

MINUTES OF THE BLACKWOOD TOWN COUNCIL MEETING HELD ON 3RD FEBRUARY 2025

Present : Cllr. R Mills (Mayor)

Cllr. G Etheridge (Deputy Mayor)

Cllrs. K Williams, J Griffiths P Cook, C Clark, L Phillips, K Etheridge N Dix, A Farina-Childs,
A Short, M Gwynne & K Jones

Also present Sgt. Liam Brown (Gwent Police)

Prior to the start of the meeting, the Mayor presented a cheque for £5,000 to Richard Lewis (Chair) & Bruce Penfold (President) of Blackwood Rugby Football Club as a grant towards their ongoing Refurbishment of the Clubhouse & pitch as a result of Storm Bert.

Both officials thanked Town Council for this generous grant and said they had been overwhelmed by the support received from the Town and neighbouring communities.

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for Absence were received from Cllrs.C Erasmus & D Box

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no Declarations of Interest made at this point

3. Police Report

The Chair welcomed Sgt. Liam Brown to the meeting

Sgt. Brown reported on the spate of recent issues in the town which had resulted in a meeting between police, County Borough officers and local members to try to address these problems. Operation Lumley had been initiated with a zero tolerance approach.

Two weeks ago there had been 14 incidents reported at the bus station, 29 on the High Street and 34 in and around the Cliff Road area.

Last week there had been 2 incidents reported at the bus station, 2 on the High Street and 6 at the Cliff Road area.

The current operation, which had ensured all available neighbourhood resources had been deployed to Blackwood was obviously having an effect with several arrests and numerous referrals having been made, with one young female appearing in Court for the 18th.time.

Since the Wi-Fi and lighting had been turned off at the Bus Station numbers of youths had now been seen to be congregating near the SNAP Fitness Centre

The Sgt. reported another spate of shop lifting targeting B&M and several other stores, and that the perpetrators did not appear to be locals.

Members queried whether all the CCTV cameras at the Bus Station were available to the Police, and whilst agreeing they were via the CCTV room, admitted there were still blackspots especially in the far corner of the Bus Station. After some discussion on this issue members thought consideration should be given as to whether Town Council might be able to provide an additional camera via CIL monies to cover this blackspot area.

After some further discussion where the officer confirmed there had been problems throughout the town, all members agreed the increased police presence had been greatly appreciated and had obviously had a marked improvement on the situation of late and hoped this would continue in the months to come.

Sgt. Liam Brown was thanked by the Mayor for attending the meeting, especially whilst officially off duty.

4. County Borough Report

Members reported briefly on the meeting with Police and Borough Officers referred to earlier in Sgt. Browns report and were pleased the problems in town were now being taken seriously and a concerted reaction was having an impact.

Cllr. N Dix reported on ongoing meetings with BMI with regard the charitable status and the need for trustees who can assist moving forward.

Cllr. A Farina-Childs reported on the Bin Storage facility at back of the shops and the fact that the whole area behind Costa and up towards Hall Street in an absolute disgrace with litter and other waste everywhere. He also reported briefly on further consultation events on the Skate park proposals.

Cllr. K Etheridge reported on a public meeting held in respect of the County Borough's proposal to close Cefn Fforest Leisure Centre. The meeting was well attended with the 3 Cefn Fforest members present, and whilst feelings were obviously running high had concerns that not enough was being done. He had put a Notice Of Motion to the Housing & Environment Scrutiny Committee being held on 11th. February calling for the Borough to fund any necessary improvements via internal grants Senedd funding and reserves so that the facility can continue serving many communities and schools within the area benefitting the wellbeing of the residents.

5. Mayoral Announcements

The Mayor reported that he had attended the Public Meeting referred to earlier in the Borough Members Report. It was important to note that whilst the facility was not strictly within the Town Council boundary, it was still a facility that greatly benefitted many of our residents and their families.

He also reported that a planned visit to Ty Hafan (his nominated Charity) had to be postponed due to a Royal visit, and that he had attended the opening of the new Greenfields Nursery located at the former Mason's Arms site on Bridge Street.

6. Correspondence

The Clerk presented his report on correspondence received since the last meeting an all were *noted*

Caerphilly C.B.C.

Football figures

News Online

Notification of proposed artworks depicting Chartist Movement on wall of Flourmill Pub

Notification of Blackwood Town Centre Stakeholders meeting to be held Thursday 20th. March – venue to be confirmed

Notification of Consultation exercises on Libraries, Leisure Centres & Budget Proposals

One Voice Wales

Notification of AGM being held online Tuesday 11th. March 4pm.- 6.00pm. Town Council needs to nominate representative and substitute by 28th. February.

G.G.P. Law

Request for further drop in session at Offices on Tuesday 18th. Feb.

