



Councillor Frank James (Mayor)

Present (for all or part of the meeting):-

Councillors:

Beatty F E	McKeown B
Carter E L	McNaughton A R
Cooke R P	McNaughton D M
Cooper A G	Nixon A
Dodson M G	Nixon J A
Edgeller A P	Nixon L
Edgeller P C	Pardesi G P K
Fordham I D	Pearce A N
Godfrey A T A	Pert J M
Hobbs A D	Read J P
Hood J	Reid A F
James R A	Rose J T
Jones E G R	Rouxel D P
Jones P W	Sandiford A J
Kenney R	Spencer S N
Leason P A	Thorley J
Loughran A M	Winnington M J

Officers in attendance:-

T Clegg	-	Chief Executive
I Curran	-	Head of Law and Governance
W Conaghan	-	Press and Communication Manager
J Dean	-	Democratic Services Officer

C21 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 30 July 2024 were agreed as a true and correct record.

C22 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors K M Aspin, J A Barron, B M Cross and M Phillips.

C23 Announcements

The Mayor noted that the Anniversary of the Battle of Britain church service and wreath laying ceremony would take place on Sunday 15 September 2024.

It was with sadness that the Mayor announced the passing of former Alderman and Councillor David Brian Price. All present observed a minutes silence as a mark of respect.

C24 Councillor Session

- (a) Councillor F Beatty had submitted the following question in accordance with Paragraph 12.3(a) of the Council Procedure Rules:-

“Due to the failure of the Labour, Independent and Green coalition to take forward any local plan (including the previous Conservative administration plan) to a Regulation 19 stage over the last 16 months, the new government’s mandatory housing targets and ‘top-ups’ will soon be applied.

One of the consequences of this failure by the coalition to prioritise this important issue over the last 16 months is that 8,500 additional new homes in the Borough - on top of those already planned - will have to be built during the next 20 years.

Can the Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration please confirm where will the 8,500 further new homes be placed, as the new targets could be applied within months, or is he going to allow the Borough to become open season for any developer?”

Councillor A F Reid, Cabinet Member - Economic Development and Planning Portfolio responded as follows:

“First of all a couple of corrections: the Council does not operate under a coalition, and secondly the Cabinet Portfolio in question is titled Economic Development and Planning.

The new Local Plan 2020-2040 Preferred Options consultation took place in October to December 2022. This was immediately followed by significant changes proposed to the National Planning Policy Framework by a consultation in terms of planning processes and policy context with major implications for our Local Plan. The NPPF was published by the Conservative Government at that time in September 2023, alongside primary legislation of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act which was enabled in October 2023.

Meanwhile, from May 2023 the Council's administration has taken time to carefully review and consider the implications for our area of these changes, as well as continue to maintain an updated evidence base and react to the input provided to the preferred options consultation - much of which was truly excellent in terms of quality and detail. I especially appreciated the input provided by the Members opposite, some of whom argued against their own plan at some length!

When the current administration took over, it became clear that the Preferred Options document was not sufficiently advanced to progress through to adoption, as set out by the previous administrations' timescales in the published Local Development Scheme.

In any event, all Local Planning Authorities across the country are currently considering the proposed mandatory housing targets and changes in the planning system. Whatever stage received by a Local Plan, transitional arrangements are clear that sooner or later if the proposed housing targets are confirmed later this year, these will need to be provided for moving forward. Therefore, it is as a result of significant proposals from the Government. We will continue to progress the new Local Plan using available resources in the most efficient and effective way.

The country and our own communities are living through a housing crisis. We have retired people who are currently unable to remain in their community due to a lack of suitable housing, likewise young families, people who wish to rent but cannot, and all varieties of people seeking different but non-existent homes, or homes beyond their price range. I must congratulate the former administration for pursuing a policy of growth under the current plan period, but they were unable to also ensure the infrastructure kept pace with their huge house building programme, with locations such as Gnosall, Eccleshall and Stone groaning under the pressure, and communities like Marston Grange having to suffer years of delays and so-called temporary solutions. This administration is committed to ensuring new communities, which will last perhaps a hundred years, are supported from day one with the appropriate infrastructure and become places where people can not just live, but thrive.

With regards to the latest Government consultation and mandatory housing targets, the Council will be submitting a response by the 24 September 2024 deadline. It is anticipated that updated National Policy will be received by the end of the year, when an assessment of the local implications can then be considered through the planning process both for plan-making and decision-taking".

Councillor Beatty thanked the Cabinet Member for his helpful response and asked the following supplementary question:

“This Authority, under Conservative control, had an enviable reputation for house building under the controlling group’s own going for growth strategy - homes for local people, for our elderly, starters and special needs. We have exceeded all our housing targets year on year. So, in the light of this attainment, is this administration going to respond to the Labour Government’s demand for an eye-watering 119% increase in house building over and above current targets?”

