

# **City of Durham Parish Council**

## **Minutes of the Business Committee meeting held on 10th July 2025 at 11:00am via Zoom**

**Present:** Councillor Elizabeth Scott (in the Chair), Councillor David Freeman, Councillor Victoria Ashfield, Councillor Susan Walker, Councillor Rory Handy.

**Also present:** Mr Adam Shanley (Parish Clerk), Mr Graham Soult and Mr Paul Howard (Durham BID).

### **1. Election of Chair of the Parish Council's Business Committee**

The Clerk opened the meeting by calling for nominations for the position of Chair. Councillor David Freeman proposed Councillor Elizabeth Scott and this nomination was seconded by Councillor Ashfield. With no further nominations forthcoming, the proposal was put to the Committee and was unanimously agreed. Councillor Scott accepted the nomination, thanking Members for their support and expressing her delight at taking on the role.

The Committee agreed to elect Councillor Elizabeth Scott as Chair of the Business Committee.

### **2. Election of Vice-Chair of the Parish Council's Business Committee**

The Clerk then sought nominations for Vice-Chair. Councillor David Freeman nominated Councillor Ellie Hopgood and this was seconded by Councillor Ashfield. Although Councillor Hopgood had submitted apologies for the meeting, the nomination was considered valid and Members were content to proceed. The proposal was approved unanimously, with the Clerk confirming that Councillor Walker was substituting for Councillor Hopgood at this meeting.

The Committee agreed to elect Councillor Ellie Hopgood as Vice-Chair of the Business Committee.

### **3. Welcome and apologies**

Apologies were formally recorded from Councillors Hopgood and Wilson. The Chair noted that Councillor Walker was attending in Councillor Hopgood's absence and Councillor Ashfield was attending in Councillor Wilson's absence.

The Clerk also extended his thanks to all Members for being flexible with their availability, which had enabled the meeting to take place.

### **4. Declarations of interest**

None received.

### **5. To receive and approve as a correct record the minutes of the meeting held on 18<sup>th</sup> March 2025**

The minutes of the meeting held on 18<sup>th</sup> March 2025 were unanimously agreed as a true and accurate record of proceedings.

## **6. Public participation**

No members of the public had registered to speak at the meeting.

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

Graham presented his report, which covered his work from March through to July owing to the absence of a May meeting. He began by outlining his ongoing role for the Parish Council, reminding Members that he was first engaged during the COVID pandemic to provide business support, before evolving into his current focus on acting as a “retail Cupid” by matchmaking businesses to vacant premises.

Graham highlighted the recent success of the Seven Stories “Two Tales” pop-up, which had launched in May and quickly attracted around 40 school groups in the first fortnight, demonstrating its strong draw to the city. He described how he had facilitated the link between Seven Stories and the property owners, with the project now operating independently and proving very successful.

He provided an update on Moon Jewellery, a valued independent retailer. Graham emphasised the importance of retaining Jo in the city, given her strong role in promoting independence and BID activity.

He reported on potential new entrants to the city, including a regional country clothing retailer and a small arts and crafts enterprise, both of whom were considering premises and had been provided with tours and introductions. He also described the creation of a new page on his website cataloguing both marketed and unmarketed vacant units to improve transparency.

Graham updated Members on specific sites, including the recently closed “phone gadget” shop at 17 Silver Street, which had been repossessed by the landlord. The property, spread over four floors with exceptional city views, offered significant potential beyond a simple phone shop. Other updates included the old Kemble Gallery, considered overpriced and in poor condition; the Dawson & Sanderson travel shop, vacant due to expensive sublease terms; and the former Barclays, which required major reconfiguration. He also noted that 25–26 Silver Street (formerly Vodafone and Select) was under offer to a food and drink operator, which he viewed as disappointing given the retail potential of the site.

The Committee discussed these issues in detail. The Clerk raised difficulties faced by two local creative businesses seeking space at Fowler’s Yard, who had struggled to gain a response from the County Council. He also reported upcoming discussions with Prince Bishops management on ensuring unit flexibility to accommodate both small independents and larger retailers such as Waitrose or M&S. Graham supported this approach, emphasising adaptability and confirmed he could use his contacts with major retailers at the appropriate stage.

Members raised broader issues. Councillor David Freeman referred to Morrison's proposed occupation of a North Road unit, with concerns about 24-hour alcohol sales, and queried the lack of progress at the Stack site. The Clerk confirmed delays of approximately nine months beyond the planned September 2025 opening and undertook to press the County Council for removal of unsightly scaffolding. Mr Howard (BID) added that engagement with Stack had been difficult, and the Committee discussed the possibility of lobbying through the MP's office if required.

Councillor Rory raised the issue of car parking charges, suggesting they discouraged visitors compared with out-of-town centres. Graham responded that evidence showed parking was less decisive than often believed, and that a compelling retail and hospitality offer was the most important factor. Councillor Rory also noted high rents at Riverwalk as a barrier to independents, with Graham acknowledging the continued divide between main-street landlords (who were becoming more realistic) and shopping centre operators (who maintained higher rents).

The Clerk further updated Members on the Parish Council's ongoing lobbying on business rates, noting that a response from Mary Foy MP's office was still awaited. He also highlighted interest in the old Kemble Gallery but confirmed that significant repair work was needed before any occupation could be viable. Members noted that potential funding might need to be explored for such restoration given the building's listed status.

The Chair thanked Graham for his report.

## **8. Report on the work of Durham BID**

Mr Paul Howard presented his update on the work of Durham BID. He reported that while a number of new lettings were progressing in Silver Street and Riverwalk, these were predominantly hospitality ventures, continuing the wider trend of food and drink occupying prime retail sites. He noted that the loss of the Ginstitute had been felt by independents such as Moon Jewellery.

