

City of Durham Parish Council

Minutes of the Business Committee meeting held on 18th March 2025 at 11:00am via Zoom

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), Mr Paul Howard (Durham BID), and Mr Colin Wilkes (Durham Markets Company).

1. Welcome and apologies

The Chair welcomed all attendees and noted apologies had been received from Graham Soult.

The Chair also announced that this would be his final meeting as Chair of the Business Committee and extended his thanks to members and officers for their hard work and contributions to what he described as “the most important committee”, given its vital role in promoting the city centre economy.

2. Declarations of interest

None declared. Members were reminded to declare any interests as and when they arose during the meeting.

3. Minutes of the meeting held on 21st January 2025

The minutes of the meeting held on 21st January 2025 were agreed as a true and accurate record of proceedings.

4. Public Participation

No members of the public had registered to speak.

5. Proposed letter to Member of Parliament regarding upcoming changes to business rates relief

The Committee considered the draft letter to the Member of Parliament regarding the reduction in business rates relief for retail, hospitality, and leisure sectors from 75% to 40%. The Clerk advised that this was a significant national policy change announced in the previous Autumn Statement and would have serious financial consequences for many Durham businesses.

A table of 25 local businesses was shared with members, illustrating how steep the increases would be in some cases—sometimes running into tens of thousands of pounds. The Clerk reported that one local business owner had already indicated they may need to close due to unaffordable rates.

The Clerk confirmed that Durham BID had asked to be a co-signatory to the letter. Cllr E Ashby requested an amendment to reference the additional impact of remedial works at the Milburngate development. This was agreed.

The Committee unanimously **approved** the letter (with amendments) and **agreed** to send it jointly with Durham BID.

6. Durham Business Viewpoints

The Committee held a broad discussion on the city centre business environment. Colin Wilkes of the Durham Markets Company gave a detailed overview of current challenges and opportunities. He advised that while the Market Hall was currently full, the organisation had been forced to reduce rents to retain traders, amidst rising operational costs.

Colin agreed with previous comments from Peter Jackson (at the January meeting) that Durham's economy was increasingly skewed toward the nighttime economy, to the detriment of daytime retail. He warned that Durham was losing its identity as a hub for independent retailers, once known as the "independent jewel of the North East"

He called for stronger partnership working to promote retail and increase footfall and welcomed further collaboration with the Parish Council on events.

Committee members echoed these concerns. Cllr Ashby raised serious questions about the change of focus at the Aykley Heads development from a job-intensive site to a low-job data centre, and the missed opportunity for economic regeneration that could drive city footfall.

Cllr Freeman, Cllr Holland and others agreed on the importance of developing a cross-partner team to strategically plan footfall-generating events and retail promotion.

The Clerk and members discussed the potential impact of future events like Lumiere, with some expressing concerns over limited retail benefits from large-scale nighttime events. By contrast, smaller, more frequent daytime events were seen as having more sustained economic impact.

The Committee acknowledged the scale of the challenge and agreed to continue lobbying for policies and investment that support the daytime economy and encourage retail vibrancy in the city.

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

Although Graham Soult was unable to attend, a written report had been circulated to members.

The Clerk highlighted several key points, including:

- Ongoing uncertainty about the future of the TJ Hughes site, which is under a flexible lease.
- Interest from a Danish furniture retailer in the Prince Bishops Centre was hampered by the lack of long-term lease options.
- Several small units in the city remain empty and are not being actively marketed, especially where previous tenants (such as Barclays) continue to pay rent.

The Committee expressed concern about the marketing strategy of landlords like Riverwalk, who appear to be prioritising hospitality over retail.

The Committee also expressed its thanks to Graham for his detailed report.

8. Report on the work of Durham BID

Paul Howard (Durham BID) provided a wide-ranging report on local business activity and initiatives. He advised:

- Fire & Ice had once again been shortlisted for a North East Tourism Award.
- BID is supporting events such as Maundy Thursday, Durham Pride, and the Durham Fringe Festival.
- BID is reviving the duck race as a community event for summer 2025.
- There is a growing shortage of office space in the city, which could force some businesses, including BID itself, to move away from the centre.
- Retail crime in Durham had decreased due to strong partnership work, especially through the Shopwatch scheme.

Paul emphasised that more events were needed and called for funding to be spread across the year instead of being concentrated into single large-scale events like Lumiere.

The Committee welcomed the update and reaffirmed its support for BID's work and its focus on local business collaboration and crime reduction.

9. Terms of Reference for the Business Events Grant

The Clerk presented the proposed Terms of Reference for the new Business Events Grant fund, a £5,000 scheme to support local businesses to host their own public-facing events.

The terms mirrored the structure of the Parish Council's Small Grants Scheme but with more flexibility to allow applications throughout the year.

Cllr E Ashby proposed changing the wording from "support a transition" to "promote a transition" between the daytime and evening economy. This amendment was accepted.

The Committee **approved** the Terms of Reference (as amended) and agreed to recommend them to Full Council for adoption.

10. Events Report – to agree the 2025/26 events plan and VE Day commemorations

The Clerk presented the proposed events plan for 2025/26. He confirmed he had worked closely with external partners to prepare the list and ensure budget compatibility.

Notable events included:

- Maundy Thursday (with royal visit)
- Durham Pride
- Durham Fringe Festival
- Return of the Duck Race
- Fire & Ice (2026)
- Durham City Children's Book Festival (now led by Seven Stories)

A major discussion was held regarding plans for VE Day (8 May 2025), including the lighting of the beacon. Members raised concerns about the cost (£1,800) and the limited public benefit of the current location at Beacon Hill.

It was agreed that the Clerk would seek contributions from the Charter Trust (£450), the Freeman of Durham (£450), and potentially ex-servicemen's organisations to cover half of the cost, with the Parish Council funding the remaining £900. The Committee favoured a simplified ceremony, potentially live-streamed, without catering or large numbers of attendees.

Cllr Holland and others raised the importance of also commemorating VJ Day in August. The Committee agreed to include VJ Day in the events plan and to explore the possibility of involving the Ukrainian community.

Cllr Doig reminded members of the need to quantify the Clerk's time involved in organising events, following a recommendation from the Personnel Committee. The Clerk confirmed that a time allocation graph would be produced by July.

The Committee approved the events plan and **agreed** to submit it to Full Council for ratification.

11. Dates of future meeting(s) of this Committee

The next meeting was provisionally scheduled for Tuesday 20th May 2025 at 11am.

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

Signed,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G. Scott'.

**Chair of the Parish Council's Business Committee
(10th July 2025)**