

Stone Town Council – General Purposes Committee

Minutes of the meeting held in the Council Chamber at 15 Station Road, Stone, on Tuesday 10 December 2024

PRESENT: Councillor R. Kenney in the Chair, and
Councillors: J. Battrick, J. Davies, I. Fordham, J. Hood, T. Kelt, B. Kenney, P. Leason,
J. Metters, A. Mottershead, J. Powell and R. Townsend

Officers: L. Trigg, R. Edwards and T. Williams

ABSENT: Councillors: A. Best, A. Burgess, L. Davies, K. Dawson, N. Powell and C. Thornicroft

GP25/095 Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors: A. Best, A. Burgess, L. Davies, K. Dawson and C. Thornicroft

Where a reason for absence is given, this reason was approved for the purposes of Section 85(1) of the Local Government Act 1972.

GP25/096 Declarations of Interest

None made.

GP25/097 Requests for Dispensations

None received.

GP25/098 To receive the report of the County Councillors

County Councillor Jill Hood

The Chairman invited Councillor Hood to address the Committee.

Meeting with County Highways

County Councillor Hood reported to the Committee that she had today (10 December 2024) met with Staffordshire County Council Highways officers, from various departments within the service.

The most pressing item of note was that she had some money to spend in the town and needed to identify a suitable project.

Councillor Hood invited Town Councillors to put forward ideas for highways related improvements where the work could be completed swiftly and within a defined timescale (necessary because the County elections were taking place in May 2025).

Councillor Hood informed the Committee about a complaint made by residents who had witnessed a highways team arrive to a job, sit in their truck while the engine was idling (throwing wrappers out of their window), and then disappearing.

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She said the matter was swiftly dealt with by the County Council and urged Councillors to report future instances of questionable conduct to her or the Highways Department.

Councillor Hood advised the Committee that Staffordshire County Council was proposing to install a cattle grid and tank on the Coppice as a remedy to the longstanding flooding issue that had continued to occur there. The tank was designed to capture boulders and stones carried with the flood water which could be periodically emptied. She said Staffordshire County Council had tried everything to prevent the houses from flooding.

Councillor Hood informed the Committee that the County were looking at the key points on the gyratory (the one-way system) in Stone where pedestrians were randomly crossing the road. The highways team were in collaboration with Morrisons, and she was hopeful that something positive would come from the review after the serious accident involving a pedestrian on Christchurch Way. She said this would be a capital programme with S.106 money fed into the project.

County Councillor I. Parry

Councillor Parry was not in attendance at the meeting.

GP25/099 To receive the report of Borough Councillors

The Chairman invited Borough Councillors to address the Committee.

Councillor Fordham made Councillors aware that the Borough Council, as statutory licensing authority, had at last week's Council meeting adopted the revised policies for the control of licensed establishments, taxis, pavement licenses and gambling establishments. The policies would shortly be published on the Borough Council's website and become effective from January 2025.

GP25/100 Representations from Members of the Public

None received.

GP25/101 Minutes

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the General Purposes Committee meeting held on 5 November 2024 (Minute Numbers GP25/076 – GP25/094), be approved as a correct record.

GP25/102 Minutes of Sub-Committees

- a) Environment Sub-Committee held on 5 November 2024 (Minute Numbers ENV25/019 – ENV25/026), that the draft minutes be noted.
- b) Tourism & Town Promotion Sub-Committee held on 19 November 2024 (Minute Numbers TTP25/016 – TTP25/025), that the draft minutes be noted.

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- c) Estates Sub-Committee held on 19 November 2024 (Minute Numbers EST25/009 – EST25/016), that the draft minutes be noted.

GP25/103 Budget 2025-26 to 2027-28 - Overview

The Committee considered the report of the Town Clerk* (which had been enclosed with the agenda for the meeting) commencing the process for examining the budget and precept level for the financial year 2025-26 for recommendation to the Council.

The Town Clerk advised the Committee that the figures in the report set the scene for the budget preparation. They were based on a standstill position (after looking at potential levels of inflation and fees and charges) and represented the continuation of the Council's existing activity and policies.

