

Audlem Parish Council

**Minutes of the Parish Council Meeting
held at the Methodist Church, Shropshire St, Audlem,
on Thursday 12th December 2024 at 7.00pm**

Present:

Councillors:

Phillip Baker,
Tim Brooksbank,
Charles Cavill,
Carl Dovey,
David Jones,
Ryan Jones,
David Lambourne,

Absent:

Councillors:

Will Pearson
David Siddorns
Paul Smart

In Attendance:

Lee Jakeman (Locum Clerk)

24/97 Election of Chair of the Parish Council.

- a. There being no existing Chair or Deputy of the Council, Members **RESOLVED** to appoint Cllr David Jones. as chair for the meeting until such point as a Chair of the Council was elected.
- b. **RESOLVED** to appoint Cllr Carl Dovey as the Chair of the Council for the remainder of the municipal year.

(Clerk's Note: Cllr Dovey signed a declaration of acceptance of office form which was witnessed by the Proper Officer, and then took the Chair for the remainder of the meeting and formally welcomed the members of the public and fellow councillors to the meeting.)

24/98 Election of Deputy Chair of the Parish Council

- a. **RESOLVED: to appoint Cllr Phillip Baker as the Deputy Chair of the Council for the remainder of the municipal year.**

(Clerk's Note: Cllr Phillip Baker signed a declaration of acceptance of office form which was witnessed by the Proper Officer)

24/99 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence had been received and were noted from Parish Cllrs Pearson and Smart, along with (Cheshire East Ward) Cllr Rachel Bailey.

24/100 Declarations of Interest

Nil

24/101 Requests for Dispensation

Nil

24/102 Public Session

- a. **RESOLVED** that Standing Orders of the Council be suspended, to allow public participation in accordance with Standing Orders 3e-j.

A member of the public asked if the councillors present would introduce themselves (in light of the fact that many had recently been appointed). Those councillors present provide a brief introduction of themselves to the meeting.

- b. **RESOLVED:** that Standing Orders are reinstated and the meeting continues with remaining items on the agenda

24/103 Confirmation of Previous Minutes

RESOLVED: to approve the Minutes of the meeting held on 8th August 2024,

24/104 Council Meeting Dates

RESOLVED: that for the remainder of the Municipal Year that the Council meets on following dates:

9th January 2025, 13th February 2025, 20th March 2025 and 10th April 2025.

And

That the Annual Council meeting (which begins the Municipal Year 2025/26) be held on 8th May 2025.

24/105 Committees and Working Groups

RESOLVED: that all existing working groups and committees be terminated.

24/106 **Bank Mandate**

- a. **RESOLVED** that the Locum Clerk (Mr Lee Jakeman) and Cllrs , Phillip Baker, Tim Brooksbank, John (AKA Charles) Cavill, Carl Dovey and David Lambourne be fully authorised signatories of the Audlem Parish Council Bank Account held with Lloyds Bank

AND

- b. That all other signatories currently on the Bank Mandate are removed from the Bank Mandate.

24/107 **Bank Reconciliation**

RESOLVED: that the bank reconciliations for August, September and October 2024 be confirmed and that the Chair be instructed to sign them.

(Clerk's Note: The Balance of the Lloyds Bank Account as at 31 October stood at £73,374.92)

24/108 **Budget Summary**

Members received and noted a budget summary produced from the Scribe Accounting Package, as of 5th December 2024.

24/109 **Precept/ Budget 2025/26**

Members were advised that they will need to set a budget and confirm a precept before the end of January 2025.

Members were further advised that the Locum Clerk is preparing a draft budget for 2025/26 on the basis that the Parish Council will continue to do that which it currently does (no new or novel expenditure) and by applying reasonable estimated inflationary costs, and any contractual increases. The level of the General Reserve on 31 March 2024 was £149,826 (a level of nearly twice the current precept). With a predicted overspend (albeit heavily caveated) of circa £8k this would still leave the General Reserve (at year end 31 March 2025) at circa £140k. This is a significantly healthy sum for a parish whose annual budget is circa £90k.

Cllr Brooksbank asked for clarification regarding the high level of balances/reserve indicated at the end of the financial year 31 Mar 24 as per the Annual Governance and Accountability Return Accountability Report, and the most recent reconciliation of the Bank Account (£73,374.92). The Clerk will respond once the full position is understood.

24/110 Payments for Approval

RESOLVED: to approve a list of payments totalling £6,125.48 (see Appendix 1)

24/111 Clerk's Update

Members received and noted a report from the Locum Clerk (see Appendix 2).

