

**HALLS, CEMETERIES & ALLOTMENTS COMMITTEE MEETING OF THE
WITNEY TOWN COUNCIL**

Held on Monday, 6 November 2023

At 6.02 pm in the Gallery Room, The Corn Exchange, Witney

Present:

Councillor R Crouch (Chair)

Councillors:	D Enright O Collins J Aitman D Edwards-Hughes	D Newcombe J Treloar R Smith
Officers:	Adam Clapton Sharon Groth Mark Lewis Derek Mackenzie Nigel Warner	Deputy Town Clerk Town Clerk Head of Estates & Operations Senior Administrative Officer & Committee Clerk Responsible Financial Officer
Others:	Two members of the public. Councillor Thomas Ashby	

H580 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies for absence were received.

H581 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest from Members or Officers.

Councillor D Enright joined the meeting at 6:03pm

H582 MINUTES

The minutes of the Halls, Cemeteries & Allotments Committee meeting held on 11 September 2023 were received.

Resolved:

That, the minutes of the Halls, Cemeteries & Allotments Committee meeting held on 11 September 2023 be approved as a correct record of the meeting and be signed by the Chair.

H583 **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

The Committee adjourned for this item.

The Committee received representations from a resident concerning a lack of signage in Tower Hill Cemetery. His concern related to the lack of signs advising individuals to keep dogs under control and to pick up dog waste. As this was not an item on the Agenda the Chair advised it would be added to the agenda for discussion at the meeting of the Committee on 22 January 2024 but Members were understanding of the request.

The Committee reconvened.

H584 **FINANCE REPORT: REVISED REVENUE BUDGET 2023/24 AND DRAFT BASE REVENUE BUDGET FOR 2024/25**

The committee received the report of the Responsible Financial Officer (RFO) who apologised for the late delivery of the report to the Committee owing to additional work commitments.

The RFO summarised his reports which outlined a general underspend on the grounds maintenance cost but included there had been a significant spend on machinery since the council took the contract back in house. Members also received an update regarding energy costs including how these should soon show a decrease for Burwell Hall following the new boiler installation; the operations team would review the performance in 3 months and review the projected budget for 2024/25 accordingly.

Costs for the Corn Exchange saw an increase; the RFO outlined this was mainly due to the recruitment of a Bar & Café Manager, however she would be looking at the reduction of costs and greater efficiency across the 1863 Café which should lead to better margins of profit.

Members expressed a concern that if there were to be increases in the cost of purchasing from the Café, that some of the loyal clientele may be put off and cease frequenting the venue, they asked that this was borne in mind as the café offered a warm and safe place to many individuals.

Recommended:

1. That, the report be noted.
2. That, the revised base revenue budget for 2023/24 and the initial estimated base revenue budgets for 2024/25, as detailed in the draft estimates be agreed, noting that they may change in the final completed budget.

H585 **REVENUE GROWTH ITEMS, SPECIAL REVENUE PROJECTS, AND CAPITAL PROJECTS**

The Committee received and considered the tabled report of the Responsible Financial Officer.

Members heard that projects to fit the new boiler at Burwell Hall and redecorate the Gallery Room and Café at the Corn Exchange had been completed. Members agreed that the project to improve the lighting up of the Corn Exchange for special events should continue to be investigated and reported back to the Committee.

Members noted the proposal to increase the closed churches budget by £5,000 to facilitate repair, this was discussed later in the meeting as Agenda Item 13.

The Town Clerk updated members on the reasoning for the upgrade of toilet facilities at Burwell Hall, which dated from the 1980's; she also explained the reasoning behind ensuring that the replacement glazing project at the Langdale Hall take place.

Recommended:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, the revised capital and special revenue projects budget for 2023/24 and the proposed capital and special revenue projects budget for 2024-25 and beyond be agreed, subject to further adjustments in the final budget and,
3. That, the project to improve lighting up the Corn Exchange be costed out by officers and,
4. That, Officers continue to work on the project to replace the sanitaryware at Burwell Hall and Glazing at Langdale Hall.

The Responsible Financial Officer left the meeting at 6:42pm

H586 **SCHEDULE OF PROPOSED FEES AND CHARGES 2024/25**

The Committee received and considered the details of the 6.7% increase proposal to Halls & Cemeteries costs from April 2024.

Members discussed the increase however felt that before reaching a decision they asked for feedback from the council's staff as to whether any cost increases should be considered independently rather than a blanket increase.

Recommended:

That, the matter be deferred to the meeting of Policy, Governance & Finance on 20 November 2023 to allow Officers to provide further information if necessary.

H587 **RESIDENT SATISFACTION SURVEY COMMENTS**

The Committee received and considered the report of the Deputy Town Clerk which outlined comments listed in the resident's survey which related to the Committee.

Members were pleased to see that the majority of respondents had not made any negative comments about the Halls, Cemeteries or Allotments. Only eight comments from over two hundred responses.

Members were aware of the anti-social issues suffered at Tower Hill Cemetery however, there was agreement that CCTV at the cemetery would go against the private nature of the area and would likely be vandalised. Members asked that Thames Valley Police continue to be informed of problems as it is felt that Tower Hill was no greater effected than other similar areas.

