

DRAFT

MINUTES OF THE BLACKWOOD TOWN COUNCIL MEETING HELD ON 5TH. FEBRUARY 2024

Present: Cllr. G Edwards Etheridge (Mayor)
Cllr. R Mills (Deputy Mayor)
Cllrs. A Farina-Childs, N Dix, K Etheridge, D Davies, K Williams, C Erasmus, A Short, ,
& K Jones
Cllr C. Clark joined the meeting remotely

Also in attendance CSO Adrian Popa

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for Absence were received from Cllrs. D Box & M Gwynne

2. Declarations of Interest

Cllr. D Davies declared an Interest in the Application for Financial Assistance from Bravehearts, as they meet at the Moose Hall, and he is a member of the Moose

3. Police Report

The Mayor welcomed CSO Adrian Popa to the meeting who then tendered apologies from Inspector Oliver Petty.

The Officer gave a brief update on issues affecting the town, namely –

A.S.B. at the Bus Station, including graffiti, youths accessing the roof, e scooters being ridden through and around the concourse, general disturbance and a recent assault. He thanked members for their assistance in getting the access to the roof repaired and for the cleansing of the graffiti. He noted there appeared to be new unknown groups congregating at the site, and that at a recent meeting a part time security guard being employed had been discussed, but as always funding was an issue.

Beggars on the High Street have been moved on, and it is acknowledged these are not genuine homeless individuals.

He also reported the ongoing riding of dirt bikes in and around town, but that officers had limited powers to follow and apprehend, given the unfortunate outcome of such actions in Cardiff last year.

When asked by members he reported he saw no real improvement in illegal parking, especially on pavements in town, but hoped the planned bollards might assist the situation.

Adrian reported this would be his last attendance as he had a new post in the Response Unit.

Members congratulated him, and thanked him for his tireless work and service in tackling A.S.B. and general crimes in Blackwood and neighbouring communities, and it was agreed the Clerk write to Inspector Petty highlighting Town Council's appreciation of Adrian's work in his time as CSO.

4. County Borough Report

The County members gave a brief update on current issues, namely –

Installation of bollards in the High Street to prevent illegal parking

A meeting with Borough Officers regarding the ongoing drainage problems at Cwmgelli, when it was acknowledged the developers had breached planning conditions on a number of occasions and that C.C.B.C. had taken no action. An agreement has been reached for the culvert to be renewed, and with an increased diameter which should help alleviate the problems. There is a possibility that residents could now bring a prosecution against the Council.

After the recent storms there has been a significant erosion of river flooding defences near Blackwood R.F.C. and discussions regarding liability for same are currently ongoing.

Nothing further to report on the Skate Park at the Showfield

Information that the Pobl flats on the Old Red Lion Site adjacent to the Blackwood Miners Institute should now be occupied during March.

Consultation Events held on the Proposed Development on Somerfield Site car park - both events attended by 15/20 people. The likely timescale is that formal planning application will be made during February/ March with 28 days consultation for objections, with the Planning Committee likely to meet during June/July.

It does appear the developers have listened to concerns raised with balconies on properties to the rear of the site now removed.

During general discussion on this issue, all members were mindful that the company had appeared to be very accommodating to suggestions voiced, but at the end of the day objections could only be made on strict planning matters

5. Mayoral Announcements

The Mayor reported he had attended the 10th Anniversary Celebrations of the Oasis Centre, where a much used Foodbank had been established for several years.

He also reported that he and the Clerk had attended several meetings with representatives of Barclays Bank at the new offices, with them assessing the suitability of the premises for their continued presence in the town, with a further meeting planned later this week. It is hoped a decision will be made within the next week or so.

