

Stroud District Councillors' Report – April 2024

Report of meetings during March 2024

All Stroud District Council and Committee papers can be found here:

<https://www.stroud.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/meetings>

Recordings of meetings are available via the Council's You Tube channel (Live recordings):

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCeH_AmF0s-TShcYIM8Stweg

Elections

Elections will be held on Thursday 2nd May for Stroud District Council, the Police & Crime Commission for Gloucestershire and for the seven parish and town council wards which are contested (with more candidates nominated than spaces). Full details for the ward can be found [here](#).

The deadline to register to vote is midnight on Tuesday 16th April at www.gov.uk/register-to-vote. You will need to provide your national insurance number and registering only takes a few minutes.

The deadline to apply for a postal vote is 5 pm on Wednesday 17th April. The quickest way is to apply online: gov.uk/apply-postal-vote and you can also contact the District Council to complete an application by post.

For those who choose to vote in person on 2nd May it is important to remember that you will need to present an acceptable form of photo ID. This can also be obtained from the District Council as a Voter Authority Certificate. Further information on the local elections is available [here](#).

Strategy & Resources Committee – 7th March

The following items were discussed:

Visitors Car Park Ebley Mill

Agreed that the visitors-only car park at Ebley Mill will change to a public, charging, car park. This change is prompted by requests from local residents and businesses who would like to access the car park due to limited parking spaces in the local area, and the County Council due to imminently put double yellow lines on Westward Road and the area around Ebley Mill, which will make the situation even more difficult for local residents. Since the pandemic the number of in-person visits to Ebley Mill has dropped significantly, by over 60%, as the public access and pay for services on-line and some meetings are held virtually, so the Visitor Car park is empty most of the time. EV charging for cars and bikes has been included in the project costs.

There will still be 15 accessible and free-of-charge visitor spaces directly outside Ebley Mill – which are more convenient for people to stop for a short time, for example to pick up a new recycling container.

Community Funding (Crowdfunding)

The Council has selected Spacehive as the preferred supplier for a new Crowdfunding application, which will help community groups to raise funds via a community funding campaign, with successful projects receiving council funding too.

Support to community groups will include helping them to develop a marketing strategy, preparing a funding microsite, planning, promoting and launching the funding window with the community. A high

funding success rate is expected on the basis of experience with other councils. The new operating model was agreed by committee and the scheme is expected to launch later this year

Cotswold Canals Connected project update

An update on the revised approach to the delivery of the project, was agreed, following discussion with all the project partners on the Project Board, including Stroud District Council, Gloucestershire County Council, Cotswold Canals Trust, Canal and Rivers Trust and Stroud Valleys Canal Company. The revised approach has also been agreed by the principal funding body for the project - National Lottery Heritage Fund.

In December 2022, the council agreed to increase the capital budget for the Phase 1B of Canal Project, due to an increase in project delivery costs and inflationary cost increases. This phase of the project will see the canal connected to the national network at Saul Junction, and the engineering programme and project completion is now unlikely before the end of 2027.

The timeline is driven by the time needed to secure the additional funding to complete the project – in particular a new road bridge (Walk Bridge) and to cover the M5 crossing costs. Restoration of the canal will bring significant environmental, community and economic benefits to the local area and excellent progress is already being made on the environment and community programmes with a plan of further works for 2024, and by December 2025 an additional section of the canal from Stonehouse to Eastington will be completed.

Leadership Gloucestershire Update

- A new Homes for Refugees scheme for Gloucestershire has launched, to provide short term accommodation for refugees who are granted leave to remain.
- Gloucestershire Local Resilience Forum will take part in a new pilot study to strengthen emergency response in the county.
- Gloucestershire is to be offered a level 2 devolution deal by Government, which is expected to be announced in May and would mean the adult education budget transferring from central government to the county but no other significant changes.
- A new Severn Estuary Commission has been launched to explore tidal energy potential ([link](#)).

Other reports were discussed and noted:

- Future use of the Canalside Site along the A419 in Stonehouse
- Budget Monitoring quarter 3 update
- Performance Management

Community Services & Licensing Committee – 14th March

Community Engagement and VCSE Principles

One of the commitments in the Council Plan relates to improving the district council's ways of working with the community and voluntary sector. The Committee agreed two sets of new principles and further work will start on implementation.

