



Minutes of the Parish Council Meeting held on Thursday 8th February 2024 at 7.45 pm in the Community Hall

Present: Cllr S Murphy
Cllr B Ashcroft
Cllr J Pearson
Cllr B Pilkington
Cllr J Shawcross

Prior to the start of the meeting, the Chairman Cllr S Murphy welcomed St Helens Councillor Seve Gomez-Aspron (St Helens Council Cabinet Member – Strategic Transport) and invited him to speak under the Public Session (see Appendix A)

2024/120 To pass as a true record the Minutes of the meeting of the Council held on Thursday 11th January 2024

Resolved: for the Chairman to sign the Minutes of the above meeting as a true record

2024/121 To Note Apologies for Absence

Cllrs: Stevenson, E Murphy and S Houghton

Resolved: to note the above apologies

2024/122 To Receive Declarations of Interest from Members

No Declarations were received.

Resolved: to note the above

2024/123 *To Receive any Chairman, Councillors and Clerk's Updates

The Clerk read an update from Cllr E Murphy to the meeting re work completed in recent months: cleaning/refurb of existing Parish Council floor buffer; clearing changing rooms at Community Hall (acknowledging help from Andrew and Jane) and subsequent forwarding of leftover secondhand toys to those in need; a vegetable distribution undertaken to local residents (donated from Turpin View). She also reported contacting Cllr D Baines at St Helens re Swift Conservation within Seneley Green (birds are now on the red list/endangered).

for information only: issues raised under this item that require further discussion will appear on the Agenda of a future meeting

2024/124 To Resolve to accept the Update from Planning Committee Applications

P/2024/0033/HHFP Part two storey, part single storey side extension 23 Girvan Crescent,

P/2024/0013/FUL Proposal: Retrospective change of use to convert on-site residential flat to be included within commercial property. Lancashire Power Boat Club, Garswood Old Road

Stag Pub: permission for signage

Decisions

P/2023/0690/CLP 47 Hamilton Road Certificate of lawfulness for a proposed single storey side extension GRANTED

No comments/objections have been submitted by Planning Committee re the above

The current state of roads was raised as becoming a real danger. Cllr Murphy reported she has requested a full survey of the whole area in order to prioritise action.

Garswood/Liverpool Road is particularly bad.

Resolved: to receive and note above update

2024/125

Financial Matters

The following Schedule of Payments had been circulated to Members

23164	Clerk - Feb salary	1383.12
23165	Caretaker - Feb Salary	704.17
23166	Sports Attendant - Feb Salary	461.62
23167	02 mobile phone Jan	31.44
23168	BT - alarm line and broadband - quarterly	200.09
23169	HMRC quarterly payment	1301.32
23170	British Gas	55.17
23171	REIMBURSEMENT CROWN GAS	-51.11
23172	E-on - Gas CH Jan	329.12
23173	StHCouncil - annual herbicide charges	142.56
23174	Smartest Energy Gas PH 1-31 Jan	225.58
23175	E-on gas CH Feb	635.68
		5418.76

Resolved: to authorise payments listed on the Schedule of Accounts for 5th January to 9th February 2024 totalling £5418.76 and to note there are no S137 payments

2024/126

Miners Memorial

Clerk reported awaiting quotes for the supply and installation of the plaque at the memorial and is chasing the request for tarmac repair.

Cllr Shawcross commented at least a month's notice would be needed to send out invitations to local schools/families once the official opening date is set.

Resolved: to receive and note above update

2024/127

Health & Wellbeing Working Group Update

8.1 Library – Cllr S Murphy reported on an initial meeting with St Helens Council officers held on 23rd January 2024 to discuss a volunteer-led service. She further reported an upcoming meeting to be held on 12th February at Holy Trinity. A request for space within Garswood Surgery had been refused; Cllr Murphy requested the Clerk write to the owners of the building with this request. Talks are planned with Holy Trinity Church next week about a provision. Cllr Pilkington commented on the now empty building and asked what it will be used for. The Clerk was asked to write to Archdiocese re future of building.

Resolved:

To receive and note the update

For the Clerk to write to the owners of Garswood Surgery building

For the Clerk to write to the Archdiocese re future of the building.

2024/128

Estates Working Group

It was proposed that queries on the current proposals from Seneley & Garswood Juniors on supporting their funding bid to the FA to improve facilities at the Community Hall and Playing Fields and formal agreement on the container at the Parish Hall be delegated to the Estates Working Group to take forward.

Resolved: for the Estates Working Group to take forward permissions for the above queries and report back at a future meeting.

