

STROUD TOWN COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of COUNCIL 11th January 2021 at 7.30pm Online meeting via Zoom

Present

Cllrs Geoffrey Andrews (to item 3), Simon Arundel, John Bloxsom, Kevin Cranston (Chair), Laurie Davies (to item 14), Susan Fenton, Rob Green, Camilla Hale, Jess McQuail (to item 14), Steven Naumann, Stella Parkes, Vanessa Price (to item 14), Alan Sage, Lucas Schoemaker, Haydn Sutton and Chas Townley (to item 14).

In attendance

Helen Bojaniwska (Town Clerk), Marianne Sweet (Communications Officer), Siobhan Baillie MP, Inspector Paul Cruise and 4 members of the public.

Absent

None

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Cllr John Marjoram (personal) and from Gloucestershire County Councillor Eva Ward.

It was agreed to reorder the agenda as follows.

2. Declarations of Interest or Requests for dispensations

No interests were declared. There were no requests for dispensations.

9. Mayor's remarks

The Mayor's only engagement had been the Remembrance event in November, which had been significantly scaled down to comply with COVID-19 restrictions. The Mayor called on councillors to lead by example and follow the stricter guidelines from the first lockdown and to use their influence persuade others to do likewise.

3. Meeting with Siobhan Baillie MP

The Mayor welcomed Siobhan Baillie MP to her first Town Council meeting and congratulated her on being elected to represent the Stroud constituency and on the birth of her daughter.

Ms Baillie reiterated the need for everyone to follow the spirit of the lockdown rules, for example exercising locally. She thanked the Council for the support provided to the Stroud community during the pandemic. Much of her current casework related to COVID-19, but she was pleased to report that vaccinations were progressing well. She emphasised that people should wait to be called by their GP and that it would not be compulsory to travel to the new large vaccination hubs.

Ms Baillie identified the following areas for continuing collaboration with the Council: accessibility improvements at Stroud station, securing funding for town centre regeneration projects – she had been disappointed that the town had missed out on previous government funding schemes. She would be setting up a task force to help secure future

opportunities, e.g. “levelling up” funding, rail infrastructure grants, and opportunities to support jobs and COVID-19 recovery, especially in the hospitality sector. She felt Stroud had lots to offer in terms of: tourism, natural environment and skills relating to the climate emergency and nature recovery. She was particularly keen to support further investment in the Five Valleys shopping centre.

Ms Baillie then took questions from members. Cllr Townley asked about support for retrofitting homes to improve their energy efficiency and the long-term impact on mental health of people being unable to work and be active. Ms Baillie agreed that retrofitting represents a good opportunity to create new jobs to address poverty and support the environment. She agreed to investigate concerns about the affordability for many families of retrofitting homes. She further noted that SGS College and GFirst had plans to address a shortage of contractors able to install carbon reduction measures, which would potentially provide training and employment for people who have lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic.

Ms Baillie acknowledged that the mental health impact of the pandemic is a major concern, and welcomed the vaccine rollout as a shining hope. Opportunities for volunteering in the community would also be an important way of supporting people back into work.

Ms Baillie agreed with Cllr Schoemaker that cyclists on the canal towpath need to have bells on their bicycles and offered to take this issue to the next meeting of the cycling forum with a view to launching a local campaign. The Mayor noted that the Stroud Valleys Canal Company had recently issued guidance for towpath users.

Cllr Andrews left the meeting.

Cllr Hale raised a concern about permitted development rights which allow offices above shops to be converted to residential accommodation, with little regard to the quality of such conversions. Cllr Arundel also asked about the timetable for new developments to be zero carbon. Ms Baillie agreed to discuss these with Stroud District Council’s Head of Planning Strategy. It was her view that planning decisions were best made locally and she had campaigned against government proposals to impose higher housing numbers.

Cllr Bloxson raised a concern about the potential for local elections to be further delayed by COVID-19 restrictions and the implications that this would have on parish and town councils’ use of the General Power of Competence. He asked whether 100% postal voting might be approved. Ms Baillie confirmed that the government were planning for 2021 elections to go ahead, but it was unlikely that 100% postal elections would be feasible. She noted that Stroud District Council were putting in place measures to allow people to vote safely at polling stations and anticipated that by May there will have been good progress on vaccinations.

The Mayor asked if there could be plenty of notice for any changes to this and whether the rules relating to the General Power of Competence could be relaxed if polls are cancelled. He also asked Ms Baillie to investigate whether the government would consider making virtual or hybrid meetings legal for parish and town councils beyond the currently temporary legislation.