- The new **Community Engagement Principles** are a toolkit for the council's officers and members across all their work with communities and individuals, supporting an asset-based approach

underpinned by consistency, respect, and reliability applicable in the many and varied interactions which the council has with its communities of place and interest.

- The new **Voluntary, Community & Social Enterprise Sector Principles** have been developed in parallel – and seek to provide the council and its partners in the VCSE with a set of commonly understood good practice guidelines for communication and support. They are designed to strengthen working relationship with a transparent and consistent approach.

Details of the principles are provided at the end of this report.

Cultural Strategy update

In December 2021 specialist arts consultants, 64 Million Artists, were commissioned by Stroud DC to undertake research and consultation to support the development of a cultural strategy for the Stroud District. The work to date has so far identified the following issues and opportunities:

- Creativity and climate – Working across generations and communities to be creative in tackling climate change.
- Communicating and connecting – creating a culture of advocacy - a cross cutting view to value culture's contribution
- Economy and regeneration - Fostering an eco-system which is supporting the creative/cultural sector to help them become better networked and connected in the broadest sense.
- Future Generations – Ensuring equal access to creative activity, co-creating youth led activities and enabling young people to become good ancestors.
- Community and Wellbeing – Maximizing the district's strong identity with creative health and there is the potential for creativity to connect to issues of loneliness, social isolation, an ageing population and adolescent mental health.
- Heritage and Place – Building on the district's heritage alongside commitments such as the canal restoration project linking communities together and magnifying the role of culture as a key driver for the cohesion, ownership and involvement.

The final strategy will be presented in the summer and then published in the autumn.

Safeguarding Policy and Procedures Guide

Committee approved the updated guide following an annual review. A Corporate Safeguarding Group has been established, which has clarified procedures for reporting and referring concerns and incidents. The training requirements for staff and elected members have also been clarified.

Other reports that were noted:

- Museum in the Park (Cowle Trust)
- Police and Crime Panel
- Citizens Advice
- Mental Health Champions (verbal update)
- Cost of Living Information Sheet – Housing Advice update
- Salix Decarbonisation – installation of Air Source Heat Pumps
- Proposal to set up a Taxi Task and Finish Group to consult with the taxi and private hire trade
- Performance Monitoring for quarter 3.

- Budget Monitoring update for quarter 3

Housing Committee – 19th March

Warm and Well Scheme – for home energy efficiency

Stroud District Council is the lead partner in the Gloucestershire and South Gloucestershire non-profit delivery partnership known as 'Warm and Well' for energy advice and support for home energy improvements.

Since 2001 this partnership has been delivered by the Severn Wye Energy Agency, a registered charity. Whilst not formal partners, the scheme also works closely with Gloucestershire Integrated Care Board and Gloucestershire County Council. The Warm and Well Scheme promotes the health benefits of energy efficiency in the home and delivers a programme of energy efficiency improvements which offers the benefits of personalised support from a dedicated local team, with the flexibility to offer tailored support for vulnerable households.

During the last four years the Warm & Well partnership has:

- Offered advice and support to 16,200 households (2,286 in Stroud District)
- Enabled the installation of 3,919 energy efficiency measures (437 in Stroud District).
- Brought in £9.6 million in funding (£1.1m for Stroud District) for those measures from Energy Company Obligations (ECO), Public Health and Better Care Fund, Warm Homes Fund and Central Government Green Homes fund (LADS and HUG).

For every £1 invested by the local authorities in the core Warm & Well Scheme in the last 4 years Stroud district residents benefited from support and funding worth an average of £6.58 per year.

Committee agreed that Stroud DC will lead the procurement of a delivery partner for the next 5 years, from April 2025, as the current delivery contract with Severn Wye Energy Agency ends in March 2025.

Swedish Timber Houses - Redevelopment Sites

The Committee agreed to add the three sites of current Swedish timber houses to the programme for redevelopment to build new council homes: in Stinchcombe (for 16 new homes), Uley (for 18 new homes) and Wotton (for 8 new homes). Redevelopment will of course be subject to planning permission.