The Chair advised members that earlier in the day the Council had received a statement from Chesire Police regarding the ongoing alleged fraud investigation (see Appendix 3), copies were distributed to councillors and the statement was read out for the benefit of the members of the public present.

Members sought clarification on a number of points raised in the report, and in particular the likely time frame for the fullest understanding of the Turnpike Field issues to be shared with and considered and any firm resolution being considered. It was generally agreed that any formal discussions and decisions would not likely take place until the February meeting of the Council.

24/112 Exclusion of the Press and Public

Members considered in terms of Schedule 12A, Local Government Act 1972, that the following item(s) will be likely to disclose exempt information relating to the contractual matters and therefore **RESOLVED: that pursuant to the provisions of the Public Bodies (Admissions to Meetings) Act 1960, the public and press be excluded.**

24/113 Locum Clerk Contract

(Clerk's Note: the Locum Clerk left the meeting during this item, returning only once a decision had been made to record that decision)

RESOLVED: to approve the draft contract circulated in advance of the meeting, subject to the contract end date being March 2025

----- **END** -----

Retrospective Payment List - Town Council Meeting 12 Dec 24

Invoice Date	Folio	Payee	Service	nett	VAT	Gross	Payment date	Payment Type	Scribe Code
27/8/24	1	3 Counties Cleaning	INV 772 - Toilets cleaning August 2024	420.00		420.00	19.11.24	via ChALC	
29/8/24	2	PHS Group	INV 7082664 - Annual Duty of Care 1 Oct 24 to 30 Sep 25	7.16	1.43	8.59	19.11.24	via ChALC	
30/8/24	3	Freeths	INV 509368-Legal fees - Land rights and restrictions advice	750.00	150.00	900.00	20.11.24	via ChALC	
1/9/24	4	SCRIBE	INV 6872 - SCRIBE Accts Subscription 1-30 Septe	55.00	11.00	66.00	2/9/24	D/D	
2/9/24	5	EDF	INV KI-447658B2-0003 Electric 1 -31 Aug 24	35.17	1.76	36.93		D/D	
6/9/24	6	Water Plus	wp-INV06783109 - Public Toilets Water/Waste 5 Aug - 4 Sep 24	105.21	-	105.21	19/9/24	D/D	
9/9/24	7	Fields in Trust	INV 8716 - Turnpike Field Change Request - File relating to deed of dedication	50.00	10.00	60.00	20.11.24	via ChALC	
15/9/24	8	PHS Group	INV 70865093 - Public Toilets consumables / sanitary waste disposal	185.02	37.00	222.02	19.11.24	via ChALC	
20/9/24	9	M K Jones (Martin Tree Care)	Dismantle Alder Tree and dispose	700.00	140.00	840.00	20.11.24	via ChALC	
30/9/24	10	Lengthsman	Lengthsman Salary - Sep 2024	531.67		531.67	21.11.24	via ChALC	
6/10/24	11	Water Plus	Sep - 4 Oct 24	100.92	-	100.92	21.10.24	D/D	
7/10/24	12	3 Counties Cleaning	INV 772 - Toilets cleaning September 2024	425.00		425.00	19.11.24	via ChALC	
16/10/24	13	EDF	INV KI-447658B2-0004 Electric 1 -30 Sep 24	33.58	1.68	35.26	16.10.24	D/D	
28/10/24	14	J Harrison (Tech Media)	INV 027103 - Laptop access/ unlock - collect diagnose, reset and return	172.00	-	172.00	19.11.24	via ChALC	
31/10/24	15	Freeths	INV - Legaal Fees - Land rights restrictions - dispute with seller/ review Fields in Trust details etc	950.00	190.00	1,140.00	20.11.24	via ChALC	
31/10/24	16	Lengthsman	Lengthsman Salary - Oct 2024	531.87		531.67	21.11.24	via ChALC	
4/11/24	17	3 Counties Cleaning	INV 773 - Toilets cleaning October 2024	425.00		425.00	19.11.24	via ChALC	
6/11/24	18	Water Plus	wp-INV07374825 - Public Toilets Water/Waste 5 Oct - 3 Nov 24	105.21		105.21	13/11/24	D/D	

6,125.48

AUDLEM PARISH COUNCIL MEETING
12 December 2024

LJ/2024/Admin

8th December 2024

REPORT TO AUDLEM PARISH COUNCIL

AGENDA ITEM 24/111 – Clerk’s Update

AIM

1. To provide members with an introduction to some of the likely priorities of the Council over the coming months and the priority ongoing issues.