He had also had meetings with a number of contractors/ suppliers regarding possible minor alterations to doorways/ installation of kitchen and office furniture and equipment requirements

6. Correspondence

The Clerk presented his report on Items of Correspondence received since the last meeting, and all

were *noted* –

Caerphilly C.B.C. Consultation on Budget Proposals 2024/25 – closing date 13th. February – forwarded to members

Footfall figures – forwarded to members

Figures have been down significantly over the past weeks and it has been queried if the cameras/ counters have all been working 24/7 for the periods covered

Newsline - forwarded to members

Consultation on proposals to levy Council Tax Premiums on long term empty domestic properties – closing date 8th. February – forwarded to members

Blackwood Town Centre Audit Briefing Note January '24 – forwarded to members

Notification of Town Centre Stakeholders Meeting on Wednesday 13th. March 6.00 – 7.30 pm @ Talking Shop in Market Place

Bus Station – ongoing ASB with teenagers gaining access to the roof/ graffiti/ riding of bikes & electric scooters in concourse & transit area for buses

D Day Landings Celebrations – 80th. Anniversary

Enquiry from Cllr. Teresa Heron (CCBC Armed Forces Champion) as to whether community councils have anything in mind as recognition/ acknowledgement of the Landings

GAVO Invitation to Mayor to attend One Beat Event at Blackwood Rugby Club on 27th. March 10.00am – 3.00pm

One Voice Wales Training opportunities – forwarded to members

Planning Wales Invitation to Online Training Seminar – An Introduction to Strategic Development Plans being held during February - Wed. 21st. 10.30am – 1.00pm
Thurs. 22nd. 5.30 – 8.00pm
Mon. 26th. 12.30 – 3.00pm
Wed. 28th. 3.30 – 6.00pm

Forwarded to members

Audit Wales Notice of agreed Fee Levels
Transaction Audit (every 3rd. Year) £379 - £463 / £676 - £809 up to/ over £100k
Limited Audit (other 2 Years) £223 - £266 / £223 - £266 up to/ over £100k

In respect of the D day Landings Celebrations Cllr. D Davies informed the meeting that the Blackwood British Legion had discussed same, and would be making contact with local schools and other organisations to plan an event.

7. *Schedule of Payments*

The Clerk presented his report on payments made/ due for payment, and all were *unanimously agreed*

		£. P
William Parkman	First lease payment plus admin. Fee	950.00
One Voice Wales	Training Fee	38.00
John Hold	Jan. Sals & Reimbursements	1,259.94
Katherine Watkins	Jan. Fee	20.00
HMRC	Jan Tax/N.I.	341.85
Fusion	Independent Electrical Test	585.28
Einfinity	Microsoft set up (incl. VAT)	1,986.24
Caerphilly C.B.C.	Reimbursement Beach Party	4,710.03
Don Elsbury	Xmas lighting o/s 50%	2,193.24
William Parkman	Lease Payment	800.00

8. *To Confirm the Minutes of the Town Council Meeting held on 8th .January 2024*

It was *resolved* the minutes be approved as a true record

9. *Matters Arising*

The Clerk reported that Cllr. Donna Box had expressed an Interest in becoming a Governor at Blackwood Primary School, and that he had forwarded her details to Lewis John (C.C.B.C. Principal Information Officer).

However earlier today he had received a response with a request from the Chair of Governors, stating that the school now find themselves with too many governors having recently reduced the size of their governing body very recently, and asking if Town Council would consider supporting Andy Baker, an existing governor as our nominated governor instead of Cllr.D Box at this time.

Members were disappointed that having been asked to nominate a Town Council representative we are now told they have reduced the size of the governing body and for us to support an existing governor instead.

After some discussion it was agreed the Clerk write expressing our disappointment and querying why the Governing Body took the decision, and for sight of the LEA policy which allows such a decision without prior notice/ consultation with Town Council as a properly constituted member of said Governing body.

The Clerk reported that there had been no call for Election, and that a Notice had been posted on our Web page and Notice Board seeking Expressions of Interest in being Co-opted onto Town Council. Unfortunately only one expression was received by the closing date and that was from County Cllr. Pat Cook, who had resigned her position on Town Council citing lack of time due to C.C.B.C. Committee responsibilities. She now believes that with lesser responsibilities she can again devote the necessary time to Town Council business.

After some discussion it was **agreed** that given her past service to Town Council she be co-opted and invited along to the March meeting to complete the formalities.

