

City of Durham Parish Council

Minutes of the Business Committee meeting held via Zoom at 13:00pm on Tuesday 16th January 2024

Present: Cllr R Ormerod (in the Chair), Cllr E Ashby, Cllr V Ashfield, Cllr N Brown, Cllr D Freeman and Cllr G Holland.

Also present: Mr A Shanley (Parish Clerk), Ms Sally McEvoy (Co-operative Bank), Ms Kate Boylan and Ms Carolyn Ellison (Nationwide Building Society) and Mr Graham Soult (retail consultant).

1. Welcome and apologies

None received.

2. To receive any declarations of interest from members

None received.

3. To receive and approve as a correct record the minutes of the meeting on 21st November 2023

The minutes of the meeting held on 21st November 2023 were unanimously **agreed** as a true and accurate record of proceedings.

4. To receive any public participation comments on the following agenda items.

None received.

5. Durham Business Viewpoints – discussion with local high street bank representatives on the future of branch banking in the City.

The Chair welcomed Ms Sally McEvoy (Co-operative Bank), Ms Kate Boylan and Ms Carolyn Ellison (Nationwide Building Society) to the meeting and thanked them for attending today, in order to discuss the current branch banking situation in the City.

The Chair began by highlighting that the closure of Barclays and Virgin Money in the City had come as something of a shock and that the Committee was keen to hear from other banking service providers of their view of the situation in the City.

Kate Boylan began by confirming that Nationwide has a commitment to branch banking in Durham City within their current premises until 2026. Kate advised that Members will likely be aware that Nationwide currently closes on Tuesdays and Thursdays which is part of the Nationwide strategy at present.

Kate advised that members of staff are being trained on telephony and online services to customers. Kate highlighted that, post-pandemic, there has been a reduction of in-branch footfall and Nationwide is keen to develop itself in a way which meets all of its customers needs.

Kate advised that Nationwide recognises that face-to-face banking is equally as important on the high street and highlighted that new customers have come to Nationwide following the closure of Barclays and Virgin Money.

Carolyn advised that Nationwide is Member-owned and that the new Chief Executive Debbie is very keen on the importance of face-to-face banking on the high street. Carolyn advised that customers overwhelmingly wish to speak to an adviser in branch, particularly where they have relatively complex banking needs.

Carolyn highlighted that Nationwide is very keen to get involved in any community projects.

Sally McEvoy advised that the Co-operative shares the commitment expressed by Nationwide to its customers and presently has a lease up until May 2025 in Durham City.

Sally advised that the Co-operative is currently reviewing its strategy, including the days and times of opening, in view of the reduced footfall which all high street banks are experiencing at present.

Sally advised that Co-operative customers also want to maintain that face-to-face service, particularly given that fraud seems to be on the rise at present and is a real concern for customers. Sally highlighted that the personal, face-to-face service can offer an added level of reassurance for customers.

Sally advised that the Co-operative would be very keen to sit down with Councillors and the community on local community projects.

The Chair thanked both banks for their excellent presentations and asked what the Parish Council could do to ensure that both banks stay with us in Durham City beyond their current lease agreements.

Sally advised that this will all come down to customer needs and this can be demonstrated through footfall in-branch but also highlighted that, if there is a banking need which is currently unmet in-branch at present, the Co-operative would be keen to work with the community on how they could deliver this.

Councillor G Holland encouraged both banks to look at community accounts for smaller organisations. Councillor G Holland also identified a number of events he would like to see both banks getting involved with and supporting.

Councillor E Ashby advised that she had been a member of the Co-operative bank for many years and highlighted her concerns regarding the recent changes to the online banking website. Councillor Ashby asked how much flexibility local branches have to make decisions which best fits the local needs of customers. As an example, Councillor E Ashby highlighted that banks are closed when most people are finishing.

Sally confirmed that the Co-operative is able to have flexibility locally. Sally also advised that she would welcome any and all feedback on any aspect of all Co-operative services.

There being no further queries, the Chair thanked Sally, Carolyn and Kate for their time today. At this point, Sally, Carolyn and Kate left the meeting.

6. Report by retail consultant Graham Soult on his work in Durham City

The Chair welcomed Graham Soult to the meeting. Graham set out a presentation to Members on work carried out between November 2023 - January 2024.

Graham began by advising the Committee that he had visited Durham 8 times since the last Business Committee meeting in November. Graham advised that one of the best things he can do is being on the ground engaging with local businesses, gathering content to share and keeping an eye on what is happening.

