

**POLICY, GOVERNANCE & FINANCE COMMITTEE MEETING OF THE
WITNEY TOWN COUNCIL**

Held on Monday, 20 November 2023

At 6.00 pm in the Gallery Room, The Corn Exchange, Witney

Present:

Councillor J Aitman (Chair)

Councillors:	R Crouch O Collins R Smith A Bailey	J Doughty D Newcombe G Meadows (In place of L Cherry)
Officers:	Sharon Groth Adam Clapton Mark Lewis Nigel Warner	Town Clerk Deputy Town Clerk Head of Estates & Operations Responsible Financial Officer
Others:	no members of the public. Councillor Thomas Ashby Councillor Geoff Doughty	

F612 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was noted for Cllr L Cherry.

The Chair advised the Committee there would be an adjournment at 7pm for the Transgender Day of Remembrance vigil taking place outside the Corn Exchange.

F613 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest from Members or Officers.

F614 MINUTES

The minutes of the Policy, Governance & Finance Committee meeting held on 25 September 2023 were received.

Resolved:

That, the minutes of the Policy, Governance & Finance Committee meeting held on 25 September 2023 be approved as a correct record of the meeting and be signed by the Chair.

F615 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There was no public participation.

F616 **GROUNDS MAINTENANCE REVIEW**

The Committee received and considered the report of the Head of Estates & Operations reviewing the Council's grounds maintenance services which were taken in-house from October 2022.

The review showed the change had resulted in a positive overall outcome for the Council in all aspects of the service and that the cost was comparable to that provided by the former external contractor.

Key achievements, challenges, risks were identified and there were further opportunities moving forward, including around hanging baskets and additional equipment.

The costs for the services had been top-heavy in year one due to the purchase of equipment, there was further work required on staffing levels and while initially there were issues regarding grass cutting, these were overcome and the flexibility in works allowed a more efficient reactionary response.

Members welcomed the review, effectively within budget, and recognised the efforts of all staff involved in the transition during the last year. Well kept open spaces were a source of civic pride and were welcoming for visitors to Witney and further improvements would now be able to follow all the good work so far.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, the Council continues to provide hanging baskets in the town and,
3. That, Officers review the feasibility of outsourcing the hanging basket maintenance or continuing this in-house due to the seasonal requirements, vehicles and equipment necessary and,
4. That, the following requests be included in the 2024-25 draft budget, subject to prioritisation which may be required in the final version:
 - a. £5,575 ex VAT for a Trimax FX155 front mount flail.
 - b. £5,449 ex VAT for a Trimax Striker 150 tractor-mounted mower to fit on the new compact tractor.
 - c. £15,000-£30,000 for a ride on mower.
 - d. Ford transit with a renewal fund of £22,878 to be replaced with a Mitsubishi FUSO - tipper body (or equivalent) at circa £34,000 ex VAT.
 - e. Peugeot Partner was bought used as a temporary vehicle due to long delays on new vehicle purchasing to be replaced with a Nissan Townstar (Electric) at £30,518 ex VAT.

F617 **RESIDENT SATISFACTION SURVEY RESULTS**

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

The majority of the comments made were about the ground's maintenance service and the review document Members had just seen highlighted some of the challenges encountered, as well as the successes and achievements. The Parks & Recreation Committee had recommended benchmarking standards be created to help quantify comments and complaints on the service in the future.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted.

F618 OXFORDSHIRE COUNCILS CHARTER

The Committee received a verbal update from the Town Clerk/C.E.O following a meeting attended by herself and the Chair at Oxford County Hall.

Members heard the County Council were spearheading the Charter which outlined how all local tiers of authorities should communicate and work together for the benefit of residents.

The Town Clerk would issue a survey inviting individual responses on the project consultation which closed in December. A draft charter was expected in January 2024 and would be discussed again by the Council in due course.

Members agreed it was a vitally important project which would give smaller parishes a voice, including the town council, that are sometimes left unheard.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted.

F619 PAYMENT OF ACCOUNTS

The Committee received the report of the Responsible Financial Officer outlining bank statements and bank reconciliations which were brought to the Policy, Governance & Finance committee as part of the Council's due diligence.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, the bank reconciliations be agreed.

F620 INTERNAL AUDIT - INTERIM AUDIT REPORT

The Committee received and considered the Interim Audit Report 2023-24 from the Council's internal Auditors, Auditing Solutions Ltd.