An amendment was agreed to say that 'an update will be brought back to Housing Committee as soon as practicable regarding highway safety and other key infrastructure considerations before the submission of planning applications'. The Committee also recommended to Council additional budget of £14.7m to be funded from capital receipts, Homes England funding and borrowing, to fund this next phase of the new homes programme.

Visitor Room policy updates for Independent Living schemes

There are visitor rooms available at 11 of the council's Independent Living schemes (formerly Sheltered Housing). These are available for friends and families of tenants living at the scheme and can be booked through the Customer Services team. Costs will be increasing to £25 for the 1st night and £20 for each consecutive night for en-suite rooms (and £5 less for visitor rooms without an en-suite bathroom).

New Homes programme

The projects at Gloucester Street/Bradley Street (8 units in Wotton), Cambridge House (13 units in Dursley) and Glebelands (23 units in Cam) are currently out to tender for a second time following the initial aborted tender. The invitation to tender has been published through the Procure Partnerships Framework and bids are due back in mid-April. Subject to satisfactory bids, financial assessments/due diligence, and approvals, it is anticipated that the contract could be awarded by mid-June. Start on site for all three projects is therefore currently anticipated in late 2024.

SDC are also currently in the process of acquiring 3 Section 106 homes near Symn Lane in Wotton-under-Edge. The exchange of contracts has been delayed as a result of outstanding works due by the contractor. Following exchange of contracts completion will take place 5 weeks later. It is currently forecast that these homes will form part of the housing stock by the end of this financial year. This acquisition will provide 2 affordable rented homes and 1 shared ownership property which will be marketed upon exchange of contracts.

Small Sites, Garages and Disposals Update

An update report notes that capital receipts from the sale of SDC garages and small sites are £5.1 million. Since 2016 the council has sold more than 320 garages and 20 small sites. Planning permission has been secured for housing on small sites. The majority of these have now been sold for new houses to be built by individuals and small builders. The webpage set up to advertise sales and give FAQs can be found at www.stroud.gov.uk/land-and-property-for-sale

Twenty-two sites are being considered for temporary housing or general needs units (pods) across the district. Sites which will deliver fewer than five homes are not now viable for the council to develop because of the lack of the necessary economies of scale and relatively high construction costs. Housing associations and Community Land Trust face similar financial challenges in developing these smaller sites. Seventy garages are currently being marketed with more programmed for 2024-25. It is expected that the programme has 2 to 3 more years to run before all the sites have been reviewed and sold or retained as appropriate.

The disposal programme has made substantial progress selling surplus property. The promotion of the sites and work to secure planning permission or overage maximises property values and capital receipts to the Housing Revenue Account to fund new council homes. It also reduces the council's management and maintenance burden and brings sites and garages into more productive use. These capital receipts are important to support the delivery of new energy efficient council homes.

Other reports were discussed:

- Tenant Representatives
- Performance Monitoring
- Budget Monitoring Update for Quarter 3

Environment Committee – 21st March 2024

Grass Cutting changes

To align with new nature recovery obligations and to follow good practice, the committee agreed to change the SDC grass cutting regime to aid nature recovery and help reduce the carbon emissions produced in their management. However, due to the need for public access and in line with the views of residents, only

25% of the current 90 square kilometres of SDC maintained grass will be managed differently. The change in management will involve the following:

- Grass will only be cut around the base of any tree, once per annum. This will improve tree health; lessen soil compaction and unintended abrasion, reduce long term maintenance costs, and improve biodiversity and habitats for wildlife. Approximately 1500 trees are in scope and a minimum ring of 1m radius around each tree, would create a conservative 18,000sqm of enhanced habitat – equivalent to 3 football pitches.
- Ubico will begin to plant spring bulbs and wildflower seeds at the base of each tree on a rolling programme. This will further help aerate the soil and increase biodiversity, by introducing plants favourable for pollinators, whilst adding a splash of colour and brightness.
- Thereafter and on a phased basis over the next two years, SDC will be looking to identify appropriate areas of grassland for rewilding and reduced mowing.

Factors such as recreational use, proximity to housing and visibility lines will be taken into account and agreement will be sought, either via resident consultation, or in collaboration with town and parish councils, for general recreation and amenity land.

