



Councillor Frank James (Mayor)

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

Councillors:

K M Aspin	B McKeown
F E Beatty	A Nixon
R P Cooke	L Nixon
A G Cooper	G P K Pardesi
B M Cross	A N Pearce
M G Dodson	J M Pert
A T A Godfrey	M Phillips
A D Hobbs	J P Read
J Hood	A F Reid
R A James	J S Powell
E G R Jones	J T Rose
P W Jones	A J Sandiford
R Kenney	S N Spencer
P A Leason	J Thorley
A M Loughran	M J Winnington

Officers in attendance:-

T Clegg	-	Chief Executive
C Forrester	-	Deputy Chief Executive (Resources)
I Curran	-	Head of Law and Governance
W Conaghan	-	Press and Communications Manager
J Allen	-	Democratic Services Officer

### **C13 Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 13 May 2024 were agreed as a true and correct record.

### **C14 Apologies**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J A Barron, E L Carter, A P Edgeller, P C Edgeller, I D Fordham, A R McNaughton, D M McNaughton, J A Nixon and D P Rouxel.

Councillor R A James proposed that Members agree to extend a period of dispensation for Councillor J A Nixon who would attend the next Council meeting on 10 September 2024. The proposal was seconded by Councillor J M Pert.

The matter was then put to the vote and subsequently declared to be carried.

RESOLVED:- that the period of dispensation for Councillor J Nixon be extended.

## **C15 Announcements**

The Mayor detailed the following for Members to note:

- (a) 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of D-Day - Thursday 6 June 2024 - it had been a privilege to be asked to light the Beacon at this historic event;
- (b) Mayor's Charity Appeal 2024/25 - Afternoon Tea - Thursday 18 July 2024 - Thanked to those who were supporting this event. The amount raised for the Charity Appeal was over £800.00;
- (c) Anniversary of Battle of Britain - Sunday 15 September 2024 - invitations for this year's event had been sent out.

The Leader of the Council made the following announcements:

- (a) Following the appalling incident in Southport yesterday evening a letter of sympathy be sent on behalf of the Council to the residents of the Town;
- (b) The organisers of Stafford Pride 2024 would like to extend an invite to all Members of the Council to attend the festival on 10 August 2024;
- (c) Praise to Adam Burgess of Stone who had won a silver medal in the men's C1 canoe slalom at the Paris Olympics, a letter of congratulations to be sent on behalf of the Council.

Councillor J M Pert echoed the sentiments raised by Councillor Godfrey, and was pleased to report that Councillor E G R Jones who was present in the chamber had today reached a milestone birthday.

## **C16 Councillor Session**

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

“Given the failure to bring the Local Plan forward in the last eighteen months or communicate a timetable as to when anything would happen to take the general public with them in the process, could the Leader of the Council confirm the level of affordable housing delivery in the Borough

- last year
- this year

- planned for the next three years

and the level of demand for affordable housing in the Borough at the moment and what he plans to do if there is any shortfall in delivery.”

Councillor A T A Godfrey, Leader of the Council, responded as follows:

“Stafford Borough Council continues to progress the new Local Plan 2020-2040, taking onto account the latest evidence, recent and proposed statutory legislation, and National Planning Policy Framework changes.

The 2012 Strategic Housing Market Assessment had a housing need figure of 210 new affordable homes per annum.

Last year (1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024) a total of 163 affordable units were delivered.

So far this year (up until 30 June 2024) a total of 41 affordable units have been delivered, with Registered Providers reporting that a total of 115 affordable homes will be delivered in the financial year.

A further 143 affordable homes have planning consent.

Further affordable housing is likely to come into the pipeline soon due to planning applications awaiting a decision. Sadly, this process has not been helped by 20 years of underfunding the Planning Department by the last administration.

We know Registered Providers are working with some developers and Homes England to convert open market housing into affordable housing.

There are two such sites in the Borough, one of which will deliver 24 affordable homes, the other will deliver 40 affordable homes. These houses will come into the pipeline figures when the Registered Providers have fixed handover dates. Mr Mayor this is an important mechanism in delivering affordable housing.

We continue to work with Registered Providers around the delivery of affordable housing sites and are aware of some sites that may become available soon. This will help provide even more affordable and social housing.

The Government’s anticipated announcements on mandatory local housing targets and a consultation on the National Planning Policy Framework are coming. The Council will consider the Local Plan implications once further details have been provided, together with updates to the evidence base to ensure affordable housing delivery continues. I am informed there was an announcement in Parliament today.