Papyrus

Request for use of Office for Workshop for approx 15 people on 26th.or 27th. February

Forces Fitness

Offer to work within the community to deliver fun activities to benefit local youth groups, children at risk of being NEET, young adults and school aged children.. They specialise in bringing communities together, improving health and well-being whilst building resilience.

In respect of O.V.W., it was **agreed** Cllr. C Clark be the nominated representative

With regard the requests for room hire both were **agreed**, with GGP Law being charged £50 whilst Papyrus be free of charge

Whilst members were supportive of the Forces Fitness offer, they queried whether perhaps the Caerphilly C.B.C. Youth Team might be in a position to offer something similar

7. Schedule of Payments

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

		£. P
Amazon	Office Equipment	238.46
C.C.B.C.	NNDR	758.00
British Gas	Electricity Charges	49.69
British Gas	Gas Charges	412.75
E Infinity	Microsoft Licence	135.96
C.C.B.C.	Beach Party Recharge	13,175.02
Blackwood R.B.L.	Poppy Wreaths	330.00
J.S.Lee	Delivery/ planting/ disposal of Christmas Tree	240.00
Bebb, Tasker & Sucksmith	Lease Payment	960.00
John Hold	January Sals/ Reimbursement	891.91
HMRC	January Tax/N.I.	630.85
Playworks	January Fee	20.00

8. To Confirm the Minutes of the Town Council Meeting held on 6th.January 2025

With the amendment under County Borough Report that School Crossing Control should be Blackwood Primary School and not Libanus School, the Minutes were **approved** as a true record

9. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising

10. To Confirm the Minutes of the Extraordinary Meeting of Town Council held 20th. January 2025

The Minutes were **approved** as a true record

11. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising

12. To Receive the Minutes of the Policy & Finance Committee held on 29th. January 2025

The Minutes were **received** as a true record

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

(a) Application for Financial Assistance

The Clerk reported on the request from Blackwood Town Cricket Club for financial assistance towards the cost of installing solar panels, and that the recommendation was that Town Council award a Grant of £500 with the proviso an Application Form be completed together with a copy of the Quotation for the works.

This guaranteeing due diligence on our part, whilst accepting that both Sports Wales and C.C.B.C. will no doubt have gone through the same process and were happy with the outcome.

It was unanimously agreed Town Council support the recommendation to award a Grant of £500 to Blackwood Town Cricket Club with proviso attached

(b) Budget Monitoring Report to Period 9 – 31st. December 2024

The Clerk reported an Anticipated Out- turn of £110,779, an under spend of £8,151 on the original budget, whilst an Anticipated income of £88,107 is £5,842 more than budgeted which results in a likely requirement of £22,672 to be taken from balances rather than the originally estimated £36,665 (£13,993 saving).

The under spend on Expenditure being due in the main to £22,075 on additional staffing, £5,000 Contingency, £2,625 on Beach Party, £1,748 Civic Awards, £ 674 Other offset by over spends of £10,000 Office Furniture/ Equipment, £1,292 Office lease costs etc., £1,000 Flagpoles £2,500

laptops, tablets etc., £1,350 members expenses,£308 Remembrance Service,£5,000 Grant Blackwood RFC, £1250 Office/ Other equipment, £1,000 training/ conference expenses, £271 Other.

The Increased Income was due to £700 Interest, £4,000 CIL, £450 Xmas, £254 Remembrance wreaths, £150 room hire, £288 Training refund.

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

(c) Budget Requirements 2025/26/Precept Setting 2025/26/ Medium Term Budget Strategy/ Reserves

The Clerk then presented the Minutes of The Policy & Finance Committee which proposed a budget for next year, 2025/26 , based on current spending patterns, plus inflationary increases on some expenditure heads, but which also reflects 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 £1,200 to provide assistance at the Remembrance Day Service which has improved so much over the past three 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 a potential Civic Awards Evening in the sum of £2,000, and also £1,300 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 is again included for 2025/26, and future years in respect of the potential Contributions to Members Expenses, and assumes some 100% of members will claim all entitlements (£156 plus additional £52). £2,500 is included for next year in support of the Members/Clerks Training Programme & Conference Attendance

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 such provision is included at this point.

Obviously, two major additional provisions are included next year –

Office Accommodation and the associated costs – Whilst we have some certainty around Lease Costs, NNDR, Water Charges & Phone/ Wi Fi costs, some uncertainties still exist surrounding the heating & lighting costs of the offices it is, therefore, considered prudent to include a contingency sum of £2k in the budget figures to cover these potential costs.

Additional hours/ staffing to man the offices – With Town Council recently having agreed the Town Clerk post be advertised as a 24 hour per week contract and potentially an Admin/ Clerical Assistant 10 hours per week contract budget provision has been included to cover same.

An amount of £1,000 has been included for potential income from hire of rooms. This may seem an ambitious target at present, but achievable if we look to advertise our facilities. This will, however, need to be monitored throughout the year.