BACKGROUND

2. The Parish Council has been largely inoperative since late August of 2024, following the departure of the previous Clerk and several councillors within a few weeks of each other. The departure of the councillors resulted in the Council being inquorate (being down to 3 members), until the most recent elections.
 3. Whilst the Council was inquorate, the 3 remaining councillors in consultation with and with support from Cheshire Association of Local Councils (ChALC) looked to source a temporary Clerk and return the Council to being quorate (through the arranging of local elections).
 4. Seven councillors were elected uncontested on Friday 22nd November 2024 to join the 3 existing councillors, which brought the Council up to 10 members (there is still one vacancy on the Council). All new councillors have signed their declarations of acceptance of office and these have been witnessed (and signed) by the proper officer).

DISCUSSION/ COMMENT

PARISH CLERK

5. The task of finding a temporary Clerk has proven to be difficult, in that there appears to be a shortage of suitably qualified people available and that no handover is/was available. A Locum (temporary) Clerk has been in place since mid-October 2024 and has been undertaking some very limited work. A formal contract has yet to be agreed (because the Council has been inquorate) and the Locum Clerk is only available for up to 15 hours per week. The previous Clerk was employed for 20 hours per week.

6. The Council will need to consider the awarding of a short-term contract and then seek to recruit a permanent clerk on the requisite hours to undertake all functions normally required of the role.

EXTERNAL AUDIT

7. The Council has received communications from the External Auditor PKF Littlejohn to notify that it has been unable to conclude the External Audit for the financial year ending 31st March 2024 (Enclosure 1 refers). The Council will need to dedicate timely resource to addressing this matter, particularly in light of the current end of financial year fast approaching.

POLICIES, PROCEDURES, REVIEWS, APPOINTMENTS

8. A number of the Council Policies are required to be reviewed annually (e.g. Standing Orders/ Financial Regulations). In addition, the Council will need to review items necessary as part of the Internal and External Audit (including Asset registers, risk management and internal audit procedure). Much of the relevant guidance on the requirements can be found in the Joint Panel on Accountability and Governance (JPAG) Practitioners Guide 2024 [Practitioners' Guide 2024](#)
9. The Council will need to confirm appointment of the internal auditor (the minutes of the Council meeting (24/15 (vii)) agree to "retain the same auditor as this year...", without naming the company, and confirm if they have received a formal letter of appointment.
10. The Council on 3rd August renewed its insurance policy with 'Clear Councils'. A review of the insurance policy will need to take place quickly to ensure that all assets / risks are insured and that levels of fidelity insurance/ public liability etc are adequate.

BANKING ARRANGEMENTS

11. Currently the Council is unable to effect payment of its invoices directly to suppliers (lack of councillors on the banking mandate). Fortunately, Cheshire Association of Local Councils ChALC) have kindly agreed to pay our suppliers for a short period of time. We will receive an invoice in due course from ChALC recharging the value of those individual payments.

TURNPIKE FIELD

12. The Council owns a piece of land known as Turnpike Field and there appears to be an ongoing dispute/ lack of understanding of its status (with Fields in Trust) and, any planning or purchase obligations that might have arisen as a result of its purchase.
13. Due to the Locum Clerk having had no handover and the departure of many councillors in recent months, it is considered important to understand the issues clearly before proceeding with any general discussion on the matter; there is likely to be a distinct lack of corporate understanding of the issues faced. Capturing all the relevant correspondence and appropriate documentation is required and sharing that information with all councillors is a priority. Following which, councillors can consider the matter and decide if and what they might be able or want to do. It is suggested that documentation and correspondence is shared with all councillors over the coming few weeks to allow

orientation and early in the new year a briefing / workshop of councillors and officers is held to draft next steps / options for a formal review, probably at the February meeting of the Council.

POLICIE INVESTIGATION

14. The Parish Council has since 2022 been discussing alleged missing funds from a bank account. The matter resulted in the Council changing its bank account. The investigation into the alleged missing funds has been subject of a complaint made to Santander Bank (the old Bank Account) and dialogue with the Police. The Locum Clerk has asked the Cheshire Police for an update on the matter. It is likely that any information provided by the Cheshire Police would be of a privileged nature if the matter relates a live investigation. Once I have had some dialogue, I will share what I can with members and where appropriate the wider public.