Mr Mayor, housing is a very important part of this administration's work. We have been looking at the best ways to provide good, affordable and social housing that is safe, secure and creates a happy environment for all residents of our Borough. This is a very high priority.

I am grateful to Councillor Pert for giving me the opportunity to inform the Council of the high importance this administration gives to social and affordable housing.

As most Members will know, we work with all social housing providers but are also looking at other ways to provide much-needed social housing for the Borough, such as once more, providing Council owned and run housing.

To finish Mr Mayor, Councillor Pert's question also highlights the problems in the Planning Department. Problems this administration are solving. We have already reduced the historic planning backlog by more than half, but more needs to be done to rectify two decades of underfunding by the last Conservative administration.

Thank you Mr Mayor."

Councillor J M Pert thanked the Leader of the Council for his response and asked the following supplementary question:

"There has been a Government announcement today regarding Local Authorities who didn't manage to get to consultation with their Local Plans and will now be subject to increased housing targets by approximately 224 further homes per year. Failure to deliver the Local Plan on time is going to cost this Borough Council.

I do want to pick up the manifesto by the local Labour Party regarding affordable homes because from 2011-2022, every year 210 affordable homes were built. It now appears the foot has been taken off the gas. Could the Leader of the Council confirm when the manifesto commitments will be met."

Councillor A T A Godfrey responded by saying that delivery depends on the developers.

Councillor M J Winnington shared his concerns regarding the Local Plan and the impact moving forwards and asked when the current administration would share the plan and asked what stage it was at currently.

Councillor A T A Godfrey stated that the Local Plan needed to be right and would be shared when it is ready.

Councillor R A James asked if the Meecebrook Project would be affected by the increased amount of affordable homes required to be built in the Borough.

Councillor Godfrey replied that the new figures were just coming through and no decisions had been made yet as the information had only been sent through to us today.

Councillor A G Cooper queried the number of affordable housing required and the impact on existing boundaries and open green spaces.

Councillor Godfrey stated that the information regarding affordable housing had only been received today.

- (b) Councillor J M Pert had submitted the following question in accordance with Paragraph 12.3(a) of the Council Procedure Rules:-

“Following the disclosure of the £1.1m financial black hole in the Borough Council’s accounts as at the end of December last year, can the Cabinet Member for Resources confirm the actual level of deficit at the end of the last financial year (i.e. end of March 2024) and that spending in the first quarter of the 2024 Financial Year (April - June) has been in line with this year’s budget.”

Councillor R P Cooke, Cabinet Member Resources Portfolio, responded saying there are sufficient monies in reserves to fund this, so it is not a “Black Hole”. Work is being undertaken to address the main area of overspend, which is Planning, along with the others

The overspend in Planning has its genesis in past conservative administrations.

The major cause (about 74%) of the overspend is to do with Planning. The administration needed to tackle the historic backlog of planning applications as a priority, not least because the then government was threatening to take action against those LAs that did not do so. They have reduced the planning backlog by more than half; from 946 outstanding applications when we took over to about 442 and we need to reduce this further.

There was a spend associated with this. The Planning Team has struggled to fill vacancies due to wider national shortages of experienced planners and has had to use agency staff and external consultants to undertake the work - and that costs a lot more.

Cllr Cooke said they would be commissioning an independent review of the service with the aim of increasing efficiency.

Cllr Cooke reminded Members that this Authority received a highly critical report from the External Auditor for the financial years 2021-

2022 and 2022-23, during the Conservatives later period in office. Much of this resulted from staffing pressures and shortages.

The Finance Team are at present working on an outturn position as at March 2024 and this will be provided as soon as possible.

There are staffing issues and have set aside money in the last budget to employ additional finance staff and progress has been made in this regard.

Finance jobs are being evaluated by West Midlands Employers and when this is done we shall advertise. Anticipate this happening in August with interviews in September.

A new structure for Finance has been devised but has to go out to consultation with staff.”

Councillor J M Pert asked for dates when the Year End and period 1 figures will be available. At July’s Cabinet meeting, the papers indicated that the budget manager has been spoken to about the overspend position to ensure it will not happen again, and as issues arise they will be raised earlier to ensure they can be managed more easily. It is in overspend of £826k on a budget of £1.95m which is almost a 50% overspend. Has the Cabinet Member also been spoken to given that he was oblivious to what was going on?

Councillor R P Cooke explained that the money was spent to reduce a huge backlog, but there should have been notification that this was being done. Staffing issues had resulted in a delay in Q1 and end of year figures being published. He reminded Members that the Chief Finance Officer is also the Returning Officer and there have been two elections this year.