2024/129

Public Transport Working Group

Cllr Gomez-Aspron, St Helens Borough Council's Cabinet Member for Strategic Transport attended the meeting and spoke at length during Public Session (see Appendix A), answering queries from the floor, and took away the following issues:

- To chase up a response on the bridge at Spindle Hillock;
- to explore solutions to the current problems in getting on and off trains - given the 30 year old trains we have at present (you did confirm these are starting to be scrapped and replaced);

- to explore the possibility of the one track use at Garswood (in common with the system in place at Earlestown)

The Clerk had read out the response from LCR Mayor Steve Rotheram to the meeting during Public Session (Appendix A)

Resolved: to receive and note the above

2024/130

Communications Working Group

Approval for the following was requested:

11.1 to switch to .gov.uk email addresses for Members would cost £15 annually for each email address and the Clerk proposed to have this in place for 1st April 2024

11.2 to agree following changes to the Social Media Policy:

“Parish Councillors may only receive Parish Council business email to a .gov.uk email address (from 1 April 2024). Those without the required email address will receive only hard copy communication

Code of Practice:

When using social media (including email, Whatsapp, text messages and Facebook): parish councillors, volunteers and parish council staff must be mindful of the information they post in both a personal and parish council capacity and keep the tone of any comments respectful and informative. These platforms should only be used for low-level communication and not to consult or share detailed information relating to Parish Council business”

Resolved:

To agree to switch to .gov.uk email for Members at the cost of £15 annually for each email address

To agree the changes to the Social Media Policy

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Events Working Group

Cllr Murphy updated on the following:

12.1) 50th Anniversary update – she reported she had spoken to a Rainford Councillor who currently wishes to organise an inter-Parish sports event – he has taken his proposal away to consider the organisation and will get back in touch with Cllr Murphy

12.2) proposed Carnival – Cllr Murphy spoke a little about the proposed event and also proposed to advertise for volunteers to assist in the planning/running.

Resolved: to receive and note the above update.

The meeting ended at 9.15 pm

Please note: The Public Session held just prior to the meeting plus Agenda Item 4 are for information only. issues that require further discussion will appear on the Agenda of a future meeting.

APPENDIX A

PUBLIC SESSION*

1. Statement (if any) from Merseyside Police: there was no statement from Merseyside Police
2. The public may speak of any matters of concern:

Cllr Gomez-Aspron opened the session by speaking to residents in response to queries they had posed at last meeting:

Temporary Fencing at Spindle Hillock Railway Bridge: he reported no response from Network Rail but will investigate further and feedback to Parish Council.

Access for All: Bids to these national pots of money are determined by the Passenger Transport Executive, MerseyTravel, and not the Council specifically. To ensure it's fair, it's done by a number of criteria. In Merseyside, around 62 stations have step free access. The remaining stations across Merseyside are then ranked and the busiest stations are tackled first. 21 stations across Merseyside have no step free access, and Garswood and Earlestown are the only two within our Borough. Merseytravel are only allowed to submit 10 per bid and Garswood is not included in the next group of ten. That being said, there is no guarantee that 10 stations would be considered, the government may reduce the funding to, for example 4, this would mean the remaining 6 would then be pushed into the next group of ten. He acknowledged the query relating specifically to work recently announced for Earlestown Station whilst Garswood appears to be 'left out' and explained that part of the business case for submitting a station is the amount of recent development in the catchment area – another factor considered is that Earlestown is also the busiest station on the Liverpool-Manchester line without step free access. From ORR (Office of Rail and Road) figures, the station is used by around 381,000 people each year. Garswood by comparison is used by 190,000, also based on ORR figures. And around 500 houses have been built within half a mile of Earlestown Station in recent years, 1107 in the wider ward, and 2107 houses in Newton-le-Willows over the last 20 years. This is compared to only 15 houses in Billinge & Seneley Green Ward. Ultimately, the government are crystal clear that investment only comes with growth. And those places are done first. He further acknowledged the 'chicken and egg' situation of problematic access and overall use of the stations. After this round of access for all funding, Garswood will be in the final 11 stations in Merseyside that need improved access. One potential solution (which is the same as platform 3 at Earlestown), could be that all trains use platform 1 at Garswood so people simply don't need to cross the tracks. We just need to ensure that the "baby isn't thrown out with the bath water" when looking for a solution. He assured that he and Conor McGinn MP along with Cllr Murphy are pushing for this at City Region. He reminded the meeting that St Helens Council does not own the stations, they're owned by Network Rail and operated by Northern Rail which obviously hinders their progress. Cllr Gomez-Aspron went on to mention the Local Plan, St Helens Council have insisted that new development in Garswood should contribute to a solution at the station.