Memorial Plaques

The Committee agreed that the council would allow for memorial plaques on benches on Selsley Common and in Stratford Park in Stroud. Up to 22 chargeable memorial plaques can be affixed, to offer families an opportunity to buy a lasting memorial. The scheme will be self-funding and create an additional revenue stream to be replace dilapidated benches and re-invest in public open spaces. Each plaque will cost £250. This includes engraving and fitment, for a 10-year period. Westonbirt Arboretum currently charge £305 for a similar scheme.

Annual Report on progress towards the council's climate change and sustainability goals

Committee approved the third annual report on delivery of the Council's 2030 Strategy ([link](#)). The top achievements over the past year include a reduction in Scope 1 (direct) emissions of 21%, approval of over 99,000 solar panels through planning permission, 2.8 hectares of new wetland created and 3.5 km of stream restored. Do take a look at the full report.

Severn Estuary - Special Protection Area (SPA), Special Area of Conservation (SAC) & Ramsar Mitigation Strategy

The Severn Estuary SAC/SPA/Ramsar is one of the largest estuaries in Europe and is internationally important for the habitat and species the estuary supports. Saltmarsh fringes the coast backed by grazing marsh with freshwater ditches and occasional brackish ditches. The subtidal seabed is rock and gravel with subtidal sandbanks. The site also supports reefs of the tube forming worm *Sabellaria alveolata*. The estuary's classic funnel shape, unique in the UK, is a factor causing the Severn to have one of the highest tidal ranges in the world.

A consequence of the large tidal range is an extensive intertidal zone, one of the largest in the UK. The site qualifies as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) for a range of coastal habitats and for three fish species. The Severn Estuary Special Protection Area (SPA) is classified for its waterbird assemblage and for a range of species that occur on passage/over winter including a range of both wildfowl and wader species. The Ramsar interest overlaps with the SAC and SPA features and includes the bird interest.

The Committee approved the Severn Estuary Recreation Mitigation Strategy for avoidance of likely significant adverse effects.

Two Neighbourhood Development Plans were noted – and will progress to referendum: for Brimscombe and Thrupp, and for Slimbridge following the recommendations laid out in the Examiner’s Reports.

Retrofit support for self-funding households

SDC officers have been working with Climate Leadership Gloucestershire colleagues to advance the retrofit area of work in respect of those people who are able to self-finance works to their own property. The next step is to procure an expert contractor who will provide an online advice platform, along with pathways to home assessments and retrofit installation, with additional support to residents considering self-funded investment in retrofit.

This could potentially be feasible utilising a modest budget aggregated across districts. This would be a highly visible and proven method to encourage the retrofit market in Gloucestershire at relatively low cost. It would also help to make residents’ homes warmer, more comfortable, and cheaper to run; as well as tackling the quarter of the county’s emissions that come from domestic housing.

The ‘self-financing’ market is still small and will need a lot of promotion. Consequently, there is also a recommendation to commit further officer support and time to this work, to assist in developing the in-depth community engagement needed. This will include co-ordinating messages with other partners such as the NHS, to present and promote a unified Gloucestershire retrofit support offer. If delivered successfully this would represent a nationally leading approach to homeowner retrofit support.

Other reports were discussed:

- Budget Monitoring Report Q3 2023/24
- Strategic Planning Advisory Board (verbal update)
- Stroud Regeneration Committee (verbal update)
- Performance Monitoring
- Climate Leadership Group
- Cotswold National Landscape Board Net Zero Pathway - for SDC adoption Information Sheet
- Lower Severn Internal Drainage Board

Licensing Committee – 22nd March

The committee held a public hearing to review the club premises certificate held by the Carlton Club, London Road, Stroud, following complaints by the police.

Other news

Swimming Pool funding

Two Stroud district swimming pools have been successful in securing funding which will improve their facilities. Government Swimming Pool Support Fund investment in The Pulse leisure centre in Dursley and Wotton Pool will help improve the energy efficiency of their pools and leisure centres. The latest round of funding is intended to help the longer-term energy and financial resilience of the sector. The Pulse, run by Stroud District Council, has received almost £300,000 to fund the refurbishment of its entrance area and a new air-handling unit. Wotton Pool, run largely by volunteers, has secured £6,000 for new pool covers.