Members asked that consideration be given to the issue of social media posts outlining the issues and how this directly affects residents, perhaps by way of short video including the residents.

The Deputy Town Clerk advised that all the points would be picked up on the "you said we did" posts that will be issued in the New Year.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, Officers consider social media posts to highlight issues.

H588 **PUBLIC HALLS REPORT**

The Committee received and considered the report of the Venue & Events Officer.

Members welcomed the update and were intrigued to hear of the potential introduction of a screen for use in the Gallery Room which could be used for multiple purposes.

The Deputy Town Clerk advised that Officers were also looking into the hybrid meeting technology and that a further report would be forthcoming outlining the various options and costings involved.

Members also thought that the idea of Private Hirings for parties should be explored once a decision is made.

Resolved:

That, the report be noted.

H589 **PUBLIC HALLS EVENTS REPORT**

The Committee received the report of the venue & Events Officer which summarised events over the past few months.

Members were pleased to see the evidence of continued increases in the attendance of events and welcomed the greater focus on publicising of events and the news that a "What's On" with six months of events will form part of the Council's Newsletter residents issued in January 2024.

A members advised that it can something be difficult to understand it the Corn Exchange bar is open of an evening and would welcome clearer display of opening times on event and non-event nights.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, Officers review how the display of the Corn Exchange opening hours can be improved.

H590 **CORN EXCHANGE BUSINESS PLAN**

The Committee received and considered the Business Plan prepared by the Venue & Events Officer with details of the aims for the next 3 years.

A member raised concerns that the Corn Exchange did not show an indication of making a profit. Members discussed at length the aims of the venue and agreed that the main objective was to provide facilities for local groups/organisations as well as a safe and warm space for individuals; therefore if there was a drive to make more profit this may affect the footfall of the café and have an adverse effect.

A member reminded the Committee that the Corn Exchange was not the only “financial burden on Taxpayers” by the very nature of how the Council received funds from the Precept to fund the services it operates then so were Cemeteries, Parks & Receptions and all functions of the Council.

Members felt that the Business Plan should include a Statement of Use, explaining it welcomes a broad appeal of events, arranges free community events and for the Social Value of the Corn Exchange quantified in future versions of the Business Plan.

The Committee questioned the financial projections within the report, it showed the increase in expenditure outstripped the increase in income and they would welcome greater clarification on this.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, the Business Plan be reviewed by Officers for consideration by this committee at a future meeting and,
3. That, the future version of the report to show Social Value, clarification of the financial information and a Statement of Use for the Corn Exchange.

H591 PUBLIC HALLS SAFETY & SECURITY

The Committee received the report of the Town Clerk/C.E.O concerning the safety and security of hirers and Council staff within the public halls.

The Head of Estates & Operations advised he had received a visit from Thames Valley Police earlier in the day updating him on the process of the recent incidents at the Corn Exchange. Further updates would be provided to members as necessary.

The Committee discussed options and asked if progress had been made in respect of the town-wide radio scheme, previously known as “Pub Watch”, the Town Clerk advised that Officers would follow up with West Oxfordshire District Council who run the scheme.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, Officers continue to explore the town wide radio watch scheme should this be suitable to join.

H592 CEMETERIES & CLOSED CHURCHYARDS 2024-25

The Committee received the report of the Operations Manager following a request from Holy Trinity Church at Woodgreen to carry out repairs to the metal arch and stone pillars.

Members agreed that as the Council has a legal obligation to maintain the closed churchyard then a discussion on an increase in budget was not required.

Members agreed to recommend the increase in budget to be agreed by the Policy, Governance & Finance Committee on 20 November 2023.

Recommended:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, an increase to the Close Churchyard maintenance budget 4036/303 be increased by £5,000 to £16,000 in the 2024/25 financial year.

H593 **TOWN COUNCIL BURIALS SERVICE**

Members received and considered the report of the Senior Administrative Officer relating to the Councils burial service over the previous twelve months.

Members were pleased to receive the update and raised questions relating to the terms under which the council administrates its Exclusive Rights of Burials which were answered by the Senior Administrative Officer.

Resolved:

That, the report be noted.

H594 **EXCLUSION OF PRESS & PUBLIC**

Resolved:

That in accordance with section (1(2) of the Public Bodies (admission to Meetings) Act 1960, and as extended by Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, the public, including the press, be excluded from the meeting because of the confidential nature of the following business to be transacted.

H595 **PROPERTY & LEGAL MATTERS**

The Committee received and considered the confidential report of the Town Clerk relating to the renewal of the lease of Madley Park Hall to Madley Hall Park Trust (MPHT).

Members reported that residents had faced issues when trying to book the hall in the recent past relating to alcohol consumption on the premises. It was agreed the Town Clerk would address this in the negotiations.

The Committee also asked that the Council raise awareness with MPHT that they maximise the use of their status as a charity in obtaining grant funding which is not available to the council; this included West Oxfordshire District Council West Hive scheme as this could be a solution to financing the repairs to the internal doors.

Recommended:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, a new lease be drawn up for agreement on similar terms as before.

The meeting closed at: 7.42 pm

Chair