Cllr McQuail asked how Ms Baillie would be working with local councils to address local

poverty and inequality. Ms Baillie confirmed that her focus would be on education and in particular getting schools reopened. She noted that there had been a poor uptake of online learning in some areas. With regard to access to food she felt that local councils were best placed to identify families needing support, rather than central government and would like to see more funding coming to community groups to support this. She also felt that the impact on families and relationship warranted greater support, as the pressures arising from the pandemic were leading to more family breakups and crises. Finally, she noted that the “levelling up” agenda did not just relate to imbalances between the north and south of the country, as there are pockets of deprivation in many places, including Stroud.

4. Election of Deputy Mayor

Following the resignation of Cllr Poulton, Cllr Hale was **elected** as Deputy Mayor.

5. Vacancy on the Finance and Policy Committee

It was noted that following her election as Deputy Mayor Cllr Hale would automatically join the Finance and Policy Committee.

8. Minutes of meeting of 2nd November 2020

The minutes of the council meeting on 2nd November 2020 were **approved** by the members present and will be signed as a correct record by the Chair at the next possible opportunity.

10. Questions from members of the public

Stroud Neighbourhood Policing Inspector Paul Cruise was invited to report on local policing with regard to COVID-19 restrictions. Inspector Cruise explained that the Gloucestershire Police approach had been to: engage, explain, encourage and then enforce. Protests in Stroud had been a significant concern, including the event in Stratford Park in November which had required a large police operation and had led to arrests and fines for breaches of lockdown regulations. The campaign stall in the High Street had been an ongoing concern for local police, who were having to balance the need for freedom of speech against the regulations in force at the time. Now that the country had entered lockdown protests were not permitted as a reason for being away from home, so they were now able to take action and two arrests had been made over the previous the weekend.

Inspector Cruise took questions from councillors as follows. Cllr Green praised the local police response as exemplary but raised a concern that some officers were not aware of the rules regarding disability exemptions. Inspector Cruise agreed to look into this and make sure that officers know what is permitted.

In response to a concern about overcrowding in parks, Inspector Paul Cruise stated that the rules about exercise are less clear, but confirmed that officers would attend these areas and offer advice. Finally, he confirmed that the local police team would be taking a firm line on protests in Stroud.

Dr Dave Windsor, Clinical Lead, Intensive Care, Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS Trust was invited to report on the situation at Gloucester Royal Hospital. Dr Windsor reported that the hospital was under significant strain and highlighted the harm being caused by anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination protests and the spread of misinformation. He stressed how important it is that there is a significant take up of the vaccination in order to secure immunity. He called on the Council to spread the message about how vital it is that people

obey the lockdown rules to help health services. At the time of the meeting there were 200 COVID-19 cases in Gloucestershire Royal Hospital, including 20 on respiratory care and 10 to 12 in the ITU. There was capacity but staffing ratios had been reduced.

Dr Laura Hole, also from Gloucestershire Royal Hospital, raised a concern that whilst freedom of speech is important, it needed to be limited if messages are dangerous, and highlighted a lack of factchecking by the press. Dr Hole reported that the morale of hospital staff is being affected by hoaxers and COVID-19 deniers and called for people to take a compassionate approach.

The Mayor felt that people should limit their activities to support the hospital staff and asked whether the misinformation was impacting on take up of the vaccines. Dr Hole confirmed that people were being impacted by the false information and stressed the need to promote vaccination as the best way forward.

13. Misleading disinformation regarding the coronavirus vaccination programmes

Cllr Bloxsom expressed his horror at the criticism of the NHS and misinformation being circulated in the town. He called on the Council to reject the false messages, reconfirm its support for the community in Stroud and promote support for vaccination.

Cllr Bloxsom introduced a motion, seconded by Cllr McQuail, concerning disinformation regarding the coronavirus vaccination programmes. Two minor changes proposed by Cllrs Green and Fenton were accepted. It was **resolved** that:

As we move into higher tier coronavirus regulations for Stroud and Gloucestershire, we wish to formally thank everyone, especially NHS staff and other key workers, who have been working so hard to save lives, care for, and support local people in these challenging times. Stroud Town Council totally rejects the false and misleading disinformation regarding coronavirus and the coronavirus vaccination programmes being circulated in the town. We unreservedly condemn activities which have the effect of inflaming fear, and that seek to undermine public confidence in these programmes.

The Town Council resolves to continue to work with public authorities, medical professionals, other local organisations and our Stroud communities to promote wellbeing, observance of coronavirus and public health regulations and uptake of coronavirus vaccinations amongst residents of Stroud.

