

Stone Town Council – General Purposes Committee

Minutes of the meeting held virtually, on Tuesday 11 August 2020

NOTE: Due to the Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19) and Government Guidelines on public gatherings, the meeting was held virtually on Zoom. Members of the public were invited to observe the meeting streamed live on YouTube.

PRESENT: Councillor R. Kenney in the Chair, and
Councillors: T. Adamson, A. Best, Mrs A. Burgess, J. Davies, I. Fordham,
M. Green, M. Hatton (from 7.15pm during Minute number GP20/242),
J. Hickling, Mrs J. Hood, T. Kelt, P. Leason and J. Powell

ABSENT: Councillors: K. Argyle, Mrs L. Davies, Mrs K. Dawson, M. Hatton (to 7.15pm during Minute Number GP20/242), C. Thornicroft and R. Townsend

GP20/239 **Apologies**

Apologies were received from Councillors: K. Argyle, Mrs L. Davies,
Mrs K. Dawson, C. Thornicroft and R. Townsend

GP20/240 **Declarations of Interests**

None

GP20/241 **Requests for Dispensations**

None

GP20/242 **COVID-19 Outbreak**

The Chairman informed the Committee that the purpose of the meeting was to discuss the recent COVID-19 outbreak in Stone, to assess what had happened and consider the actions the Town Council could take to support recovery of the town.

The Chairman invited County Councillor Mrs J. Hood and Borough Councillor I. Fordham to address the Committee.

Councillor Mrs Hood

Councillor Mrs Hood gave an outline of the sequence of events after it became public knowledge that a mass gathering had been allowed to take place in the Crown & Anchor Public House on the 18 July 2020. Some days later, the County Council's Director of Public Health put out a warning on 'A Little Bit of Stone' advising everyone who had been in the venue on that night that they should get tested as soon as possible. The story about the COVID-19 outbreak in Stone reached national news.

Councillor Mrs Hood advised the Committee that a mobile testing centre was set up on the Crown Street Car Park from 29 July to 2 August which on the first day was overwhelmed with more than a thousand people queueing to be tested. On the Thursday the testing centre was taking drive through bookings and people were asked to carry out their own test. Self swabbing unfortunately resulted in a number of inconclusive results which required repeat testing. Every individual received a test result and the County Council provided updates via the Incident Management Team (consisting of County Councillors, Officers and Director of Public Health).

Councillor Mrs Hood advised that there had been 22 positive diagnoses of COVID-19, 5 of them were Stone residents and 17 from surrounding areas including Stoke on Trent. Sixty people have been traced as having had direct contact with people who tested positive and these have been told to self isolate for 14 days. The incident team at the County Council has now reported that they have stepped down their test and tracing work.

Councillor Mrs Hood emphasised that the Prime Minister had repeatedly been telling us what we had to do to stay safe and it was disappointing the Crown & Anchor said it didn't understand the importance of social distancing.

Councillor Mrs Hood said she hoped the Committee would be able to find a way to bring our close knit community back. Businesses have put in place robust safety measures and we can be confident that visiting Stone is safe. She communicated to everyone that 'We are safe and we want our economy to recover. Please come out with confidence. The local authorities, businesses, traders and shops have all got your best interests at heart'.

Councillor I. Fordham

The Chairman invited Borough Councillor I. Fordham to address the Council.

Councillor Fordham thanked Councillor Mrs Hood for giving a very clear explanation of the testing process. He said the events at the Crown and Anchor had been foolish and irresponsible. There had been a clear breach of guidelines which had unacceptably put lives at risk. Several councillors have made representations to the licensing authorities at Stafford Borough Council and Staffordshire Police to request action to prevent any reoccurrence, stepping up enforcement action and restricting late night licensing during the course of the pandemic. A potential tragedy may have been averted by the actions of Public Health England and our local authorities. We are grateful to them and thank them for their response.

Councillor Fordham suggested that now was the time to move forward and he hoped to see the return of consumer and business confidence leading to a rapid recovery to the town. Prior to the outbreak, feedback from businesses was that life had been returning to the town following lockdown – trade had been picking up.

Councillor Fordham advised that businesses have put in place COVID-19 secure arrangements including the necessary social distancing measures. He

said they now deserve our support and asked that the following actions be requested:

- A suspension of late night alcohol and music licences for the duration of the pandemic to discourage the assembly of large groups
- A formal review of the Crown & Anchor alcohol licence as a result of the risks caused to public safety.
- Regular weekend evening patrols by police and enforcement to ensure the laws and guidelines have been respected to help build confidence.
- Local businesses to come together to develop a confidence building campaign to encourage a gradual return of consumer footfall.
- That the Town Council plays its part in helping to build confidence by mounting its own low key informative and factual campaign stressing that businesses have worked hard at COVID security and comply with government guidelines.