The Town Clerk reminded the Committee of the budget process, beginning with the Committee's consideration of the overall position of the Council followed by each of the sub-committees considering (in January 2025) the details of their own budgets and any changes they might want to make. The budget details for all sub-committees would then be brought back together at the next meeting of the General Purposes Committee for determination of the budget recommendation to the Council.

The Council would determine the budget and precept to be requested from Stafford Borough Council in February 2025.

The Chairman proposed a further recommendation (to those detailed in the report) that the Committee add £30,000 to enable a contribution to be made to the installation of an ANPR system at the top of the High Street. He said this would be a potential solution to the ongoing traffic management issues over many years. He also suggested approaching other authorities to ask for a contribution to the costs.

The Committee expressed support for the ANPR system which was suggested as the only way of taking control of traffic movements through the High Street. The safety of residents had been a big concern over several years due to motorists either not understanding or wilfully ignoring the traffic management order rules.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee notes the standstill budget position for 2025-26, 2026-27 and 2027-28 and the issues related to setting the precept, and:

- a. Authorises the reallocation of the inflation contingency, in accordance with the figures in the Town Clerk's report.
- b. Asks each sub-committee to consider its financial needs for the next three years and report back to the next meeting of the General Purposes Committee with its budget proposals.
- c. Agrees to consider its own budgets at the next meeting of this Committee.
- d. Did not give any specific instructions to sub-committees to which they would need to have regard while preparing their proposed budgets.

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- e. Agrees to consider contributing £30,000 towards the installation of an ANPR system in the High Street.

GP25/104 Liaison with Member of Parliament

The Committee considered appropriate arrangements for liaising with the Town's Member of Parliament for Stone.

The Chairman advised the Committee that he had chatted with Sir Gavin Williamson at an event in August and had pointed out to him that he had visited many of the community groups in the town but hadn't met with the Town Council, yet. Sir Gavin Williamson said he was in favour of an arrangement being made.

RESOLVED: That the Town Council formally writes to Sir Gavin Williamson CBE MP inviting him to attend a future meeting of the General Purposes Committee.

GP25/105 Heritage Centre

The Committee considered an update on Stone Heritage Centre.

The Town Clerk advised the Committee that the Heritage Centre was opening its doors on Thursday 12 December 2024 on a three-day week basis on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays.

He said the Council was calling for members of the public who held historic items of interest to come forward to register their artefacts for future display at the heritage centre. A press release had been issued inviting people to contact the Heritage Centre Manager for more information, and for guidance purposes, a list of suitable items had been published on the Town Council's Facebook page and website.

It was reported that on Friday 6 December 2024 the Cubs, Squirrels and Beavers had spent an educational evening at the Heritage Centre, and it had been lovely to see how engaged and excited the children were, when collected.

The Town Clerk advised the Committee that the period of the grant would conclude on 31 December 2024. He said the £40,000 award had been spent and visitor numbers were now in the 600s which had exceeded the 500-visitor requirement by some margin.

The Town Clerk said the Heritage Centre Manager had been interviewed on BBC Radio Stoke during morning of 10 December 2024 about the opening of the Centre and call for items.

The Heritage Centre Manager was thanked for his hard work in bringing the facility forward.

GP25/106 Government Consultation on Remote Meetings

The Committee considered a government consultation seeking views on the introduction of remote attendance and proxy voting in local authority meetings in England. Links to the full consultation and online survey had been provided with the agenda for the meeting.

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The Chairman advised the Committee that the national consultation could be supported by Councillors individually and collectively as a Town Council.

The Committee discussed the advantages and disadvantages of remote meetings and made the following key points:

- That the Committee was broadly happy to see the introduction of remote meetings but only in special and clearly defined circumstances.
- That the process should be tightly controlled to avoid regular remote attendance and consequential loss of coherence, a worrying and significant disadvantage of remote working.
- Remote meetings should be held only in exceptional circumstances (such as the Covid-19 pandemic) rather than be the norm.
- Concerns were expressed that remote meetings did not encourage prior or post meeting discussion/conversation and only worked for the Town Council during the Covid-19 pandemic because Councillors knew one another and were already used to working together. A lot of interaction, communication and team building would be lost.
- The technical means to hold remote meetings must be available.
- Attendees who are present both in person and remotely can make meetings challenging technically and make them difficult to control with examples given of experiences elsewhere that did not work well when trying to link in with people.
- The decision to hold remote meetings should not be forced upon councils who should be free to decide for themselves.
- Most Councillors were opposed to proxy voting (voting outside of the Council Chamber) for reasons relating to the importance of hearing the debate and being fully informed.