He agreed with the current feeling in Seneley Green that rail services are falling short. The history of you that rail services are farcical across the North. The Government stripped both Northern AND TPE of their franchises because they've been running them so badly and both franchises are now currently being run by Government. Historically and as part of the privatisation of the railways, any real power to influence this was removed. Both. The Labour Party position locally is that train services should be nationalised. And as part of Liverpool City Region, we are asking for these powers to be devolved to us. Until they are, the only real influence we have is to complain directly to the franchise operator and the Office of Rail and Road (ORR). He confirmed he is happy to do this but commented it's best to do this locally too, and in volume, so it can't be ignored

He then welcomed queries/comments from residents:

A resident commented they feel like 'forgotten people' and said it would have been good to have had more notice of the Councillor's attendance at the meeting.

Concern was raised over hidden footfall particularly in relation to the ageing population in the area who regularly use passes to travel and queried if this had a negative impact on the passenger figures quoted by ORR. Cllr Gomez-Aspron answered: ORR says they use methods that account for all travellers and these methods are used at all stations. Further resident comment was made re the fact there are only two trains per hour in each direction which obviously impacts on the number of passengers too.

Further comment was made in relation to the 'temporary' fencing at Spindle Hillock and residents updated on the history of this including a visit by Cllr Robinson (the then Chair of LCR Transport Committee) in December 2021 and in and Jan 22 he confirmed nothing would happen till 2024, this could of course just be further surveys but nothing appeared to be happening. Cllr Gomez-Aspron reiterated his earlier comment and promised to work towards finding out what is going on. He did further comment that this could be about to be put into Network Rail's work plan as it runs on a five year programme. He was pressed on how he could secure a response and he replied that chasing up on this issue does include escalation and this could involve going to MPs. He was asked if submitting a Freedom of Information request could be used to gain information out of organisations- he answered it shouldn't be needed but it is an option.

A query re requests that had been made for tap on machines at Garswood Station to ensure travellers are fully recorded but had not been met with any success. Cllr Gomez Aspron commented that you needed to ensure you can tap out at destination stations to be included in data. He mentioned tap on machines at Newton-le-Willows have never worked. Cllr Pearson mentioned London Transport use of this would appear to be successful (interestingly) they have never been deregulated and remain public transport.

A comment re the single track system. A resident asked if Parish Council could write to LCR Mayor Steve Rotheram to ask him to support the single track idea forward.

Comments re funding for a potential new station at Carr Mill when there are no funds to develop Garswood, concerns were also raised re the 'poaching' of customers from Garswood. There would be more parking at Carr Mill and it would be better connected to bus services from Billinge for example (Billinge residents use Garswood Station at the moment). Cllr Gomez-Aspron confirmed funding for any new station would come from a different pot of money to that available for access/upgrades. He commented that there would not be significant parking at Carr Mill as the emphasis would be access by walking, cycling or public transport. He also didn't anticipate a station at Carr Mill would actually poach Garswood Station customers.

A query was raised about the position of Garswood Station on the list for step free access and Cllr Gomez Aspron's comment that there is no guarantee ten will actually be considered, the resident pointed out that this would mean Garswood being pushed further down the list with an extended timescale for eventual completion. Cllr Gomez-Aspron agreed and he regretted there is no guarantee on government decision but he remained hopeful.

A resident asked why St Helens Council cannot apply for Levelling Up funding to address access at Garswood when Bury Council had managed to secure monies for their station. He answered that Levelling Up funding can only be applied for in relation to Town and not Parished areas and this is how Bury had chosen to use their funding. He commented that the only town areas within St Helens are Newton and Earlestown and even though this funding wasn't used for the rail stations, it is being used for development in Earlestown Town Centre.

A query re the problems with accessibility from the platform onto trains was raised and whether Harrington Humps could be used as a temporary solution. Cllr Gomez-Aspron explained how this problem had occurred; following electrification of the line, new electric trains were promised and instead 30 year old trains from a South-England line had been supplied. These trains are now starting to be scrapped and replaced however he will take up the existing problem to explore solutions.

The topic of housing development and the Section106 monies that could be used locally (potentially to support development at the station) was raised and a comment about a potential development close to the Wigan boundary with Seneley Green which would obviously have an impact on the parish

facilities. Cllr Gomez-Aspron said development within the St Helens boundary is supported by St Helens Council and he has written to Wigan Council asking if they will do the same.

A resident queried accessibility in getting on and off trains from and to the platform can be difficult and mentioned Harrington Humps as a temporary solution. Cllr Gomez-Aspron said he would take up the existing problem and report back, but then explained the background to this issue: following electrification we were supposed to get brand new electric trains we instead got 30 year old trains. They have just started to be scrapped and replaced.

