

Cuckmere Valley Parish Council

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Minutes of the Thirty six Assembly of the Parish Meeting held at Litlington Village Hall on Tuesday 21st April 2026 at 7.00pm.

Present:

Cllr Richard Brown (Chairman of Cuckmere Valley Parish Council)
Cllr Nick Giles
Cllr Duncan Ellis
Cllr Vanessa Rowlands
Cllr Susan DeAngeli
Cllr Rod Gentry

Ms Claire Onslow (Seven Sisters Country Park Commercial and Strategy Manager)
Mr Tim Slaney (Director of Place SDNPA)
Mr Philip Ayres (Cuckmere Community Buses)
Julie O'Donnell (Parish Clerk)
20 members of the public

1. Chairman's welcome.

Cllr Brown extended a warm welcome to those present.

2. Minutes of the Thirty Fifth Assembly held on 15th April 2025.

The minutes of the Thirty Fifth Assembly held on 15th April 2025 were read, approved by all and signed by the Chairman

3. Chairman's review of activity

Cllr Brown reported on a year of effective representation involving four Full Council meetings and the Parish Assembly.

The following portfolio responsibilities were confirmed:

- Cllr Nick Giles: Deputy Chair; Highways and Planning.
- Cllr Vanessa Rowlands: Chair of South Downs National Park Authority, Litlington Village Hall (LVH).
- Cllr Duncan Ellis: Lullington Ward lead.
- Cllr Rod Gentry: West Dean Ward lead; Finance and Verges.
- Cllr Sue De'Angeli: West Dean Ward lead; Public Transport and LVH.
- Cllr Jo Thornhill: (Resigned) Rights of Way (RoW) and Sustainability.

The Chairman formally thanked Jo Thornhill following her resignation, noting her effective and imaginative contribution to the Council and her ongoing work with the village defibrillator. A vacancy now exists for the Litlington Ward.

The Cuckmere River remains the Parish's most significant challenge. Key updates included:

- Bank Repairs: Successful completion of long-awaited repairs and channel restoration at Alfriston (2024/25).

- Flood Mitigation: Winter flooding was notably less severe than in 2023/24. The WLMB successfully repaired Milton Lock.
- The Cuckmere Strategy is progressing with joint funding from ESCC, WDC, EA, and WLMB. Works at 'The Spots' are nearing completion, and the situation at Cuckmere Haven remains stable.

Councillors continue to monitor and report potholes directly to ESCC. While some repairs have occurred, the C120 remains in poor condition.

Construction of the new Exceat Bridge by Jacksons is scheduled to begin in June 2026, with completion due March 2028. The project will result in a two-lane bridge with pavements and no traffic lights. Significant disruption is expected, including a closure of the A259 for over 19 days.

Verge Management and Parking Contentious parking issues on the C120 verges during peak periods continue to cause safety concerns. CVPC has coordinated a multi-agency response (SSCP, ESCC, FE) including:

- Improved car park management and coning by SSCP.
- Verge restoration signage, bollards at the South end, and the chaining off the Gypsy Corner bell mouth.
- Parishioners are encouraged to assist in monitoring these areas.

Planning applications remained relatively low and largely non-contentious this year. All applications are reviewed by the Planning Lead and the full Council where necessary.

The Council welcomed representatives from Alfriston and Long Man Parish Councils to the Parish Assembly and look forward to working more closely to explore "Parish Clusters" to better represent rural interests.

A formal agreement has been reached to guarantee emergency access/exit for West Dean.

Congratulations were offered to Cllr Vanessa Rowlands (Chair of SDNPA) and Annie Brown (High Sheriff) for their continued work in the village.

It was noted with pride that HM King Charles visited the Seven Sisters Country Park on 26 March.

Thanks were given to the LVH Committee and St Michael's.

Upcoming events include:

Parish Walk (Beating the Bounds): Monday 25 May, departing Lullington Churchyard at 9:30 am.
Community Events: Ongoing coffee mornings, Curry Night, Summer Drinks, and Bonfire Night.

4. Presentation of Village Hall Accounts.

The charity serves the parishes of Litlington, Lullington and West Dean and is also used by external organisations on an ad hoc basis.

The Village Hall provides venues for meetings, learning, church and parish parties and events and private children's parties.

During 2025 the charity's activities continued satisfactorily. Hall bookings were higher in the year, increasing from £1,482 in 2024 to £2,352 in 2025. There was no exceptional expenditure during the year.

In December £500 was received from the Councillor Ward Fund (Wealden District Council) by way of a contribution to the cost of replacing the Wendy House in the Hall's garden, a cost that will be incurred in 2026. This amount has been carried forward as Restricted Funds.

5. Report and Election of Village Hall Committee

Caroline Giles thanked all committee members and advised that Carolyn Hoskinson had stepped down however she confirmed that everyone else is happy to be re-elected for 2025, as are the office holders.

It's been another successful year for the hall, and it is being very well used by the community and outside groups including hire as a venue for rehearsals. A special thank you to all volunteers who have worked hard on outside maintenance and ensuring the hall is kept in great condition.

6. Speaker Claire Onslow, Commercial & Strategic Manager, Seven Sisters Country Park to give an update and share the latest news from the park.