RESOLVED: That the Town Clerk in consultation with the Chairman of the General Purposes Committee summarise and submit the Committee's responses to the remote meetings survey questions in line with the discussion.

GP25/107 Town Council Payments

RESOLVED: To note the list* of Town Council payments made during the period 1 to 31 October 2024.

An apparent duplicated payment in the report was not duplicated but a cancelled payment that had appeared in the report in error.

GP25/108 Update from Working Groups:

Stone Heritage Centre Steering Group

There was no additional update from the Steering Group.

Engagement with Young People

Councillor Dawson was not available to give a report.

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GP25/109 To receive reports from Town Councillors on attendance at meetings of local organisations and outside bodies as a representative of the Town Council

Stone Area Parish Liaison Group

Councillor J. Davies advised the Committee that a date for a meeting of Stone Area Parish Liaison Group would be arranged early in the New Year now the opening of the Heritage Centre was set.

Stone ATC

Councillor J. Davies advised the Committee that a meeting of the Squadron's Civilian Welfare Committee had taken place on Monday 9 December but neither he nor the Town Mayor were able to attend. He understood the next meeting would be held on or around 7 January 2025.

Age Concern Stone & District

Councillor Davies was not aware that a meeting of Age Concern Stone & District had taken place since Councillor Thornicroft's last report.

Stafford & Stone Access Group

Councillor Kelt advised the Committee that no meeting of Stafford & Stone Access Group had taken place, but he had updated the website to incorporate agendas and minutes of meetings.

Stone Common Plot Trustees

Councillor Hood advised the Committee that a meeting of Stone Common Plot Trustees had taken place in the usual format.

Stone Community Hub Liaison Group

Councillor Hood advised the Committee that a meeting of the Community Hub Liaison Group had taken place in the Council Chamber and attendees were introduced to the new Community Hub Manager.

Councillor Hood said that a request had been made for a window in the kitchen to be replaced, and that the Hub would like permission to store some items upstairs in the mezzanine.

Councillor Hood indicated a wish to stand down from the Group.

SPCA Executive Committee

Councillor Kelt advised the Committee that a meeting of the SPCA Executive Committee had been cancelled due to the proximity of the Annual General Meeting scheduled on Monday 16 December 2024.

Stone Traders' Group Directors Meeting

Following advice received from Stone Traders Group, considered by the Tourism & Town Promotion Sub-Committee on 19 November 2024 (Minute Reference TTP25/024) there would no longer be Town Council representation at management meetings.

West Midlands Railway and other Rail Matters

Councillor Kelt advised the Committee that he had attended a meeting at the end of November and the new Stakeholder Manager from West Midlands Trains had been present. They discussed engineering work disrupting weekend and particularly Sunday travel and difficulties in sorting out the bus route replacement

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service. He said the recent bad weather had extended the need for the replacement bus service.

Councillor Kelt reported that HS2 was not yet dead and buried in that a discussion could resurrect the Birmingham to Crewe section but not as a high-speed line.

He reported that there were almost 58,000 journeys in the April to June quarter this year which was a 1.9% increase over the journeys taken in the same quarter last year (2023).

The meeting was suspended and reconvened after the Planning Consultative Committee meeting had concluded.

GP25/110 Exclusion of the Press and Public

To resolve, pursuant to the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960, that the Public and Press be excluded from the meeting whilst the next items of business are discussed on the grounds that publicity would be prejudicial to public interest by reason of the confidential nature of the debate.

RESOLVED: To exclude the Press and Public from the next items of business.

GP25/111 Confidential Minutes

RESOLVED:

That the Confidential Minutes of the General Purposes Committee meeting held on 5 November 2024, Minute Numbers GP25/076 and GP25/094 be approved.

GP25/112 Confidential Minutes Sub-Committees

- a) Estates Sub-Committee Meeting held on 19 November 2024, Minute Numbers: EST25/009, EST25/015 and EST25/016.

RESOLVED: To note the minutes.

CHAIRMAN