

City of Durham Parish Council

Minutes of the Business Committee meeting held via Zoom at 11:00am on Tuesday 21st January 2025

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

Also present: Mr A Shanley (Parish Clerk), Graham Sault (Parish Council retail consultant), Mr Peter Jackson (Mugwump) and Mr Benedict Douglas (member of the public).

1. Welcome and apologies

None received.

2. To receive any declarations of interest from members.

The Chair declared an interest in item 7 on the Agenda and took no part in the discussion or vote on this item.

3. To receive and approve as a correct record the minutes of the meeting held on 19th November 2024

The minutes of the meeting held on 19th November 2024 were unanimously **agreed** as a true and accurate record of proceedings, subject to the following amendments as proposed by Councillor E Ashby:

An addition to the minutes under item 7, to record that the Chair thanked the parish clerk for his support and work in promoting and supporting the BID's programme of events. The Committee **agreed** this.

The deletion of the words "later in" from the last paragraph of item 9, regarding deferring an item on the Friends of the Durham Town Hall as follows: "*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 later in the new year, when the Committee could revisit the proposal with more concrete plans*".

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

Mr Benedict Douglas advised that he was attending the meeting to discuss his proposal as part of item 5 on the Agenda.

5. Proposal by Mr Benedict Douglas on efforts to bring back the Durham City Show

The Chair welcomed Mr Benedict Douglas to the meeting and thanked him for attending today to present his proposal to the Committee.

Benedict proposed reviving the Durham City Show, which was a yearly produce show held in the Town Hall until about 30 years ago. Benedict advised that he

believes it would help build community ties and reduce loneliness by enabling residents to meet each other.

Benedict advised that he has consulted with groups like the Durham Markets Company, Durham University, and St. Margaret's allotments, and they have expressed support for the idea.

Benedict suggests holding the show on the second or third Sunday in September to avoid clashing with other local events. The proposed format would include categories for prizes like vegetables, flowers, baked goods, embroidery, children's activities, and potentially a dog show.

Benedict advised that he estimated the costs for this event to be around £2,500-£3,000 for things like venue, insurance, prizes, etc.

Benedict requested funding and help in organising the event from the Business Committee.

The Committee expressed its general support for the idea in principle, but had some concerns about the workload it would place on the Parish Clerk. Whilst a number of Committee Members expressed their willingness to help in organising this event, the Committee suggested that Benedict come back in 6 months with a more detailed plan, including a confirmed venue, list of supporting organisations, and plan for administration/volunteers.

The committee indicated they would be willing to consider providing funding for this event upon receipt of a more detailed plan ready for 2026, as the Committee felt that 2025 would be much too soon to take this on.

At this point, Benedict thanked the Committee for the time allocated to his presentation and left the meeting.

6. Durham Business Viewpoints

Mr Peter Jackson, a co-owner of the Mugwump shop in Durham City, thanked the Committee for allowing him to speak at the meeting today.

Peter set out a number of challenges currently facing daytime retail and expressed his frustration that the City appeared to be being taken over by the night time economy trade.

Peter advised that he believed passionately in the daytime retail economy of the City and wanted to ensure it has a longer-term survival in Durham but feared that the pressures on many businesses is becoming too great. Peter highlighted that there appeared to be much more financial benefit to transforming his shop into student accommodation upstairs and a wine bar or other form of food/ drink premises to the ground floor.

Peter particularly highlighted his concerns in relation to the proposed new Traffic Regulation Order as set out in Item 7 on the Agenda and advised that he primarily wished to come to speak to Committee about this today.

7. Consideration of implications of the proposed new Traffic Regulation Order for the Road User Charging Scheme (the Peninsular)

Peter provided extensive comments and concerns about the impact of the new traffic regulations in the city centre.

Peter explained that there is currently a 24/7 no loading/unloading restriction on Saddler Street, which makes it very difficult for his own and other businesses to receive deliveries and stock their shops. Peter suggested some potential solutions, like a 10mph speed limit or allowing loading/unloading in the Market Place between 4-6pm.

The Committee acknowledged Peter's valid concerns about the challenges the traffic regulations are causing for city centre businesses.

The Committee **agreed** to arrange an informal meeting with the Highways department to better understand the white list system for delivery vehicles and discuss potential amendments to better support local businesses.

The Committee recognised the need to balance the needs of businesses, residents, and pedestrians, and wanted to work collaboratively with the County Council on finding solutions.

Overall, there was agreement that more needs to be done to support the retail businesses in the city centre as they face significant challenges.

At this point, Peter thanked the Committee and left the meeting.

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

Graham provided his regular update on vacant shops and new businesses opening in the city centre to the Committee.

Graham highlighted the uncertainty relating to the future of the card factory site and said he would follow up to try to get more information on whether the card factory is closing or just undergoing renovations. The Clerk highlighted that the Planning and Licensing Committee had recently considered a planning application for a new frontage which included card factory signage.