Members welcomed the report and noted that recommendations provided under review of income which were being addressed by Officers.

Resolved:

That, the Interim Audit Report 2023-24 from the Council's internal auditors be noted.

F621 ANNUAL INVESTMENT STRATEGY

The Committee received and considered the report and accompanying document from the RFO concerning the Council's investment strategy.

Members heard this was usually reviewed in autumn and was part of Officers' due diligence in good financial management. A number of minor amendments were proposed, mainly regarding the powers open to Councils on investments. Overall, the strategy was prudent and cautious which was broadly similar to other larger town/parish councils.

Members discussed the sustainability and ethical standards of investments and returns. The policy highlighted the need for social and ethical investments but the levels of sustainability regarding the Councils current investment provider weren't known.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, the current investment in secure banks be approved, noting the Town Clerk/RFO continue to monitor interest rates to ensure that the Council receives the most advantageous interest rates and,
3. That, the Annual Investment Strategy 2023/24 be formally approved by the Committee, and subsequently Full Council on 4 December 2023 subject to the inclusion of sustainability and,
4. That, Officers feedback to the Committee on the levels of sustainability in the Council's current investments at a future meeting.

F622 FCC - COMMUNITIES FOUNDATION GRANT FUNDING - WHEELED SPORTS PROJECT

The Town Clerk explained that Officers were in the final stages of providing the necessary supporting information for the grant award. She requested a resolution be passed confirming the authority for her, in the capacity as the Council's Proper Officer, Town Clerk and CEO to sign the necessary paperwork.

Resolved:

That, the Town Clerk/CEO in her capacity as the Council's Proper Officer be given authority to sign the FCC Communities Foundation Grant Funding agreement for the Leys wheeled sports park project on behalf of Witney Town Council.

F623 FINANCE REPORT: REVISED REVENUE BUDGET 2023/24 AND DRAFT BASE REVENUE BUDGET FOR 2024/25

The Committee received and considered the report of the RFO regarding revenue budgets for the current and forthcoming years.

Members were advised that Officers had scrutinised budget lines in detail, and although an assumed interest in line with inflation of 6.7% had been factored, there were still volatile unknowns in what might happen in the new fiscal year. That said, the Council was in a good position and had been cushioned in the current year due to lower utility costs than budgeted for as was the public sector wage increase.

This report marked the halfway process of budget setting, revenue bids had been received from the spending committees and capital funding had been identified, however there would be challenges even with good income streams and savings.

An area of concern was whether the Council would require a loan to fund any of the larger projects it had planned in 2024/25 and this would become apparent soon. Due to legislative

constraints, this could delay the serving of the Council precept until February; this would become apparent in meetings planned before this time which would allow further discussion.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, the revised base revenue budget for 2023/24 and the initial estimated base revenue budget for 2024/25, as detailed be approved and,
3. That, the Committee noted work in relation to both revenue and capital estimates was ongoing and therefore likely to change.

F624 **BUDGET: REVENUE GROWTH ITEMS, SPECIAL REVENUE PROJECTS AND CAPITAL PROJECTS**

The Committee received and considered the report of the RFO regarding the growth items, along with special revenue and capital projects.

Members were advised this was the challenging part of the budget which, under growth items, included the day-to-day recurring expenditure over and above what it was doing already. A renewals fund formed part of this; it was good practice to budget for replacement where capital expenses were known.

A list of growth items had been prepared totalling £80,000 which would be taken forward in the budget process along with the larger capital and special revenue projects. There were earmarked reserves, but some flexibility might be required in the final budget.

Officers advised the cost of running facilities at Windrush Place was currently unknown, but it was unlikely these would be online before 2025/26 so there was time for further research on this.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, the proposed revenue growth items for 2024/25 be approved, subject to funding and prioritisation and,
3. That, the capital and special revenue projects for 2024/25 and beyond be approved, subject to any further necessary adjustments and,
4. That, the Committee noted a further report would be forthcoming regarding costs and available income streams on budgets and impact on the precept.

The meeting adjourned at 7pm so Members could attend a vigil outside the Corn Exchange marking the Transgender Day of Remembrance and reconvened at 7.25pm

F625 **SCHEDULE OF PROPOSED FEES & CHARGES 2023-24**

The Committee received the proposed fees and charges for 2024-25 which had been recommended for approval by other Council Committees in the meeting cycle.