Claire Onslow provided a comprehensive update from Seven Sisters Country Park (SSCP) detailing a significant shift in strategic focus towards nature recovery. Key initiatives include an intensive monitoring programme to increase species diversity and an expanded cattle grazing project, supported by new fencing and water infrastructure. Additional ecological surveying is underway, covering wetland species, bat populations, and the results of the dew pond restoration.

Regarding visitor management, the park has ceased using images of the iconic cliffs in its advertising to mitigate the environmental impact of social media-driven "over-tourism". This decision aims to address issues such as litter, uncontrolled dogs and waste, footpath erosion, and dangerous behaviour at Birling Gap and the Seven Sisters by redirecting public interest toward the wider park and its wildlife.

Infrastructure improvements include upgraded Wi-Fi at the visitor centre, the installation of electric vehicle charging points, and repairs to address damp issues in the holiday cottages. To tackle inconsiderate parking, new bollards will be installed; this work is funded by the Country Park and will be carried out by Highways. The park also maintains a busy events calendar, including expert talks and the annual Christmas market.

Tim Slaney, Director of Place, expressed gratitude for the Parish's engagement. He noted that local expert knowledge is essential for identifying issues that regional planners might otherwise overlook and stated his commitment to continued collaboration with the Council.

7. Speaker Philip Ayres, Managing Director of Cuckmere Community Buses to provide an overview of the organisation's history and its successful operations as it enters its 50th year of service to the community.

Philip Ayres presented his presentation chronicling the history of Cuckmere Buses, formerly known as Cuckmere Community Bus, covering its journey from its inception in 1976 to its 50th-anniversary milestones in 2026. The report highlighted the organisation's successful transition from a grassroots response to commercial service cuts into a modern, award-winning community transport provider. The service's origins date back to the period between 1971 and 1976, when local W.I. branches successfully petitioned East Sussex County Council to establish a community service following the withdrawal of commercial routes on the eastern bank of the Cuckmere River. Operations officially commenced on 26 October 1976, utilising two Ford Transit buses operated entirely by volunteers.

Over the decades, the organisation has achieved significant national recognition, including a visit from The Princess Royal in 2003 and receiving the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service in 2006. Modernisation efforts saw the introduction of the first low-floor bus in 2004, and more

recently, the organisation underwent its first major branding refresh during the COVID-19 pandemic. To address local infrastructure challenges, the "Cuckmere Valley Ramblerbus" has operated summer weekend services since 1998 to reduce traffic in narrow lanes, such as those in Litlington. The organisation has also explored sustainability, such as a twelve-month trial of a bus running on Pure Plant Oil in 2007, though this was ultimately discontinued due to high fuel costs.

Despite a sharp decline in passenger numbers during the pandemic, falling from 81,500 in 2019 to 30,000 in 2020, patronage successfully returned to pre-pandemic levels by 2025 through targeted promotions and new routes. This period also saw the 2023 launch of the Sussex Art Shuttle, which links major local art venues like Charleston and the Towner Gallery. Looking toward the future, a bus featuring a special celebratory livery entered service in March 2026 to mark fifty years of operation. Furthermore, the organisation has committed to a greener future by ordering its first zero-emission bus, funded entirely by a £225,000 grant from Wealden District Council, with an additional £64,000 allocated for charging infrastructure.

8. Speaker Annie Brown, previous High Sheriff for East Sussex who will outline the functions of her role and her work with the judiciary, emergency services, and community groups in East Sussex.

Annie Brown provided a fascinating overview of the historic role of High Sheriff, explaining that the position dates to the 1300s when it was originally established to collect taxes and enforce law and order. By 1887, the powers of the office were redefined, and it is now an independent, non-political appointment. In its modern form, the High Sheriff supports the Crown, the judiciary, and various agencies involved in crime prevention and social welfare.

Throughout her tenure, Annie focused extensively on charitable work within the county, with a particular emphasis on coastal initiatives. Her work addressed critical social issues, including drug prevention, mental health support, suicide prevention, and tackling coastal deprivation. She also played a hands-on role in community food projects, collaborating with community kitchens to ensure that surplus food and meals reached those most in need.

A significant portion of her year was dedicated to supporting children's charities that provide opportunities for those from deprived areas to experience the countryside. This included residential visits for groups of up to twelve children, offering them vital new experiences. Annie also spent time working within the justice system at HMP Lewes, engaging with victim support groups and assisting with family visits. Additionally, her diverse itinerary included visits to the Kent, Surrey & Sussex Air Ambulance, various hospices, and the local police and fire services. Reflecting on her term, Annie described it as a thoroughly engaging year and expressed how much she enjoyed the immense variation the role brought to her.

9. Update on Cuckmere River & Estuary issues.

Cllr Brown reiterated the details in his initial report at the beginning of the meeting.

The Cuckmere River remains the Parish's most significant challenge. Key updates included:

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- The Cuckmere Strategy is progressing with joint funding from ESCC, WDC, EA, and WLMB. Works at 'The Spots' are nearing completion, and the situation at Cuckmere Haven remains stable.

10. Upcoming Parish Events

Parish Walk (Beating the Bounds): Monday 25 May, departing Lullington Churchyard at 9:30 am.
Community Events: Ongoing coffee mornings, Curry Night, Summer Drinks, and Bonfire Night.

11. Public Discussion

No questions were raised and Cllr Brown thanked everyone for attending a very successful meeting.