Concern was raised over inclusivity – the library is now closed but transport links don't support ease of access to other libraries. Cllr Gomez-Aspron commented that a consultation now underway to determine what service will be needed 2026 onwards, it closes mid-March and he encouraged residents to complete.

A resident asked what is the way forward in ensuring Garswood Station isn't forgotten and Cllr Gomez-Aspron replied it is for whoever has the portfolio at St Helens Council (he has this at the moment but it may be another councillor in future) to keep raising the station and related issues at every opportunity.

Cllr Gomez Aspron was thanked for his attendance this evening, he then left prior to the start of the meeting.

Response from LCR Mayor Steve Rotheram to our queries on our railstation/rail service.

"I share your frustration that this service, and other routes on the City Line, have not met the standard expected. It is unacceptable that repeated cancellations and disruptions are continuing to impact passengers who rely on the service.

As you may know, due to the deregulated and fragmented nature of our public transport network, transport services in the UK are largely owned and run by private operators. However, the Northern franchise was taken over by government owned operator of last resort (OLR) in 2020.

Alongside Mayor Andy Burnham, I have called for an end to the rail chaos impacting our communities, and have demanded action from the government to fix these broken services. In 2019, Andy and I led the successful campaign to strip Northern of its franchise after years of poor performance. However, I recognise that many of these problems still persist on our network.

We are continuing to monitor the situation and apply pressure on the train operators and the government to improve performance and service reliability, and provide more investment. I understand the biggest issue impacting performance at present is staff resources and sickness levels, which have reached unprecedented levels. Problems have become more acute because of ongoing industrial relations issues.

I asked officers at the Combined Authority to raise your concerns with Northern Trains and we have received the following response from the company:

"I was sorry to hear about the impact that train service performance and reliability are having on your journeys. One of the recent causes of disruption is related to traincrew sickness. Whilst sickness levels at several of our depots have improved in recent weeks this is still above the industry average.

We also continue to be impacted by Industrial Relations activity including the ASLEF Action Short of a Strike (overtime ban) which was in place between Friday 1 and Saturday 9 December plus an individual day of action on Friday 8 December when no Northern Trains services were able to operate.

Recent weeks have also seen the rail network in the North West impacted by high winds/heavy rainfall which have further impacted performance.

To address high absence levels, we have been working hard with our occupational health provider to assist colleagues back to work. We have action plans in place to address all factors within our sphere of control including:

- *Regular monitoring and adjustment to our traincrew resource plan*
- *Supporting our colleagues through regular medicals and sickness support meetings to aid their recovery*
- *Deep dive case reviews with our Occupational Health Provider*
- *Ongoing recruitment of traincrew at our Blackpool and Blackburn depots which has ensured we have more traincrew than the required establishment*
- *Consulting a new Attendance and Wellbeing Policy which will allow us to better manage sickness more robustly*

Due to historic agreements which pre-date the current Northern business Sunday rosters fall outside of the working week for 95% of drivers and conductors in the North West and the service has suffered from what is essentially a “volunteer Sunday railway”. We recognise the imperative for workforce reform to bring about commitment for Sunday working and anticipate promoting active negotiations with the Trades Unions on this point when the negotiating remit is devolved back to train operating companies from the national discussions.

Our priority areas of focus for 2024 can be outlined in 3 key areas - sickness, skills and Sundays;

- *Sickness – Addressing high levels of sickness compared to historical run rate impacting both Driver and Conductor grades.*
- *Skills – Working through an outstanding driver training workbank and competency levels.*
- *Sundays – Tackling the disproportionate impact due to Sundays being outside of the working week for 95% of traincrew across the North West.”*

Mayors across the north have intervened as best we can to prompt action from the government over intercity services but we are limited in what we can do as we do not have local control over the services. To be truly impactful, we need further devolution of powers and resources so we can manage the operators in a way that is fit for our communities and economies, rather than being dictated by Whitehall.

Though I do not have the powers to instruct Northern to make changes to their services, as Mayor, I am working to bring local control over our transport services in the Liverpool City Region, including trains. This will enable us to build a London-style integrated transport network that better meets everyone's needs.

As part of our plans to improve our transport network, the Combined Authority has invested almost half a billion pounds into the fleet of 52 brand new and publicly-owned Merseyrail trains that are not only the most sophisticated in the country but the greenest and most accessible too.

I have long campaigned for a transformational shift of provision and investment into our region and beyond to be able to deliver comparable levels of service and performance to other regions. I will continue to call on the government to provide us with the adequate funding and resources we need to build a transport network that makes getting around quick, affordable, green and reliable, and one that everyone in the region can benefit from. “

Library: A resident reported a successful temporary arrangement to use IMC for groups who used to use the Library but are now displaced.