

City of Durham Parish Council

Minutes of the Business Committee meeting held via Zoom at 11:00am on Tuesday 19th November 2024

Present: Cllr R Ormerod (in the Chair), Cllr E Ashby, Cllr D Freeman, Cllr G Holland and Cllr S Walker.

Also present: Mr A Shanley (Parish Clerk), Paul Howard (Durham BID Manager) and Graham Soult (Parish Council retail consultant) and Cllr V Ashfield.

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 held on 27th September 2024

The minutes of the meeting held on 27th September 2024 were unanimously **agreed** as true and accurate record of proceedings.

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

None received.

5. Durham Business Viewpoints –

The Clerk advised that, whilst he was hoping that James Wilson of Durham Markets Company would be able to attend this meeting in order to provide his take on the business environment of the city, James had unfortunately sent apologies for this meeting.

The Committee expressed its desire to support the Market Traders in their work and thanked the Clerk for his ongoing engagement efforts with the Durham Markets Company.

6. Report by Graham Soult on the filling of vacant premises in the City

The Chair welcomed Graham Soult to the meeting and invited him to provide his report to the Committee.

Graham reported on several positive developments in the City. Specifically that The People's Bookshop had now moved to a larger space in Prince Bishops and appears to be doing very well.

Graham also advised that collected bookshop is expanding its floor space by 70% in Riverwalk and that Brilliant Auctions will be holding valuation days and an auction at Café at the Quarter

Graham reported that there is ongoing interest from both local and national businesses looking for premises in Durham and provided updates on some vacant units, as follows:

Graham advised that the former TGI Fridays unit in Riverwalk is being viewed by a potential new retail tenant and that he is continuing to liaise with all parties on this matter and highlighted the importance of filling this particular substantial unit.

Graham advised that he is seeking a further update on the units at 26 Marketplace and the former Carphone Warehouse on Silver Street which have been vacant for some time and advised that he would keep the Committee updated on these premises. In doing so, Graham emphasised the need to fill these vacant units and his efforts to promote Durham and match businesses with available spaces. Graham highlighted that in some cases the rent being asked for may be too high and/or the short lease term may be limiting interest.

Members discussed ways to support new businesses and fill empty units, including promoting the overnight stay economy and encouraging more bed & breakfasts/small hotels, providing professional support and advice to local businesses looking to expand or find new premises as well as potentially marketing Durham as a "book town" given the number of bookshops in the city centre.

The Chair thanked Graham for his positive report and work with the Parish Council.

7. Report on the work of Durham BID

The Chair welcomed Paul Howard from Durham BID to the meeting and thanked him for joining the Committee today.

Paul provided an update on recent and upcoming activities of the BID as follows:

Firstly, Paul advised that he was surprised to hear recently about the 34% drop in footfall reported for the indoor market, as he understood that the rest of the city has seen consistent year-over-year increases in footfall.

Paul advised that the BID's indie business campaign will be launching soon, providing £2,400 worth of vouchers to encourage shopping at local independent businesses.

Paul also advised that the Christmas light switch-on; branded "Christmas Sparkle" event is planned for the coming Sunday, with local hero Sergio Petrucci helping with the light switch-on instead of a celebrity.

Paul also advised that the popular Restaurant Week initiative will be returning at the end of January and encouraged Members to take part and enjoy this.

Paul also confirmed that the popular Fire & Ice event will go ahead in February 2025 and that it would have a music theme this year.

The Clerk took the opportunity to praise the work done by the BID and Andrea Cairns at Durham University in organising the Christmas festival, which is expected to see a record 49 coach loads of visitors come to Durham this year and continue its record as the biggest retail event in the City's calendar.

The Chair thanked Paul for his report and, on behalf of the Committee, thanked the Clerk for his efforts in events planning and management in the City.

8. Proposal to promote Durham Indoor Market as a retail space to visitors and residents

The Committee expressed its concern in relation to the recently reported 34% drop in footfall at the indoor market, as this contrasted with the overall increase in footfall across the city centre.

The Committee discussed the potential reasons for the decline, such as the loss of the popular butcher stall and the need to better promote the diverse range of independent shops and services now available in the market. The Committee **agreed** it would be beneficial to have the market manager, James Wilson, attend a future meeting to better understand the challenges and discuss potential solutions.

Councillor E Ashby presented a proposal to order 400+ reusable "Durham Indoor Market" tote bags at a cost of approximately £1,000, to be distributed to visitors during the upcoming Christmas festival and other events. The Committee welcomed this proposal and particularly felt this could be an effective way to raise awareness of the market and encourage more people to visit and shop there.

There was some discussion around the logistics of distributing the bags, with suggestions to have the market traders themselves hand them out or to coordinate with the "meet and greet" volunteers at the coach drop-off points. It was agreed that the Clerk should discuss this with the Pointers to see if they would be willing to support the Parish Council with the distribution of these tote bags.

The Committee was agreed in its desire to take proactive steps to support and promote the indoor market, though they recognised the need to better engage with the market management to fully understand the issues.

9. Proposal to establish a voluntary 'Friends of Durham Town Hall' group

The Clerk advised that he had included this item on the agenda, noting that there had been an extensive discussion at the previous meeting about the role of the Town Hall as an asset for the city, and took the opportunity to thank Councillor E Ashby for her work on this matter.