Graham also provided updates on a number of other vacant units in the City, including:

- The former TGI Fridays site, which has gone under offer quickly after closing
- The old William Hill unit, which is being taken over by a new independent business.
- The former Golden Pearl site, which is being converted into an "Urban Chai" restaurant

Graham noted that there continues to be a lack of suitable retail space to accommodate the number of businesses interested in opening in Durham.

Graham suggested potentially looking at converting some of the excess hospitality spaces back to retail use. The Committee expressed its disappointment that the TGI Fridays site wasn't acquired by a retail operator who is keen to come to

Durham but also noted that the marketing of the site was heavily committed to a food and drink operator coming into the site.

The Committee expressed appreciation for Graham's work and his positive outlook on developments in the North Road area in particular.

The discussion highlighted the ongoing challenges of vacant premises in the city centre, but also some encouraging signs of new independent businesses opening up.

9. Report on the work of Durham BID

The Clerk advised that Paul Howard at Durham BID had sent his apologies for this meeting but provided an update in his absence.

The Clerk reported that footfall in the city centre was up 1.2% in 2024 compared to 2023, which is seen as a positive result given the national average is around 0% growth. However, footfall is still below pre-pandemic levels.

The Clerk advised that the BID's independent business campaign will return in late summer 2025 after a successful run in 2024. This promotes shopping across independent retail businesses.

The Clerk advised that the popular Restaurant Week promotion is returning at the end of January 2025, with 51 businesses signed up so far. This event continues to generate good social media engagement.

The Clerk reported that a lot of the BID's focus has been on the upcoming Fire & Ice event which will be held over the February/ March half-term. The Clerk highlighted that this event has been shortlisted for a North East Tourism Award, and the BID would appreciate the Parish Council's support in promoting the public voting.

In addition to this, the Clerk advised that Durham BID has also been involved in the preparations for the Lunar New Year celebrations, which Adam provided a separate update on.

The Clerk also highlighted the great work the BID did on the Christmas lights switch-on event in late November 2024, which had over 6,000 attendees.

The Committee expressed its support for the BID's work and the positive footfall figures, though Councillor Grenville Holland suggested looking at footfall data for other shopping areas like the Arnison Centre for comparison.

The Committee **agreed** the Parish Council should continue to support and promote the BID's initiatives, particularly the Fire & Ice event.

10. Report on Visit Britain's accessibility information initiatives

Councillor E Ashby raised the issue of Visit Britain's accessibility initiatives and particularly highlighted their detailed 10-page questionnaire to businesses which the Clerk had circulated in advance of the meeting.

Councillor E Ashby highlighted that the questionnaire focused on assessing the accessibility of individual premises and services. Councillor E Ashby noted that

whilst this is an important initiative to improve accessibility for visitors, she was concerned that the length and detail of the questionnaire may deter businesses from completing it.

Councillor E Ashby suggested that Durham BID may wish to create a more concise 1 to 2 page version of the questionnaire which could be more easily completed by local businesses.

The Chair welcomed this initiative and thanked Councillor E Ashby for bringing this to Committee. The Chair advised that he felt that this initiative aligns with the Parish Council's strategic aim around improving accessibility and inclusivity in the city centre.

The Committee **agreed** this would be a good project for Councillor E Ashby to collaborate with Durham BID on - creating a condensed, Durham-specific version of the accessibility survey that could be more effectively distributed to and completed by local businesses.

11. Events report

The Clerk provided an update on several key events the Parish Council has been involved with:

Christmas Festival

The Clerk highlighted that the festival had to be cancelled on the busiest Saturday due to high winds, despite the Clerks attempts to negotiate with the organisers to move some activities indoors to the cathedral, but this was not feasible. The Clerk reminded Members that the Parish Council had provided significant funding for this event in 2024.

The Clerk suggested that the Parish Council should have a conversation with the Cathedral about potentially hosting the festival there in the future, over two weekends, to provide better weather protection and the Committee **agreed** that this would be a sensible approach.

Lunar New Year Celebrations

The Clerk advised that, with the unexpected retirement of the previous County Council officer who led on the planning for this event, a number of partners including DSU, Visit County Durham, Durham BID, Durham Markets and the Parish Council had worked hard to ensure the Lunar New Year event still went ahead this year.

The Clerk advised that he was delighted that the Parish Council had been able to get the Durham Students' Union element of the event back on track as well as other aspects of the day's activities.

The Clerk advised that the program will mirror previous years, with activities like the lion dance, calligraphy, and a potential appearance by the Chinese ambassador.

Councillor E Ashby particularly highlighted the significant work and contribution of the Clerk to save this event this year and advised that she felt that this

VE Day Commemorations

The Clerk highlighted that the Parish Council will likely need to take a coordinating role for the VE Day event on May 8th, including lighting the beacon.

Councillor A Doig raised concerns about the increasing demands on the Parish Clerk's time for event organisation. The Committee agreed the Parish Clerk's time should be formally costed for any new event proposals, rather than assumed to be freely costed.

Councillor A Doig advised that he will be highlighting this with the Personnel Committee at the Clerk's upcoming appraisal.

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

Tuesday 18th March 2025 at 11am

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
(18th March 2025)**