Cllr. A Farina-Childs queried why the Pride Event had not been included on the Programme of Events for Blackwood identified and reported by C.C.B.C.

The Mayor responded by saying that having provisionally agreed a date for the Event in Blackwood, the Borough have now backtracked and instead of the Event moving around the Borough over the next few years as initially planned will now be held in Caerphilly each year.

10. To Receive the Minutes of the Policy & Finance Committee Meetings held on 22nd. & 29th. January 2024 *

The Clerk presented the Minutes and it was **resolved** these were received.

The Clerk highlighted that most of the likely issues are on the Agenda for further discussion

11. To consider the following Recommendations from Policy & Finance Committee –

(a) Applications for Financial Assistance *

Cllr. D Davies declared an interest in respect of Bravehearts, who meet at the Moose Hall and he is a member of the local Moose

Cllr. A Farina- Childs declared an interest in respect of Blackwood Litter Group, being an active member of the Group.

Neither member took part in any discussion or decision making on the respective grants.

The Clerk presented the recommendations from Policy & Finance Committee that the following grants be awarded -

Bravehearts	£100.00
Blackwood Litter Community Action Group	£164.81
Kids Cancer Charity	£250.00

It was **agreed the recommendations be accepted** and the identified grants made to the organisations

The Clerk then reminded members of a decision taken earlier in the financial year that an initial grant of £250 be made to HOPE and to consider an additional £250 once proof of expenditure had been received. Receipts have now been received and members should consider making an additional grant as per the decision.

It was **unanimously agreed** the additional grant of £250 to HOPE be made

(b) Budget Monitoring Report - Period 9 to 31st. December 2023*

The Clerk presented his Monitoring Report which indicated that after making provision for office lease payments and purchase & installation of Flag poles at the War Memorial, it is anticipated approximately £15,085 will be required from reserves to balance the accounts, fairly much as originally identified.

After a brief discussion it was **agreed the report be accepted**.

**(c) Budget Requirements 2024/2025/ Precept Setting /Medium Term Budget Strategy/
Reserves Position ***

The Clerk presented his budget report which identified a proposed budget for 2024/2025 & future years based on current spending patterns, plus inflationary increases on some expenditure heads, but which also reflected the Council's previous decisions to continue the provision of hanging baskets, the GAVO Volunteer Awards Evening and ongoing Events Programme and Grants to Voluntary Organisations, including Turn the Town Pink in support of the planned Breast Cancer Unit at Ysbyty Ystrad Fawr (£250), whilst also including a budget of £1,000 to support the maintenance of the Remembrance Garden and provide assistance at the Remembrance Day Service which had improved so much over the past two years and now surely better reflects and honours the memory of our town's people that gave the ultimate sacrifice.

It also included budgetary provision for the provision for a potential Civic Awards Evening in the sum of £2,000, and also £1,000 for the continued potential provision of Christmas Selection Boxes to Blackwood & Libanus Schools (in recognition of their continued support of Remembrance Services& Carol Concert)

Provision was again included 2024/25, and future years in respect of the potential Contributions to Members Expenses, and assumes some 50% of members will claim all entitlements (£156 plus additional £52).

£1,000 is included for next year in support of the Members Training Programme.

Furthermore, it will be for the Council to determine each year whether or not Special Allowances will be paid in respect of Chairs of Committees, Level of Payments to Mayor/ Deputy Mayor and whether Attendance Allowances are introduced. No provision is included at this point.

Obviously, two major additional provisions are included for next year –

Office Accommodation and the associated costs – these costs apart from the lease costs £9,600 per annum & NNDR are pretty much unknown at present and a provisional budget of £20,000 has been included for next year but may well need adjustment as and when actual costs are known.