Councillor E Ashby thanked the Clerk and acknowledged that the idea of a *Friends of Durham Town Hall* group is still in a very early, embryonic stage. Councillor E Ashby and the Committee **agreed** that more discussion and planning would be needed before formally proposing the establishment of a 'Friends of Durham Town Hall' group.

The Committee recognised that the Town Hall is currently closed for repairs for at least 6 months and **agreed** that it would be better to defer this item until the new year, when the Committee could revisit the proposal with more concrete plans.

The general sentiment expressed by the Committee was that the Town Hall is an underutilised and significant asset of the City which could benefit from more community engagement, but the Committee recognised that more work was needed to develop the 'Friends' group concept before bringing it forward formally.

No formal agreement or decision was made on this item.

10. To review the business committee's strategic aims for 2025/26

The Clerk reminded Members that the Parish Council has agreed to formulate its strategy for 2025/26 ahead of the budget setting process in January 2025. As part of this, all Parish Council Committees are being asked to agree their priorities for the forthcoming financial year so that this can feed into the Parish Council's budget agreement.

For this current year, the Clerk highlighted that Members had agreed that the five overarching priorities for the Parish Council are as follows:

1. Being an ambitious voice for the city
2. Enhancing the physical and mental wellbeing of our residents and addressing inequalities in our parish
3. Upholding the Neighbourhood Plan and representing the parish on planning matters
4. Creating a positive environment for businesses and encouraging tourism to improve prosperity of parish
5. Taking action to combat the climate and ecological emergencies.

The Committee considered its own priorities for 2025/26 and **agreed** these priorities as follows:

Business Committee

Council priorities 2025/26	Business priorities 2025/26	Looking Forwards initiative(s)
1. Being an ambitious voice for the city	Engaging with local businesses, including improving the visitor economy	Theme 3: A City with a diverse and resilient economy
2. Enhancing physical and mental wellbeing of our residents and addressing inequalities in our parish	Promoting responsible and environmentally sound businesses	Theme 3: A City with a diverse and resilient economy
3. Upholding the neighbourhood plan and	Supporting new businesses and attempting to fill empty units across the City	Theme 3: A City with a diverse and resilient economy

representing the parish on planning matters.	and promoting the overnight stay economy/ businesses across the city	
4. Creating a positive environment for businesses and encouraging tourism to improve prosperity of parish	Marketing Durham as a place to visit, particularly the overnight stay sector	Theme 3: A City with a diverse and resilient economy Theme 5: A City with a modern and sustainable transport infrastructure
	Contracting professional support for local businesses in the city	Theme 3: A City with a diverse and resilient economy
	Promoting footfall in the city centre and encouraging a variety of businesses to ensure wide range of choice for visitors	Theme 3: A City with a diverse and resilient economy
5. Taking action to combat the climate and ecological emergencies.	Reducing food miles by encouraging the use of local suppliers and emerging green technologies and services	Theme 3: A City with a diverse and resilient economy Theme 6: A City with an enriched community life

11. To consider the business committee's budget for 2025/26

The Clerk reminded Members that the Parish Council is required to agree its budget and precept request for the forthcoming financial year in January 2025.

In order to assist the Council in agreeing both the budget and precept for 2025/26, the Clerk highlighted that each Committee of the Council is being asked to propose a budget against their individual identified priorities for next year.

As such, Members unanimously **agreed** the following draft budget for 2025/26:

Business Committee

Item of expenditure	Cost (£)
PRIORITY 1: Supporting Independent businesses	
Professional support for independent businesses in Durham	£3,600.00
PRIORITY 2: Increasing footfall through events	

Hosting events in Durham City (Remembrance Sunday, Christmas events, D-Day Anniversary, miscellaneous).	£30,000.00
PRIORITY 3: Tackling shoplifting and anti-social behaviour	
Funding new radios and other initiatives as part of Shopwatch	£2,000.00
PRIORITY 4: Improving shop frontages in the City	
Christmas Frontage Awards (previously under Environment Committee)	£1,500.00
TOTAL PROVISION IN 2025-26 AGAINST PRIORITIES	£37,100.00

12. Events report

The Clerk provided a report on recent and upcoming events to the Committee. The Clerk firstly provided an update on the recent Remembrance Day event, which he advised had been the best attended in many years with around 7,500 people in the city centre. The Clerk particularly thanked Councillor S Walker for representing the Parish Council at this event.

Regarding the upcoming Christmas events, the Clerk highlighted the extensive planning and coordination involved, particularly with the Christmas festival. The Clerk noted that a record 49 coach loads of visitors are expected this year. The Clerk particularly highlighted that the Parish Council is the main sponsor for the Christmas festival this year, as the BID has not provided funding, though they are contributing to the Christmas lights switch-on.

The Clerk highlighted that he had attempted to resolve a logistics issue raised at a recent BID board meeting where businesses were complaining that the added foot traffic did not benefit areas such as North Road and Silver Street in the City. The Clerk advised that he had attempted to convince DCC highways to allow the coach drop-off location to be the new bus station on North Road, however his efforts had been to no avail.

Looking forwards, the Committee also debated the Parish Council's role and the associated costs of the beacon lighting events for both VE Day and VJ Day, with some Members questioning whether the Parish Council should fully fund one of the events rather than splitting the costs.

13. Dates of future meeting(s) of this Committee:

Tuesday 21st January 2025 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's Business Committee
(21st January 2025)**