Councillor Reid confirmed that the Council would respond as required following advisement from appropriate Officers.

Councillor A P Edgeller asked the following question:

“What are the Councils plans to address the shortfall in the provision of affordable housing?”

Councillor Reid noted the fluctuating supply of affordable housing and stated that this matter was more suited for consideration at the appropriate Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor J M Pert asked the following question:

“Could the Cabinet Member confirm where the said 8500 extra homes will be built and would the appropriate infrastructure be provided?”

Councillor Reid confirmed that the matter was being investigated by the appropriate Officers.

Councillor A N Pearce asked the following question:

“The Cabinet is happy to receive suggestions for future housing developments, were local residents in favour of those previously put forward?”

Councillor Reid confirmed that there had been much feedback received pertaining to the site suggested, some of it from members of the opposition front bench, which was being taken under advisement with Officers.

Councillor E G R Jones asked the following question:

“Lots of communities had approved neighbourhood plans in place, will said plans be protected under the review of providing extra houses?”

Councillor Reid reported that neighbourhood plans formed part of the associated evidence base, and confirmed that he had consulted with many Parish Councils to provide any assistance required before encouraging other Parish Councils to approach the Council for any help needed in this area.

C25 Notice(s) of Motion

- (a) A Notice of Motion pursuant to Paragraph 13.1 of the Council Procedure Rules had been proposed by Councillors S N Spencer and J T Rose as follows:-

'To formally declare that Staffordshire now faces a Roads Emergency.

The state of our borough highways is now at breaking point. Road users risk damage to their vehicles and injury to themselves travelling on our roads and it is unacceptable. It is time now for us all to hold the County Council and their contractors to account and demand that action is taken. Research by the LGA has calculated that to catch-up with the backlog of existing pothole repairs across England and Wales would need a cash injection of £12 Billion, and take 12 years to complete – by comparison with the £200 Million 'Pothole Fund' recently announced by Government. The annual local authority road maintenance survey reveals that potholes now account for around 70% of all requests reported to Local Authorities for repairs.

The Borough Council Believes:

- That we have roads in a worryingly poor state of repair across our County.
- Concern about the state of our roads is one of the top priorities and worries amongst our residents, as expressed in the feedback being received by Councillors.
- By leading the way in declaring a roads emergency, we need to place pressure on the County Council and Government to act on our residents' concerns.
- Investing in our road network is not just a benefit to motorists, cyclists, and pedestrians, but a vital component of our local infrastructure, supporting local businesses and our tourism sector.
- Residents regularly report that repairs are executed, followed by more repairs on the same stretch of the road, whilst other nearby sections of the same road are left untouched.
- That encouraging cycling on our roads is important, and to encourage cyclists to be confident using roads local authorities need to review all roads regularly and bring them up to a standard of safety required for cycling.
- The poor state of repair of the roads are causing damage to vehicles, injuries to cyclists and are causing numerous safety risks from users veering across carriageways to avoid road defects.

- Some roads are close to impassable due to defects, with motorists opting for alternative, longer routes, with the associated environmental and climatic impacts.
- Pothole/road repairs when conducted are of poor quality and require further repairs in a very short period of time.
- Priority needs to be directed away from A-roads and concentrate on B-roads, unclassified rural and urban roads that the majority of residents live on or along.

Actions:

- More frequent quality control inspections by the County Council and the imposition of financial penalties for inadequate work, demonstrated by the need to return to any given pothole or equivalent piece of work within a six month period.
- All potholes/repairs to a road to be conducted within the specified road closure/stretch of road at that time. Not 'cherry picked'.
- Request that the County Council debate the state of our county roads and provide a clear plan of action to tackle the issue, in a cost effective and logical manner.
- Request the County Council to establish joint committees with each district council to discuss prioritisation and phasing of road maintenance and improvements across the county.
- For the Leader of the Council and Chief Executive to write to the Secretary of State for Transport, calling on central government to provide an additional one off, lump sum to enable Councils to provide a start to clear the backlog of repairs.

Councillor Spencer noted an amendment to the wording of the final bullet point under 'The Borough Council Believes' to read 'Equal priority to be directed away from A-roads...'

Councillor J M Pert advised that recent adverse weather conditions over winter had undermined the quality of the road network across the county. In fairness to the County Council they have allocated an additional £8m to fixing the county's roads. They currently put £42m into operational repairs and £83m into capital schemes. This included investment of £5.6m across 6 schemes in Safford Borough and over £5m of patching and repair work at 191 locations.

Members subsequently voted on the Motion as set out above which was declared to be carried.