Graham advised that he had been promoting the new 'In Bloom' Flower Shop at Prince Bishops Place. Graham welcomed this new use of space for a local independent business and highlighted that Durham presently has a very low vacancy rate for businesses.

Graham advised that he had been actively promoting other businesses following recent visits, including: Northern Stores & Deli (ex-Discovering Durham), Kingslodge Inn, The Food Pit, Coarse, 19Twenty as well as the Christmas Festival.

Graham also advised that he had been promoting the winning festive frontages in the Parish Council's competition and offered his congratulations to: St Cuthbert's Hospice, Elvet & Bailey, Tango and Seasons Gallery & Framing.

Graham also advised that he had been promoting Durham BID's Durham Independents campaign on social media as well as Durham Fringe, Durham Pointers and the opening of the new bus station on North Road.

On social media, Graham advised that following had now reached 5,187 followers combined through the @IndieDurhamCity social following (Twitter: 2,085; Facebook: 1,805; Instagram: 1,297), an increase of 68 followers since November.

Graham also advised that he had been supporting Brooklyn Pizza Slice with finding a new premises after their lease was not renewed by their current landlord.

Graham also highlighted that he has been engaging with a new national retailer who is potentially interested in a Durham City site.

Graham highlighted a number of issues in the City centre at present. In particular, Graham was aware that there is disparity in the number of units occupied by food and drink premises vs retail.

Graham highlighted that the former Card Factory is presently up to let but that the rental costs and business rates for this unit are very high indeed. At present, the agent is advertising this premises as "would suit a variety of uses... with potential for external seating."

The Chair thanked Graham for his presentation.

7. Update on the work of Durham BID

The Clerk advised that Paul Howard has submitted his apologies for this meeting, but in his absence, Paul had provided the following report which the Clerk presented to the Committee:

1. Events and Activities: The BID organised, supported and took part in a series of events and activities to engage the community and boost local businesses. These events not only contributed to the festive spirit but also provided opportunities for local businesses to showcase their products and services.

- Christmas Festival - We provided financial support for the Festival and took a stand to promote the Independents Campaign and Restaurant Week showcasing the products of a number of local shops including Robinsons, Bear Bottom and Woven.
- We provided lots of Christmas fun at The Riverwalk on Saturday 9th December with our Arctic Explorers, Christmas characters with giveaways and skating/juggling elves.
- Sunday 17th December saw a special visit from The Grinch (with the kind support of Parish Council) at Prince Bishops Place causing chaos and mayhem with his antics. Always a popular addition to delight families and make precious memories.

2. Shop Local Campaign: In alignment with the Christmas season, Durham BID launched our "Shop Local" campaign (Durham Independents) to encourage residents and visitors to support local businesses. This campaign aimed to highlight the unique offerings of Durham's retailers, promoting the economic growth of the town and fostering a sense of community. Vouchers were given out to the value of £2,500 with a phenomenal response this time. This campaign will return in the Summer 2024. For the first time, we utilised influencers in this campaign with great results.

3. Marketing and Promotion: Durham BID engaged in strategic marketing and promotional activities to increase awareness of the Christmas events and encourage participation. Our new direction with social media is working very well so far with interactions greatly increased.

We are now looking forward to the next highlights on the calendar including Chinese New Year celebrations on 10th February, Restaurant Week from 26th January to 2nd February and of course the return of Fire and Ice on 23rd and 24th February with an all-new North East landmarks theme.

The Chair thanked the Clerk for his report.

8. To consider the latest updates on the Business Committee's budget for 2024/25

Members carefully considered their priorities as a committee for 2024/25 and their respective budget arrangements. The following draft budget was **agreed** to recommend to Finance Committee on 17th January 2024:

Business Committee

Item of expenditure	Cost (£)
PRIORITY 1: Supporting Independent businesses	
Professional support for independent businesses in Durham	£10,800.00
PRIORITY 2: Increasing footfall through events	
Hosting events in Durham City (Remembrance Sunday, Christmas events, D-Day Anniversary).	£25,000.00
PRIORITY 3: Filling empty units with new retailers	
Welcome to Durham Fund (match funded through UKSPF)	£5,000.00
PRIORITY 4: Improving access to public toilets	
Production of a map and extra signage on available public toilets	£1,500.00
TOTAL PROVISION IN 2024-25 AGAINST PRIORITIES	£42,300.00

9. Date of next meetings

19th March 2024 at 1pm
21st May 2024 at 1pm

There being no further business, the Chair thanked all attendees for their attendance and contributions and closed the meeting.

Signed,

R. Ormerod

**Chair of the City of Durham Parish Council Planning and Licensing Committee
(19th March 2024)**