In response to a concern about coverage in local press the Clerk was asked to make sure fact checked links are shared. The Mayor reported that a flyer with information on sources of support was being prepared, which would be posted to every household in Stroud.

16. Project to refurbish Thanet House

The Clerk reported that a grant application had been submitted to the Public Sector Decarbonisation Fund for improvements to the carbon footprint of the building. Improvements would require listed building consent but would potentially include: installation of an air source heat pump, LED lighting, insulation and a double glazed shop front, at a total cost of £65,600. Further window replacements had also been costed but did not meet the conditions of the grant fund.

The Mayor presented a recommendation from the Finance and Policy Committee that the Council should progress improvements to Thanet House as set out in a feasibility study which had been commissioned from Childs and Sulzmann Architects. The main aims were to provide more space for staff, a better meeting space for Council meetings and improvements to the energy efficiency of the building.

Preliminary costings had been provided and the Clerk had prepared a comparison to the potential cost of relocating to a larger office building in the town.

Councillors weighed up the two options taking into account the relative costs, the location of the properties and the value of both properties as property investments.

Concerns were raised about the relocation option including: the lack of knowledge about the building structure and potential for energy efficiency improvements, uncertainty about the owner's willingness to sell or negotiate on price, the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the market for renting out surplus space, and the risk of not being able to sell Thanet House.

There was general support for progressing improvements to Thanet House, mainly because it was felt to be a less risky, less expensive option and would provide certainty for the office staff. The expressed concern about the impact of a major building project on staff capacity and it was suggested that hiring temporary staff to support the project could be considered.

It was **resolved** to progress a project to refurbish Thanet House. The Clerk was asked to present a financial report to Full Council at the next meeting on 1st March to include detailed costings and borrowing proposals.

Action: Town Clerk

17. Action plan for 2021-24

The Council **approved** an action plan but requested that each of the Committees review their sections of the plan to enable the Clerk to prioritise workload.

Action: Town Clerk

18. Budget for 2021–22

The Clerk had presented a written report detailing budget proposals recommended by the Council's Committees. The Clerk was asked whether potential savings could be made by reducing the budgets for several projects. The Clerk advised that some of these were already being funded by using earmarked reserves, so reducing expenditure would not impact on the precept. The Clerk recommended that the precept requirement could be reduced by placing an anticipated underspend of £10,000 from the Community Safety budget in an earmarked reserve for use in 2021-22 and by using £10,000 from the NDP Projects earmarked reserve to fund the Review of the NDP.

An expenditure budget of £1,120,132 was **approved** including the amendments suggested by the Clerk.

Action: Town Clerk

19. Precept for 2021–22

A precept of £744,829 was **approved**.

Action: Town Clerk

14. Grant to the Stroud Valleys Canal Company

It was **resolved** to award a grant of £5,000 to the Stroud Valleys Canal Company towards the purchase of a mud hopper, funded from the Council's Canal Fund. The Trust had recently purchased three hoppers, the first two had been named Bobbin and Shuttle and some suggestions had been put forward for the third.

Action: Town Clerk

Cllrs Davies, McQuail, Price and Townley left the meeting.

15. Acquisition of a piece of land at Fennells View

It was **resolved** to pursue the acquisition of a piece of land at Fennells View Stroud, subject to satisfactory completion of due diligence checks.

Action: Town Clerk

20. Renewal of Quality status under the Local Councils Award Scheme

It was **resolved** that the Council meets the criteria for renewal of its Quality status under the Local Councils Award Scheme.

Action: Town Clerk

21. Committee reports

The following reports, previously circulated, were received.

Consultations & Highways: 12th October, 9th November & 7th December 2020

Regeneration: 5th November 2020

Environment: 17th November 2020

Community: 23rd November 2020

Finance and Policy: 14th December 2020

22. Exclusion of press and public

It was **resolved** in view of the confidential nature of the business to be transacted, that the press and public be excluded from the meeting.

23. Employment contract

It was **resolved** to make a fixed term employment contract permanent.

Action: Town Clerk

11. Verbal reports from District and County Councillors

Cllr Sutton reported that Stroud District Council were trialling an electric waste collection lorry. He also mentioned the need to plan for adequate water supplies for new developments.

12. Clerk’s report

The Clerk’s report was noted. The Clerk additionally reported that Listed Building Consent and Planning Permission had been granted for improvements at Lansdown Hall and Bank Gardens.

6. Election to fill a vacancy on the Environment Committee

Cllr Parkes was **elected** to join the Community Committee.

7. Election to fill a vacancy on the Consultations and Highways Committee

There were no candidates to fill the vacancy.

The meeting ended at 10pm.

Chair.....

Date.....