Additional hours/ staffing to man the offices – similarly whilst no firm decision has yet been made with regard actual opening hours of the offices and, therefore, likely additional staffing requirements a provisional budget of £25,000 has been included for next year, which currently assumes 25 hours per week at SCP 18, which includes anticipated employers N.I. / pension contributions (based on a recent advertisement for Bargoed Town Council). Again adjustment may well be needed once a firm decision is made. The initial view of members was that additional hours would be required to shadow the Clerk and also to ensure the offices are adequately manned throughout the week. These hours and /or the current Clerk's hours will be reviewed and very likely reduced next year.

Given the uncertainties surrounding the running costs of the offices Policy & Finance Committee considered it prudent to include a contingency sum of £5k in the budget figures.

No provision has been included in the figures regarding any potential income streams in respect of letting of rooms at this point, given the uncertainty and adjustments will need to be made as and when available.

The Clerk pointed out that at Policy & Finance Committee it was unanimously agreed last year to recommend to Town Council the budget as presented and that the Precept for 2023/2024 remain at £20 per Band D Property, which necessitated utilising £12,830 from balances – Actual precept based on Budget would have meant an increase of £3.38.

It should come as no surprise to members, therefore, that with an approx. additional £50,000 included in the budget to cover the Office & Staffing that the Precept requirement for 2024/25 to cover all budgeted costs would need to increase by approximately an additional £ 20.00 resulting in a total of some £40.00

This would be totally unacceptable to members, especially given the level of non earmarked balances at present, and Policy & Finance Committee have, therefore, presented an option that gets us to a self balancing budget in 2/3 years time, with a proposed £7.50 increase next year, and a further £7.50 increase for the following year and utilising some £40k of available balances over that period.

Crude assumptions have been made regarding potential additional income in respect of planned developments

The Caerphilly C.B.C. 2024/25 Budget proposals, now out for consultation identify an increase of 6.9% for Council Tax resulting in a charge of £1,446.37 at Band D, an increase of £93.36 per annum (£1.80 per week)

The Clerk also presented a paper which identified that the proposed £7.50 increase on our current precept would equate to a weekly increase of 15p for those 488 households currently within Band D, whilst a further 2,606 will pay between 10p to 13p . The remaining 488 households will face weekly increases ranging from 18p (459)/ 22p (98)/25p (41) & 35p (3)

The proposed increase in the Caerphilly County Borough Precept is reported to be £1.80 per week at Band D properties

He also reported that some 612 households in the area are in receipt of Council Tax Reduction, and would therefore paying even less than currently identified.

Cllr. Dix sought clarification on the need for the additional hours, but was satisfied when explained it was necessary to plan for the future and the need to employ someone to shadow the existing Clerk whilst also ensuring sufficient hours to properly establish the new office, and accepting this would be further reviewed next year with every likelihood of reducing total hours once office usage by other organisations is known.

He also queried the possibility of utilising more reserves to negate an increase in the precept, but it was pointed out that it was already proposed to utilise £36k to lessen the increase, and to not increase at all would require an additional £22k, but this would result in the need for an approx £15 - £20 increase in precept or 2025/26

Cllr. K Williams (Chair of Policy & Finance C'ttee) informed the meeting that the Committee had deliberated long and hard on the increased precept ,and had as could be seen from the minutes met a second time, asking the Clerk to identify a number of options. The proposed increase of £7.50 was they felt the minimum that could be levied for 2024/25 without over burdening households next year bearing in mind the probability of a significantly higher increase in 2025/26.

After some further discussion, the Clerk presented the following recommendations from Policy & Finance Committee –

* that we include for an additional 25 hours staffing per week for next year, and review when staffing requirements become clearer throughout the year. This will equate to approx. £25k per annum provision being included.

Advice will be sought from One Voice Wales and /or Caerphilly C.B.C. regarding advertisement in terms of initial length of contract/ probationary period/ notice period etc. to safeguard Town Council.

This recommendation was ***agreed*** by Town Council

*that given all the uncertainties surrounding office costs etc. that we include a Contingency sum of £5k in the budget for next year, to be reviewed as and when actual costs are known.

This recommendation was *unanimously agreed* by Town Council

that the Budget for 2024/25 as presented be agreed, which identifies a £7.50 increase in precept to £27.50 which necessitates taking £36,665 from reserves to deliver a balanced budget whilst recognising the potential need for a further precept increase of £7.50 for 2025/2026 that will obviously be revised throughout the coming year.

