attend the meeting, In addition, leaflets and flyers were distributed throughout the village, and information was posted on social media to engage with the public. This effort was aimed at ensuring that all candidates had the opportunity to connect with the community and promote their platforms. Apologies if not all areas were reached; the effort was restricted by the timeline required for distribution.
3. How many candidates are standing in total?
 - 6 candidates are standing for election

Instigating Change of the existing council

1. Why will the council be better with two candidates from this group instead of other candidates Muir and Chris?
 - **Michael** stated that it is time for a change and that the village and parish should pass leadership on to younger individuals to bring fresh perspectives.
 - **Paul** emphasised the need for a shift in leadership style, moving away from a "command and control" approach. He clarified that this does not mean a military-style structure but rather an evolution in leadership to reflect modern times.
 - **Alex** referred to her professional experience and contributions made whilst employed, highlighting relevant skills she could bring to the role.
2. How will you change what the council do – you are only two of a council of 8 member/ Will the new councillors be able to work effectively with the existing members?
 - **Alex** If elected we would appear to be outnumbered and it could be a slow start, but emphasised working together would be key, engaging with the community, and ensuring transparency and openness.
 - **Michael** Committed to ending 'secret meetings' and making the council an "open book," ensuring honesty while respecting confidentiality where necessary.
 - **Paul** - The council's style is dictated by dominant individuals, with some unwilling to challenge this. Believes change can happen by putting pressure on councillors and reminding them they were elected to represent the community, not to operate in secrecy
3. Is it true the council hold secret meetings
 - Reports of the parish council holding secret meetings have circulated around the village, where council business is being conducted privately, away from public. This raises concerns about the lack of openness and transparency in the decision-making process. It is troubling to think that debates and important discussions are being withheld from the public, preventing us from having a clear understanding of how decisions are being made that affect our community.
4. There is concern and confusion within the community regarding how this staff member was allowed to join the team. Many are questioning the reasons for their presence, and some individuals are expressing strong dissatisfaction
 - Staff member was employed officially through interview process and unanimous vote of the standing parish councillors at the time.

Instigating Change

1. What are the three most important issues in the village you will address

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- **Alex:** 1) Roads, particularly flooding issues, 2) Footpaths, and 3) Car parking.
 - **Jasmine:** 1) Car parking, 2) Dog fouling, and 3) Rebuilding community spirit.
 - **Michael:** 1) Road safety outside The Gather due to repeated crashes, 2) Poor parking by Cumberland Council vehicles despite their role in setting standards, and 3) Restoring trust, transparency, and integrity in the village.
 - **Paul:** 1) Parking issues along the main road, 2) Flood risk to properties, particularly concerning United Utilities' (UU) proposed changes to the weir. He raises concerns that if UU mismanage the weir, more properties could face flooding. He notes that during Storm Desmond, flooding was avoided partly because the lake was low at the time, decoupling rainfall from the storm impact downriver. If the weir is removed, the lake could exacerbate flooding problems rather than prevent them.
2. Current Parish Council is very much lead by the Wild Ennerdale's aspirations to commercialise the valley/ this group does nothing for the parish and just do what they want. Will you be prepared to challenge them or let them do what they want?
- **Alex** Wild Ennerdale has a place in the discussion, it remains a controversial issue with divided opinions in the parish. There is an emphasis to listen to and support all sides while ensuring the interests of the parish are prioritised.
 - **Michael** The people of the parish should come first, ensuring their voices and concerns take precedence in decision-making

Finances

1. The council say they have reduced the precept yet you are concerned about costs – Why is that?
- **(Jasmine/Alex)** There has been no open discussion or evidence provided by the council to show how they have made any saving by reducing the precept. The reconciliation demonstrated transactions up to the 16th July 2024, and the public were excluded and requested to leave the room during the discussions on the budget, no minutes have been released and until this can be shown there is still a concern. The statement that the precept has reduced, but the budget shows an increase in the spend for the next year. A link to the budget set this year by the current parish council can be shared on Facebook.

Addressing History

1. It sounds like quite a lot of bad 'negative things have gone on, how will these be addressed moving forward
- There have been troubles like getting meetings organised, and while it will be a struggle, efforts will be made to make a change.
2. Once held to account how will the whole story be made public
- Anything discussed this evening has been based on fact and can be evidenced. All will be documented within the minutes and shared with the public,
3. Where 2 parish council meetings postponed or cancelled? If postponed, when were they held? Was postponement/cancellation due to the clerk's inability
- The cancellation of two parish council meetings went without explanation. These meetings were not postponed or rearranged. It was discussed that the clerk is also employed by Cockermouth Town Council, and this employer has stated that town council takes priority over any other employment. No official reason has been given for the cancellations, but it is a fact that the town council meetings are held the day before the parish council meetings.
4. I saw a Facebook post from the Chairman saying that the disqualification was automatic and legal is that correct?
- PR response: As an individual, I believe that while the six-month rule is a legal requirement, public law allows for fairness and reasonableness in these circumstances. The current parish council has been toxic and failed to accommodate the councillors, with only a few villagers being involved. Though I'm not a lawyer, I feel the situation deserves a fair and balanced approach, as public law supports these principles.
5. Should the clerk not have alerted Councillors Paul and Nancy Rowson that they may be disqualified?
- The first notification given was that we were disqualified, the Clerk should have notified us prior to this happening. This is a failure in communication and duty of care. It would be reasonable to expect that councillors are made aware of such risks in advance, so they have an opportunity to rectify the situation or seek advice on how to avoid the penalty.
6. The clerk also attended the meeting which did not qualify as a parish council meeting, was she paid?
- Response: The Clerk attended a meeting which the Parish Council did not recognise as a qualifying meeting with the Lake District National Park, alongside fellow councillors. Had it been accepted; it could have prevented the unnecessary disqualification of two councillors. It is not known whether the Clerk was paid for this attendance but is a question that can be posed to the Parish Council to clarify.
7. Is it just the council that can fire the clerk?
- The Clerk is an employee of the Parish Council, and the Parish Council are their employer. An employer can only address termination of an employee because they hold the authority and responsibility for managing the workforce.