Last Autumn The Pulse secured £165,000, and Wotton Pool £11,000 from an earlier round of Swimming Pool Support Fund for heating, maintenance and chemicals.

Help to protect skylarks

Walkers and dog owners can protect Skylarks during nesting season by sticking to footpaths and keeping dogs on short leads when enjoying Selsley Common. Selsley Common is one of few places to spot the iconic, yet sadly declining, bird species. Skylarks are classified as 'red' on the British Birds of Conservation Concern list which means that their population is at risk. In the UK, the population halved during the 1990s and continues to drop. During nesting season, from April to July, Skylarks are particularly vulnerable. It is important they are not disturbed, as this can interfere with them raising their chicks. Keeping dogs on short leads helps protect the nests.

Support for The Brimscombe Mill community

Stroud district council made a short statement on 22nd March in support of the Brimscombe Mill community:

“Following recent developments, we are concerned to hear that the people working for the community organisations at Brimscombe Mill may have to relocate their activities. Stroud District Council officers and councillors are in regular contact with management of the overarching Grace Network organisation, to see how we can support a valued partner, whom we work with on a number of innovative and effective projects. The organisations there employ many local residents, and many more regularly utilise and love their services, so as a council we appreciate all the public concern. They are keeping us informed about their situation and we are doing all that we can to support them in their efforts to secure a permanent home in the local area.”

Great British Spring Clean

Stroud District Council joined forces with Keep Britain Tidy's campaign by holding an event at Wallbridge near Stroud town centre on March 22. The Great British Spring Clean is the nation's biggest mass-action environmental campaign. The Great British Spring Clean and [Great Big School Clean](#) 2024 take place from 15 - 31 March,

Clearing fly tipping, street sweeping, emptying bins and litter picking costs council tax payers £770,000 to clear up in our district. To borrow litter picking equipment, visit <https://www.stroud.gov.uk/environment/bins-rubbish-and-recycling/street-cleaning>.

Discover Stroud Trails app for Stroud District

Interactive family scavenger hunts, quizzes and pop-up event notifications are among a host of new features to be added to Stroud District Council's popular Discover Stroud Trails app. Discover Stroud Trails is a free-of-charge walking app designed to help people make the most of the Stroud district, whether they are locals who want to discover more about their home town, or first time visitors to the area.

The app's new features include hunts to find hidden historical features in the district's towns while collecting online badges and taking part in fun quizzes. More than 2,000 users have downloaded the app since it was launched in 2022, and 4,437 trails have been followed.

Discover Stroud Trails is available to download from the Apple store and Google Play stores

Action on empty homes

A long-abandoned home with a garden so overgrown it encroached onto neighbouring properties will be brought back into use as a result of action by Stroud District Council's Environmental Health Officers. The three-bedroom property had been empty for a number of years before concerned neighbours contacted SDC to request assistance in 2019. When officers inspected the property they found the interior was so damp that moisture-loving ferns were flourishing inside, and the structure badly damaged by years of neglect.

Extensive efforts were made to contact the owner and encourage them to bring the property back into use. Despite numerous attempts to engage with the owner, officers successfully applied for a County Court order to force the sale of the house. The house, which requires extensive renovations to make it habitable, has been sold by auction. The council's costs will be taken from the proceeds.

SDC offers homeowners an interest free Empty Homes Loan of up to £15,000 for repairs and refurbishment to properties that have been empty for more than 12 months if they are then used for affordable rented housing.

Social Housing award

Stroud District Council has won an industry award recognising its hard work, dedication, and commitment to improving the energy efficiency of hundreds of social homes in Gloucestershire. At the Retrofit Academy awards ceremony this week, the council was named as the Best Social Housing-led Retrofit Programme. The award is for a Gloucestershire-wide consortium project, which is led by SDC, and brings together social housing retrofit across the county. So far, the programme has delivered across the county, whole house retrofit of 46 properties and continues to deliver a two-phased programme of fabric first improvements to 843 properties, many of which are considered 'hard to treat'.