At Riverwalk, he confirmed that almost all units were now let, with only three remaining under discussion. Estabulo had recently vacated but was close to being re-let.

He outlined BID's promotional and campaign activity. Over the past month, BID's Facebook presence alone had achieved half a million views, with growing demand from businesses for BID to create and manage content. BID's "Independents Campaign" would launch again on 9th August, issuing £2,500 in vouchers to support local traders, and would be repeated at Christmas. Restaurant Week would return on 26th September, with informal discussions about extending it into a second week due to business demand. Plans were also underway for a possible "Wine Week" immediately following.

Mr Howard confirmed that preparations for the Christmas Light Switch-On had begun. He anticipated a similar format to 2024, retaining the popular "Local Hero" theme, though the inclusion of a celebrity guest was not expected.

Members welcomed the report. Councillor Scott praised the effectiveness of the Local Hero theme, noting the strong attendance figures last year. Graham suggested that Prince Bishops management could install signage on vacant units to inform visitors about the redevelopment, avoiding the impression of decline. The Clerk undertook to raise this suggestion at his forthcoming meeting with management.

Councillor Ashfield queried BID's governance, asking what proportion of city businesses contributed and how the levy operated. Mr Howard confirmed that businesses within the defined boundary and with a rateable value over £10,000 were required to contribute, with full details available in BID's business plan online. Councillor Scott requested that Mr Howard present a short briefing on BID's structure and ballot process at the next Committee meeting to assist newer Members' understanding, which he agreed to do.

The Clerk also noted BID directors' recent approval of an additional £10,000 contribution to the City Safety Hub, which was welcomed by Members.

The Committee agreed to note the report and welcomed BID's continued partnership, particularly in promoting independent businesses and supporting city safety.

## **9. Report from the Durham University Engagement Task Force Economic Sub-group**

The Chair, as the Parish Council's representative on the Task Force, provided a report from the latest meeting. She noted that County Durham had recorded a 7% increase in visitor numbers, with 21.56 million visitors and spending rising to £1.38 billion, supporting nearly 14,000 jobs. The increase in Durham City day visitors was encouraging, though the city continued to underperform in overnight accommodation, limiting its ability to convert visitors into longer stays.

Councillor Scott reiterated that visitors continued to come primarily for the city's heritage, hospitality and events, but less so for retail. Independent retail remained the area of greatest distinctiveness for Durham and should therefore be protected and supported.

She further reported that she and the Clerk would give a presentation to the Task Force later in the year to outline the breadth of the Parish Council's work, as many partners were unaware of the extent of its involvement in city centre initiatives.

The Committee agreed to continue engagement with the Task Force and to champion the need for increased overnight accommodation and support for independent retail.

## **10. Business Events Grant Scheme**

The Clerk updated Members on the operation of the Business Events Grant Scheme, noting that the budget had been increased from £5,000 to £8,000. However, only one valid application had been received to date. Feedback suggested that the £500 limit and the two-month approval cycle were disincentives, with businesses often operating on shorter planning horizons.

Members considered proposed amendments. The Chair suggested raising the maximum award to £1,000 and delegating authority to the Clerk, Chair and Vice-Chair to approve applications between meetings. Councillor Rory suggested allowing discretion to award up to £1,500 without advertising this higher figure, to provide flexibility where needed. Councillor Ashfield and Councillor Walker supported more proactive engagement, including offering to help businesses draft applications and publicising successful bids as case studies. Councillor Walker also recommended converting the application form into a Google Form to make it easier to complete electronically.

The Clerk welcomed these suggestions and confirmed that a sample completed form would be produced to illustrate expectations for applicants.

The Committee agreed to amend the grant scheme by raising the limit to £1,000 (with discretion up to £1,500), delegating approvals to the Clerk and the Chair of the Committee, producing a more simple application form, and converting the process into a Google Form.

### **Application from St Cuthbert's Hospice**

The Committee considered an application from St Cuthbert's Hospice for £500 towards its annual remembrance event at Durham Cathedral. Councillor David Freeman raised concern that the event, whilst worthy, was not new and would go ahead regardless, and therefore may not align with the scheme's aim of stimulating new city activity. He also cautioned against creating an expectation of repeat annual funding.

Councillor Ashfield acknowledged these points but suggested approving the application to launch the scheme and demonstrate the Council's willingness to support local organisations. She emphasised the importance of clearly stating that funding was a one-off. She noted that the event did bring visitors from outside the city, particularly bereaved families from across the county.

The Chair expressed some unease about whether the event fitted the Business Committee's remit, but Members **agreed** that it would be helpful to support this first application while reinforcing the scheme's focus on new, business-related events in the future.

The Committee **agreed** to award £500 to St Cuthbert's Hospice on a one-off basis, making clear that repeat funding would not be considered.

## **11. Events Report**

The Committee considered the future events programme, with particular reference to the VJ Day anniversary. Members agreed that it was important to commemorate this occasion alongside other city events.

The Clerk noted the wider context of significant city centre redevelopment, with Milburngate, Prince Bishops and Stack all contributing to disruption and creating the impression of a city under construction. In this climate, the Committee emphasised the importance of small-scale, regular events to sustain footfall and provide continuity for businesses.

Councillor R Handy suggested that Durham City may wish to see a Folk Festival in the town and Members felt that this was an excellent idea worth exploring.

The Committee agreed to include VJ Day in the events programme and to encourage additional business-led events supported by the revised grant scheme.

## **12. Dates of future meetings**

The next meetings of the Committee were confirmed as:

16th September 2025 – 11:00am

18th November 2025 – 11:00am

20th January 2026 – 11:00am

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

Signed,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G. Scott'. The signature is written in a cursive, slightly stylized font.

**Chair of the Parish Council's Business Committee  
(16<sup>th</sup> September 2025)**