TRAINING

15. The role of Councillor can be helped significantly through the attendance of training courses. The Town and Parish Council sector can be 'a little difficult' to understand at times things that seem straight forward are not always so. The Cheshire Association of Local Councils (ChALC) is the recommended first port of call for sector specific training.
16. Members are encouraged to visit the [Cheshire Association of Local Councils](#) and familiarise themselves with the content and consider the virtual training events scheduled for 2025. [F903324.pdf](#).
17. There is a relatively healthy training budget and members are requested to identify any courses that they would wish to attend.
18. The 'induction for councillors and clerks', the 'roles and responsibilities' and the 'meetings and procedures' courses would be of benefit to most (unless you have previously served on a parish council); they are not onerous but will likely prevent some frustrations regarding processes.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

There are no specific recommendations. Members might wish to obtain further understanding of items mentioned from the Locum Clerk (noting the lack of working knowledge that the Clerk will have in historic items).



Lee Jakeman
Locum Clerk

Enc.
External Auditor's Report and Certificate 2023/24.

Section 3 – External Auditor’s Report and Certificate 2023/24

In respect of **Audlem Parish Council - CH0020**

1 Respective responsibilities of the auditor and the authority

Our responsibility as auditors to complete a **limited assurance review** is set out by the National Audit Office (NAO). A limited assurance review is **not a full statutory audit**, it does not constitute an audit carried out in accordance with International Standards on Auditing (UK & Ireland) and hence it **does not** provide the same level of assurance that such an audit would. The UK Government has determined that a lower level of assurance than that provided by a full statutory audit is appropriate for those local public bodies with the lowest levels of spending.

Under a limited assurance review, the auditor is responsible for reviewing Sections 1 and 2 of the Annual Governance and Accountability Return in accordance with NAO Auditor Guidance Note 02 (AGN 02) as issued by the NAO on behalf of the Comptroller and Auditor General. AGN 02 is available from the NAO website – <https://www.nao.org.uk/code-audit-practice/guidance-and-information-for-auditors/>

This authority is responsible for ensuring that its financial management is adequate and effective and that it has a sound system of internal control. The authority prepares an Annual Governance and Accountability Return in accordance with *Proper Practices* which:

- summarises the accounting records for the year ended 31 March 2024; and
- confirms and provides assurance on those matters that are relevant to our duties and responsibilities as external auditors.

2 External auditor’s limited assurance opinion 2023/24

On the basis of our review of Sections 1 and 2 of the Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR), in our opinion the information in Sections 1 and 2 of the AGAR is in accordance with Proper Practices and no other matters have come to our attention giving cause for concern that relevant legislation and regulatory requirements have not been met.

Please see below

Other matters not affecting our opinion which we draw to the attention of the authority:

We are unable to complete our review work on the AGAR and supporting documentation as a result of correspondence received in relation to 2023/24 and/or prior years. Once we have finalised our review and completed any additional work arising from that correspondence, a final report will be provided with the certificate of completion detailing any qualifications and ‘other’ matters.

Our fee note for the limited assurance review will be issued when we certify completion.

3 External auditor certificate 2023/24

We certify that we have completed our review of Sections 1 and 2 of the Annual Governance and Accountability Return, and discharged our responsibilities under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014, for the year ended 31 March 2024.

We do not certify completion because:

We have received correspondence bringing information to our attention that we must consider before certifying the completion of our review and the discharging of our responsibilities

External Auditor Name

PKF LITTLEJOHN LLP

External Auditor Signature

PKF Littlejohn LLP

Date

22/09/2024

Cheshire Police Comment Regarding Potential Fraud Audlem Parish Council

Issued Thu 12th December 2024

“We would like to reassure the parish council that this is very much a live investigation, however there is no significant update to provide at this time.

As we have previously stated, this is a complex case, and we need to ensure that all evidence is recovered so that it can be presented to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS).

Since the investigation was launched in July 2022, we have spoken to several witnesses, analysed the parish council accounts and have also sought advice from expert witnesses, including a chartered surveyor.

Two suspects have also been arrested on suspicion of fraud in relation to the allegations. The pair are both currently released under investigation, having been questioned by officers a number of times.

Following their arrest several documents, mobile phones and other electronic devices were seized, and hundreds of documents have since been extracted from the devices which are now being analysed by officers.

Once all of our enquiries have been completed, we are hoping to be able to submit a case file of evidence to the CPS in the new year. Until then, we would continue to urge people not to speculate on the case.

Further updates will be provided when available.”