Celebrating the natural environment

The connection between land, nature, people, and flooding was the subject of a multimedia event combining film, poetry, art and live music at Stroud Film Festival. The event brought together various art works commissioned by Stroud District Council to celebrate its innovative Natural Flood Management programme (NFM). A 30-minute film made by film maker Antony Lyons was accompanied by a live trio of musicians. The film, jointly funded with the University of Gloucestershire countryside and Community Research Institute, celebrates the wet woodland and Tufa (porous limestone) habitats in the Stroud Valleys that are vital for slowing, storing and filtering water which helps to reduce flood risk and increases resilience to drought. Artist Joe Magee and SDC's NFM officer Chris Uttley presented an exhibition of the original artwork from the graphic story 'Sound of a River.' It tells the story of a young Stroud resident's journey of discovery after the flooding of her home and is available to download free-of-charge at www.stroud.gov.uk/soundofariver

Revamped Play Areas – with more to follow

Play areas at Mason Road and Stratford Park in Stroud have recently been revamped and reopened. New play equipment has been installed following consultation with residents and the children who use it, providing children with much-improved play areas for years to come. Both were opened with special events for children recently.

The play area is one of six throughout the district to be revamped by Stroud District Council. Acacia Drive and Cambridge Avenue in Dursley, Wharfdale Way in Stonehouse, Archway Gardens in Paganhill and now Mason Road in Stroud are now complete and were funded by £300,000 of Contain Outbreak Management

Fund (COMF) for local authorities in England to help reduce the spread of coronavirus and support local public health. SDC is contributing its own funds to improve Stratford Park's play area in Stroud.

A further £150,000 has been earmarked for investment in more play area revamps in 2024/25, as well.

SDC News magazine

Every household in the district should recently have received the free annual newsletter from Stroud district council with information about council services to keep the public informed on current initiatives and projects. Delivered to more than 54,000 homes and also available as a digital version, it explains how the new Council Plan's three main priorities are driving improvements across the district SDC News costs approximately 28p per copy to produce and distribute - the same as last year.

Agreed at the Community Services & Licensing Committee:

Community Engagement Principles:

1. **Involvement:** *we will work with community stakeholders to identify and involve the people and organisations who have an interest in the focus of the engagement, ensuring accessibility, inclusivity, diversity and equality.*
2. **Support:** *we will identify and overcome any barriers to involvement.*
3. **Planning:** *we will gather evidence of the needs and available resources and use this evidence to agree the purpose, scope and timescale of the engagement and the actions to be taken.*
4. **Methods:** *we will implement and use methods of engagement that are effective.*
5. **Working Together:** *We will implement and use clear procedures that enable people to work with one another effectively and efficiently.*
6. **Sharing Information:** *we will ensure that necessary information is communicated with the participants of community engagement, in line with Data Protection legislation.*
7. **Working with Others:** *we will collaborate with energy, respect and effectiveness with others with an interest in the engagement like stakeholders, statutory partners and third parties.*
8. **Improvement:** *we will develop actively the skills, knowledge and confidence of our people so that they can engage with communities more effectively.*
9. **Feedback:** *we will feed back the results of the engagement to the wider community and agencies affected.*
10. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** *we will monitor and evaluate whether the engagement achieves its purposes, and we will use our learning to improve our engagement.*

Voluntary & Community Sector Principles:

1. *We identify which SDC service areas work with VCSE partners and ensure that the 11 VCSE principles applied across the Council.*
2. *We use our time and resources to hold spaces for open and informative dialogue with VCSE partners through regular forums.*
3. *We seek VCSE partners and their representatives to form working groups with us on priority issues including Community Safety and Cost of Living.*

4. *When a new priority is identified, we seek to bring relevant VCSE partners together to share data, insight and develop joint working with us.*
5. *We will actively listen to our partners without judgement and prejudice valuing community knowledge and local insight.*
6. *We champion the work of our VCSE partners in the networks that we have access to, including ICS commissioning groups and SDC decision making bodies.*
7. *We invest in our VCSE partners with the project funding we receive from Government, commissioners and our SDC grant schemes.*
8. *We research potential investment in funding tools that will support VCSE organisations like a Crowd Funding platform.*
9. *We review our contracting processes to ensure they are accessible for less experienced organisations and the documentation and monitoring is proportionate for the level of funding being given.*
10. *We invite open dialogue and respectfully hear what our VCSE partners have to say as 'critical friends' to us.*
11. *We use constructive feedback from our VCSE partners to inform future policy and practice.*