Committee Member Comments

The Chairman invited Members to express their views.

The discussion points were wide ranging and the following key themes emerged:

Implications of the Crown & Anchor Incident

The Committee acknowledged the following points:

- The incident had undermined the hard work of local businesses in becoming COVID-19 prepared and ready to reopen after lockdown.
- Public confidence had been lost and there was a fear about the safety of the town.
- Businesses have sustained loss of custom and sales.
- There has been a reduced footfall in town.
- A negative image of the town had been portrayed following coverage on national news.
- Late opening (to 3am) had significantly increased the venues popularity by patrons
- Feedback suggests that businesses have felt unsupported as there has been a lack of guidance and business support.
- That hard lessons had been learned and it was time to look to the future

Resident and visitor safety

The Committee acknowledged the following points:

- The County Council and Borough Council are working with the Crown & Anchor to make sure safety measures are in place.
- The power of the general public (including residents, visitors shoppers and diners) should not be underestimated in self policing safety

measures, raising questions when they feel something is not done in accordance with the required procedures.

The Committee suggested that consideration be given to the following points of action:

- To emphasise that Stone is a safe town to visit, in which to shop, dine and socialise. Standards are high often exceeding the Government's guidelines and strict COVID-19 measures are in operation.
- That support should be given to the test and trace programme.
- That the residents of Stone are protected, particularly the elderly population, as well as its businesses. One view suggested the Town Council should only promote the town to local people and not encourage people to visit from further afield. This could lead to further outbreaks and greater longer term damage.
- That use is made of local surveillance to identify where management of the guidelines are not meeting the required standards.
- That consideration is given to reaching younger people to identify how they can best communicate their needs.
- That enquiries are made to the County Highways Department about extending closure of the High Street to 8pm.

Promoting Stone to restore confidence

The Committee suggested that consideration be given to the following points of action:

- That the Town Council actively welcomes visitors as well as local people who are vital to the economy of the town, impressing on them the safety measures that are in place.
- That the Town Council take the opportunity to promote Stone as people are widely preferring to visit small towns rather than larger towns and cities.
- That the possibility of providing free parking at weekends is explored.
- That the interests of daytime and night time businesses which are equally as important to the town's economy, are protected.
- That support be given to continuation of the Farmers market in Stone.

Working with local businesses

The Committee suggested that consideration be given to the following points of action:

- That Radio Stoke be invited to broadcast a live show from Stone, showcasing how Stone has responded to the incident by interviewing businesses to demonstrate that the town is open for business and is a safe place to visit.
- The use of media – radio, press and online social networking to deliver the message that Stone is open for business, safe and a great place to visit.

- The increased use of test, track and trace to local situations. If incidents like this do occur businesses should discuss potential action with peer groups.
- To set up a working group of councillors, traders and other interested parties to work together to promote the town.
- To develop a trader led Certificate of Approval scheme driven by local businesses with the support of Public Health England. *Any initiative, would require investigation relating to legal implications and the scope/powers of the Town Council.
- To investigate the possibility of the Town Council providing a package of benefits to shops (for example a free on off use of a marquee) to assist individual traders to recover.
- To enquire about free Pavement Licences so that businesses can extend their trading range onto their shop frontages.

RESOLVED:

That the Town Council:

- Writes to the Licensing Department at Stafford Borough Council asking for a suspension of late night alcohol and music licences within all Stone public house and entertainment venues for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Writes to Stafford Borough Council calling for a formal review of the Crown & Anchor Premises Licence for consideration of whether the venue continues to meet the licensing objective relating to 'public safety'.
- Writes to Staffordshire Police and Stafford Borough Council's Enforcement team requesting that weekend evening patrols are undertaken in Stone to ensure the laws and guidelines on COVID-19 measures have been respected to help rebuild confidence.
- Sets up a Working Group consisting of Town Councillors, local businesses and other interested parties to consider how the town can be promoted through a confidence building campaign that will encourage a return of consumer footfall to the High Street and spending in Stone.
- Writes to Stafford Borough Council to ask how much it would charge Stone Town Council to provide free Saturday parking in Stone to the end of the year.
- Writes to the County Highways Department to ask whether there would be a possibility of extending the duration of the High Street pedestrianised zone each day, and that if permitted by the County, the Town Council first undertakes a consultation exercise with businesses to identify the most appropriate times.

- Writes to the Licensing Department asking whether Stafford Borough Council would be prepared to suspend the fee for Pavement Licence applications from Stone businesses for the rest of the year.

CHAIRMAN