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6. Community Topics

During the hustings, several important issues were raised regarding the current functioning of the parish council and its impact on the community

Number of seats on the Parish Council

The question raised during the hustings asked why the number of seats on the current council is limited to 8 and why an increase is not being considered. It was explained that this matter had been reviewed before the 2023 elections. The discussions surrounding this issue were acknowledged to be complex, as increasing the number of seats would involve a detailed review of the council's structure, responsibilities, and potential impacts on local governance. It was emphasised that while the idea has been considered, the process remains complicated and requires careful assessment.

Emergency Plan

The first major concern was the absence of an emergency plan for the village, which is not in place despite being in the budget for the past three years. This plan is now outdated, and there is an urgent need for its update and proper implementation.

Ownership of Common land

Parish landownership was discussed, with suggestions for securing a grant to plant trees. This initiative could provide both environmental benefits and potential income for the community. The proposal was well received, emphasizing the importance of community involvement and collaboration.

Support to Local Charities

A significant point raised was the lack of support from the current parish council for local initiatives, including the refusal of a grant for an outdoor education charity despite repeated requests. It was believed this decision was turned down by the current council due to the charity's relationship with previous councillors. The new council's toxic environment has obstructed progress and stifled collaboration. It was emphasized that a change in leadership is needed,

Candidates offering their willingness to work collaboratively and restore trust in the council if elected, with a promise to work collaboratively to implement much-needed changes, acknowledging that progress would take time but was essential for the community's future.

Confidence in the Current Parish Council

It was questioned whether the process for triggering a by-election for an MP, where 10% of constituents can initiate one, would be similar for a parish council. It was noted that a vote of no confidence can be initiated by parish councilors and supported by a petition of 10 people. However, councilors are not required to step down if they choose to remain in the office. It was suggested that presenting such a message at the AGM could be significant, emphasizing that decisions on leadership should be influenced by the parishioners rather than solely by the councilors.

Payment of the clerk at the LDNPA meeting

It was confirmed during the hustings that the Clerk attended a meeting which the Parish Council did not recognise as a qualifying meeting with the Lake District National Park, alongside fellow councilors. Had it been accepted; it could have prevented the unnecessary disqualification of two councilors. A question was raised about whether the Clerk was paid for attending this meeting and whether it should have been considered an official meeting by the Parish Council.

Representation of the Parish Council

A wide range of concerns and experiences regarding the current Parish Council were raised. However, rather than engaging with these points constructively, the Parish Council has shown resistance to addressing them. Despite being made aware of all topics discussed, the response has been dismissive, characterised by a reluctance to acknowledge complaints or accept any responsibility for issues raised. The minutes serve as an opportunity for those unable to attend to review the discussions, engage with the issues raised, and form their own opinions.

Community Led Plan

A **Community Led Plan** (CLP) needs to be developed as a matter of urgency. This plan should be **community-led, not parish council-led**, ensuring that local residents have direct input.

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Despite being on the parish council agenda for some time, no individual has taken the lead to progress it. Regular **community meetings** should be held to identify and address local issues. A properly structured CLP would help strengthen community arguments when engaging with **LDNPA, Cumberland Council, planning authorities, and highways** on local matters.

Without such a plan, there is a risk that decision-making will remain unchallenged, and accountability will be lacking. There have been two previous plans, but concerns were raised about their effectiveness. The focus now should be on ensuring **genuine community involvement** rather than divisive discussions.

Concerns Regarding Parish Council's Handling of Public Engagement and Transparency

Concerns have been raised about the parish council's handling of public engagement. When individuals have sought assistance, raised complaints, or requested information, responses have sometimes been characterised by hostility, avoidance, or neglect. Additionally, the use of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to scrutinise private correspondence with the council has been questioned, with some arguing that this practice undermines transparency and accountability. There is a call for a more supportive and responsive approach to public interaction.

7. Closing Statements

At the conclusion of the hustings, no formal closing statements were given by the candidates. Instead, they chose to remain engaged in the ongoing discussions, demonstrating their commitment to the debate and continued involvement with the community throughout the event

Meeting Close

The Chairperson thanked all attendees and candidates for their participation and formally closed the meeting at 9:45PM.