After some discussion it was unanimously agreed Town Council support the budget as outlined in the Policy & Finance Committee minutes/ recommendation

Precept Requirements 2025/26

The Clerk outlined that currently our Precept of £27.50 is expected to raise approx £84,875, this together with an estimated other income of £2,000 means a total income of £ 86,875
With total expenditure estimated to be £114,700 this results in a shortfall of £27,825 which will need to be met by raising the Precept by approx. £9.00 per annum for Band D properties, Use of Balances (currently estimated at £47,011 at March 2025) or a combination of both.

With our useable Balances at their current levels to raise the Precept to its properly required level (approx £36.50 at Band D) would no doubt be questioned by the Wales Audit Office and so he would not recommend this course of action.

His recommended course of action would be for members to consider a combination of both - an increase in Precept and Utilisation of usable balances, whilst realising that on current predictions of budget requirements we will need a Precept of approx £40 for a self balancing budget for 2027/28 if that is the desired goal

N.B. a £1 increase in Precept amounts to approx. £3,085

The Clerk had also prepared some options to support his Recommendation to aid discussion at the meeting and he explained how he was eager to show that consideration of our Balances had been to the fore when setting our Precept otherwise Town Council would likely receive criticism from Wales Audit.

He then outlined his recommendation to Policy & Finance Committee which would mean an increase of £2.50 per annum to £30.00 for Band D properties for 2025/26 resulting in £20,110 being taken from Balances.

When looking at the Medium Term Strategy he was recommending that for 2026/2027 an increase of a further £ 3.50 to £ 33.50 for Band D properties necessitating £11 355 being taken from balances and for 2027/2028 an additional increase of £4.00 per annum to £37.50 requiring a further £ 5760 being taken from Balances.

***After some discussion it was unanimously agreed that Town Council support the recommendation that the Precept for 2025/2026 increases by £2.50 to £30.00 per annum for Band D properties, and that we utilise £20,110 from Balances to deliver a Balanced Budget.
Furthermore it was agreed the Medium Term Budget Strategy be accepted but that this will obviously need revisiting/revising this time next year.***

The Clerk was thanked for all his hard work in preparing the reports for budget/ precept discussion

14. Caerphilly C.B.C. Budget Proposals – Consultation Ends 14/2/25

The Clerk reported that given the Consultation ends shortly and whilst no doubt some members will have responded individually, perhaps a formal response from Town Council especially around the proposals to do away with the Community Safety Wardens & School Crossing Patrols which would undoubtedly have an adverse effect on the town.

This was unanimously agreed by members

It was also unanimously agreed a formal response from Town Council against the proposed closure of Cefn FForest Leisure Centre prior to end of Consultation on 12th. March be made, recognising whilst not within our area closure would have a devastating effect on our residents

15. 2 ND. Replacement C. C.B.C. Local Development Plan 2020- 2035 – Consultation Ends 26/2/25

After a short discussion it was **agreed** that a Special Meeting be held to discuss the potential effects of this vitally important document on the community

16. Festive Lighting

The Clerk presented his report on this issue, which basically requests Town Council arranges for the removal of the catenary cables which support our cross street festoon festive lighting as a matter of some urgency.

Numerous emails back and fore between himself, Borough members and others - basically pointing out the paperwork had been sent as requested but never apparently received.

The festoon lighting has been in-situ for many years, and officers were aware of it. Back about 2/3 years ago when the Borough widened the pavements to accommodate the parklets they removed the lighting without any consultation and after much argument with Mark S Williams, the Clerk had recovered the cost of purchasing replacement festoon lighting which were then re-installed by Elsbury's on our behalf.

Members voiced their disgust at this decision which would mean a much less impressive Christmas lighting display in town compared to what we have currently, and saw this as yet another decision to the potential detriment to the town its residents, businesses & visitors alike.

After much discussion it was **agreed** we request a face to face meeting with offices to explain, why it has taken almost 25 years to try and implement this policy, supposedly made in 2000, when we had not purchased or erected our original catenary supported festoon lighting until well after that date, and more recently allowed replacement of same after works in the High Street.

17. Meeting with Police & Crime Commissioner at 6.00pm.on Wednesday 19th. February 2025

The Clerk confirmed the date of the re-arranged meeting with the Police & Crime Commissioner, and it was agreed we follow the same agreed format with previously agreed questions to be asked by nominated members

18. Planning Applications

The Clerk presented his report on Planning Applications received since the last meeting –

Case Ref. 25/0028/HH

Location: 12 Pembroke Close Cefn Fforest Blackwood NP12 1JL

Proposal: Erect first floor side extension and replace existing bow bay window with a new square bay window

Case Officer: Luke Buffery (01443 864709 : buffel@caerphilly.gov.uk)

After a short discussion it was **agreed** no objections be raised

19. Reports

There were no reports