Councillor F Beatty reported that Officers were repeatedly asked how many staff they needed. She also referred to the peer review in 2018.

Councillor R A James stated that former Councillor R M Smith insisted on monthly budget monitoring. Councillor R P Cooke stated he would be asking for this also.

Councillor M J Winnington referred to the overspend being due to the use of consultants to reduce the backlog of planning applications, and that it has come from tax payers money.

Councillor R P Cooke reported that money needed to be spent quickly in order to reduce the backlog of planning applications, but there should have been notification about the money being spent.

**C17 Waterfront and Riverside Car Park Payment Systems: Capital Programme**

Considered the report of the Deputy Chief Executive (Resources) seeking approval for £275,000 of unallocated capital resources to be allocated into the capital programme for upgrading the current parking system at the Council's Waterfront and Riverside car parks.

Councillor R P Cooke introduced the report and noted the recommendations as set out in paragraph 2 before concluding his comments by moving that said recommendations be approved.

The proposal was seconded by A T A Godfrey.

The matter was then put to the vote and subsequently declared to be carried.

RESOLVED:- that £275,000 be allocated from the unallocated capital resources into the capital programme for the replacement of the parking system, payment machines, and associated equipment at the Council's Waterfront and Riverside car parks.

**C18 Swimming Pool Support Fund: Capital Programme**

Considered the report of the Head of Wellbeing seeking approval for £214,616 to install Photo Voltaic Panels and Shower Flow Restrictors at Stafford Leisure Centre, to be included in the capital programme.

Councillor G P K Pardesi introduced the report and noted the recommendations as set out in paragraph 2 before concluding her comments by moving that said recommendations be approved.

The proposal was seconded by A F Reid.

The matter was then put to the vote and subsequently declared to be carried.

RESOLVED:- that Council includes £214,616 in its capital programme for the installation of Photo Voltaic Panels and Shower Flow Restrictors at Stafford Leisure Centre.

**C19 Network Infrastructure Replacement**

Considered the report of the Head of Transformation and Assurance seeking approval to purchase replacement network infrastructure equipment and approval to move resource into the capital programme from the IT reserve to fund the replacement of the infrastructure.

Councillor R P Cooke introduced the report and noted the recommendations as set out in paragraph 2 before concluding his comments by moving that said recommendations be approved.

The proposal was seconded by J M Pert.

The matter was then put to the vote and subsequently declared to be carried.

RESOLVED:- that:-

- (a) moving of £198,904 into the revenue budget from reserves for the purchase of new network infrastructure equipment be agreed
- (b) spend of £198,904 on the procurement of updated network equipment to ensure the ongoing security of the Council's IT infrastructure be approved.

## **C20 Committee Business Planning Reports**

Considered the report of the Head of Law and Governance.

Councillor M J Winnington introduced the Resources Scrutiny Committee Business Planning report and thanked Members and Officers for their help and support in the work of the Committee. In conclusion, Councillor Winnington moved that the report be received.

The proposal was seconded by Councillor F Beatty.

Councillor E G R Jones raised concern regarding the level of detail contained within the various business planning reports, and questioned whether those areas requiring enhanced consideration were subject to effective and robust scrutiny. Councillor Jones made specific reference to the overspend in the Planning Portfolio as discussed during the earlier Councillor Session (Minute No C16(b)) as an example.

The Leader of the Council reiterated that Members were able to bring any matter for discussion to the various Scrutiny Committees through the 'Call-In', Councillor Session/Members Item processes.

Members then voted on the proposal as set out, which was declared to be unanimously carried.

RESOLVED:- that

- (a) the annual report of the Resources Scrutiny Committee be received.

Continuing, Councillor F Beatty introduced the Economic Development and Planning Scrutiny Committee Business Planning report. She went on to say that there could be more detail in the reports and minutes in the future. In conclusion, Councillor Beatty moved that the report be received.

The proposal was seconded by Councillor A G Cooper.



Members then voted on the proposal as set out, which was declared to be unanimously carried.

RESOLVED:- that

- (b) the annual report of the Economic Development and Planning Scrutiny Committee be received.

Finally, Councillor A G Cooper introduced the Community Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee Business Planning report in Councillor A P Edgeller's absence and moved that the report be received.

The proposal was seconded by Councillor R A James

Members then voted on the proposal as set out, which was declared to be unanimously carried.

RESOLVED:- that

- (c) the annual report of the Community Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee be received.

MAYOR