- (b) A Notice of Motion pursuant to Paragraph 13.1 of the Council Procedure Rules had been proposed by Councillors J M Pert and A P Edgeller as follows:-

‘Changes to the Winter Fuel Allowance and Protecting Pensioners from Fuel Poverty

Council notes:

- The Labour Government’s recent decision to restrict the Winter Fuel Payment to only pensioners in receipt of means-tested benefits like Pension Credit, as announced by Chancellor Rachel Reeves.
- The estimated impact of this decision, which Age UK says will mean 2 million pensioners who badly need the money to stay warm this winter will not receive it.
- The significant role that Winter Fuel Payments play in helping older residents of Stafford Borough and across the UK afford heating during the coldest months, thereby preventing 'heat or eat' dilemmas and safeguarding health.
- The criticism from Age UK, the Countryside Alliance and other charities, highlighting the social injustice and potential health risks posed by this sudden policy change.
- The additional strain this decision will place on vulnerable pensioners, many of whom do not claim Pension Credit despite being eligible, further exacerbating their financial hardship.
- This is on top of the recently announced increase in the Fuel Price Cap by 10% on 1 October 2024, making it doubly difficult for many pensioners to stay warm without risking turning their heating down or not using it at all this Winter.

Council believes:

- That the Winter Fuel Payment has been a lifeline for many older people across the UK and that restricting its availability solely to those on Pension Credit risks leaving many pensioners in financial hardship.
- While some pensioners currently in receipt of the Winter Fuel Payment may not require it, many thousands across Stafford Borough sit just above the cut-off for Pension Credit and will now lose their allowance.

- The decision to means-test Winter Fuel Payments, especially with such short notice and without adequate compensatory measures, is deeply unfair and will disproportionately affect the health and well-being of our poorest older residents.
- The government's approach fails to consider the administrative barriers and stigma that prevent eligible pensioners from claiming Pension Credit, leaving many without the support they desperately need.

Council resolves to:

- 1) Bring forward a Council-led local awareness campaign to alert those eligible of Pension Credit which in some respects will help access to the Winter Fuel Payment for those most in need.
- 2) Request that the Council Leader write to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, urging a review of the decision to means-test the Winter Fuel Payment and asking the government to ensure that vulnerable pensioners, particularly those who do not claim Pension Credit, are protected from fuel poverty.
- 3) Commit the Council to signing the 'Save the Winter Fuel Payment for Struggling Pensioners' petition being run by Age UK and write to all Members offering them the opportunity to sign the petition themselves.
- 4) Encourage local efforts to promote Pension Credit uptake through council services and partnerships with local charities and community organisations to ensure that all eligible pensioners in Stafford Borough are supported in claiming their entitlement.
- 5) Find ways to support some of the most vulnerable pensioners locally affected by this policy decision throughout the Winter, so that they don't face 'heating or eating dilemma' at a time when some pensioners cannot afford to meet the most basic of needs, especially those in rural areas who have some of the least energy efficient housing.
- 6) Prioritise funding to support those worst affected struggling pensioners by realigning budgets and funding'.

Councillor Godfrey raised a point of order regarding rule 13.5 of the Council Procedure Rules, which requires the Chief Executive to refer motions to Cabinet, prior to consideration by Council, where the motion contains proposals that would increase revenue expenditure. The Chief Executive agreed that the motion should be referred to Cabinet.

RESOLVED:- that the matter be referred to Cabinet without discussion.

C26 Recommendation Referred from Cabinet

Council was requested to consider a recommendation from the Cabinet meeting held on 8 August 2024 in respect of the following matter:

Additional Funding Request for Environmental Health Services - Confidential - Minute Number CAB21/24.

“That:-

- (a) Cabinet recommends to Council funding of £61,940 for the permanent establishment of the Senior Environmental Health Officer post;
- (b) Cabinet recommends to Council temporary additional funding of £112,840 to maintain the current agency support for work on food safety and environmental protection;
- (c) Cabinet recommends to Council temporary additional funding of £96,200 to provide additional support to improve work relating to environmental permitting and regulatory checks on private water supplies.

Councillor I D Fordham proposed and Councillor R P Cooke seconded that the recommendations of Cabinet be approved.

The Head of Law and Governance advised that the information supporting this recommendation was contained within a confidential Cabinet report. If members wished to debate the contents of that report, then they would need to consider excluding the public and press from that part of the meeting.

C27 Exclusion of Press and Public

RESOLVED:- that pursuant to Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting whilst the next following item of business be discussed, on the grounds that it included the disclosure of exempt information of the type specified in Paragraphs 1 and 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Act.

Recording of the meeting was suspended at this point.

The Chief Executive confirmed that said resources were for services provided to Stafford Borough Council and that Cannock Chase District Council were fully staffed in its equivalent department.

On being put to the vote the matter was declared to be carried.

RESOLVED:- that:-

- (a) funding of £61,940 for the permanent establishment of the Senior Environmental Health Officer post be approved;
- (b) temporary additional funding of £112,840 to maintain the current agency support for work on food safety and environmental protection be granted;
- (c) temporary additional funding of £96,200 to provide additional support to improve work relating to environmental permitting and regulatory checks on private water supplies be granted.

MAYOR