This recommendation was *agreed* by Town Council, with 9 members in agreement and 3 members against – Cllr. A Farina-Childs requested his name be recorded as voting against

The Clerk identified that we currently hold General Reserves of £15k, based on 25% of our annual expenditure (£60k), and given that our anticipated expenditure will now be in excess of £100k Policy & Finance Committee considered it prudent to recommend to Town Council that we transfer an additional £10k from our currently non earmarked reserves to General Reserves making it £25k

This recommendation was *unanimously agreed* by Town Council

12. Arrangements for Payments of Members Contributions to Expenses

The Clerk reported that Payments (currently £156 per annum/ or pro rata towards extra household expenses plus £52 cost of office consumables) would automatically made annually each March (unless members notify the Clerk in writing they do not wish to receive same) by direct transfer to Members Bank Accounts.

Members are requested to provide their bank details – Sort Code/ Account Name & Number as soon as possible to the Clerk / Proper Officer

Cllr. K Williams reminded members that confirmation had now been received from HMRC that these allowances are tax free

13. Verbal Update on Office Accommodation

Already covered in Mayoral Report

14. Planning Applications

The Clerk presented his report on planning applications received since the last meeting. After some discussion it was *agreed* no objections be raised -

Case Ref. 24/0029/NOTAF

Location: Pencoed Fach Farm Heol Y Cefn Bedwellty Blackwood NP12 0BQ

Proposal: Erect steel portal framed building

Case Officer: Joshua Burrows 07874 641749 : burroj1@caerphilly.gov.uk

Case Ref. 24/0039/HH

Location: 2 Denbigh Close Cefn Fforest Blackwood NP12 1JH

Proposal: Demolish existing garage and single storey rear extension, erect two storey side extension and single storey rear extension with internal structural alterations including new bay window to front elevation

Case Officer: Lorna Berrow 01443 864429 : berrol@caerphilly.gov.uk

Case Ref. 24/0040/TPO

Location : 7 Coed Y Bryn Blackwood NP12 1HA

Proposal : Carry out various tree works (Tree Preservation Order 66/72/MCC)

Case Officer : Emile Braithwaite 01443 864433 : planning@caerphilly.gov.uk

15. Reports

The Clerk reported briefly on a meeting with Borough officers regarding our proposal for the installation of shutters as a potential solution in assisting with the ongoing ASB issues at the Bus Station. Whilst all in attendance agreed this was an ongoing issue that needed a solution, and that the proposal could well assist in reducing ASB, there were a few issues that needed addressing - opening and closing of shutters and alternative bus stop for evening service buses.

The Mayor had indicated that the opening of the shutters could be accommodated by an automatic timer and closure could possibly be arranged via volunteers on Town Council.

He also stated that without a dedicated stopping point being identified and provided there was no point in installing the shutters. He did also offer a suggestion as to where the new bus pull-ins could be best sited.

Borough officers had major concerns regarding the use of volunteers to close the bus station. However it was pointed out and recognised that Cllr Edwards Etheridge had been doing similar tasks for the past number of years as the Borough had appeared to abrogate their responsibility for the Bus Station. Borough officers accepted the suggestion for bus pull-ins was feasible, but could well be quite an expensive option.

After some further discussion it was agreed the officers would need to consult with colleagues regarding the proposals and proposed they cost up the proposals, whilst also trying to establish the costs of police and community wardens time spent attending problems at the site, together with associated repair/ cleansing costs over the past couple of years.

A meeting would be called to further consider the proposals over the next few weeks.

Cllr. A Farina-Childs queried progress on DBS checks for members and also whether given our new offices are very close to a defibrillator we might consider some training for members on use of same in an emergency.

The Mayor & Clerk promised progress on DBS checks in the near future, and it was agreed that once we are settled in the office , serious consideration be given to organise defibrillator training, possibly via Jacks Appeal or other providers.