There was agreement the fees should increase with inflation which was at 6.7% at the time of the reports. Members debated Group 4 hire charges for the Corn Exchange which were introduced earlier in the year and felt that the increase delivered good value when compared to the other hall hire charges.

Resolved:

1. That, the recommended fees and charges for 2024-25 be approved.

F626 **FINANCIAL MATTERS REFERRED FROM SPENDING COMMITTEES**

The Committee received and considered the report of the Deputy Town Clerk.

As this Committee cycle had been focused on budget-setting for 2024-25, there were few recommendations for current fiscal year spending.

The Youth Council Task and Finish Group had raised Youth Council Member training once it had reformed at the beginning of 2024 as workshops were available from the British Youth Council. There was only £500 in the current year budget allocated to the Youth Council, and this was earmarked for administration costs to facilitate its work, not specifically for training. Members agreed the Council should be investing in the development of Witney's young councillors so agreed that funds should be allocated in 2024-25 towards a half days training. Internal training should also take place to compliment the official programme.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, funds for half a day's training is included in the 2024-25 budget for the Youth Council.

F627 **TO RECEIVE THE FINANCIAL RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE MEETING OF THE CHRISTMAS LIGHTS WORKING PARTY HELD ON 13 NOVEMBER 2023**

The Committee received the financial recommendations of the Christmas Lights Working Party held on 13 November 2023.

Resolved:

1. That, the recommendations including that the breadth and scope of the future contract being retained and a budget of £45,000 + £10,000 being included in the 2024-25 budget, be approved.

F628 **TO RECEIVE THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE MEETING OF THE D-DAY 80TH ANNIVERSARY TASK & FINISH GROUP HELD EARLIER IN THE DAY**

The Committee received the financial recommendations of the D-Day 80th Anniversary Task and Finish Group held earlier in the evening.

Resolved:

1. That, a request to include an extra £500 in the 2024-25 budget, therefore making the event budget £1,500, be approved.

F629 **ANNUAL GRANTS**

The Committee received and considered the report of the Deputy Town Clerk regarding the allocation of annual grants to local groups and organisations.

Members agreed the work provided by all the groups was crucially important to Witney and its residents. The Town Clerk/C.E.O advised the sum allocated for Witney Twinning Association was an historic amount which was the Council's contribution to the running of the organisation, administration and for their meetings.

The Town Clerk/C.E.O also raised that funds towards a joint mental health training event, run by Oxfordshire Mind and supported by WODC had been agreed under delegation, with agreement of the Leader and Chair of the Committee since the last meeting. This would be funded from the discretionary grants budget line 4100/407.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, the grants be dispersed as proposed, subject to a written request from the groups and,
3. That, £660 from 4100/407 be allocated towards a free mental health training event run by Oxfordshire Mind and,
4. That, the grants be awarded under the General Power of Competence, apart from the amount towards Citizen's Advice which is awarded under Section 142 of the Local Government Act 1972.

Cllr O Collins rejoined the meeting at 7.40pm during agenda item 16

Cllr D Newcombe left the meeting at 7.44pm during agenda item 16

F630 **EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND 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.

F631 **MAJOR STRATEGIC PROJECTS**

The Committee received the report of the Project Officer which provided updates on projects underway at The Leys and West Witney Sports & Social Club.

Members were advised that a public engagement event regarding the redevelopment of the Skate Park had provided positive feedback which would be analysed by Officers and the contractor Bendcrete.

With regard to West Witney Sports & Social Club, a planning application had been submitted and so far the comments provided on the plans were positive.

Finally, a verbal update was provided on the Leys Masterplan by the Head of Estates and Operations. There had been some objections to the plans submitted by Courtside CIC and a meeting had taken place with concerned residents over access and parking. Further discussions would be required with other authorities and stakeholders on parking to avoid any delay in the plans being approved and the timeline being delayed. There were still concerns from Members

on the tight timeframe, but they were reassured by the continuous communication between Courtside and Officers.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted.

Cllr G Meadows rejoined the meeting at 7.45pm during agenda item 18

F632 PROPERTY & LEGAL MATTERS

The Committee received and considered the confidential report of the Town Clerk/C.E.O concerning various property and legal matters.

Members received updates on play area transfers from West Oxfordshire District Council to the Town Council, including Unterhaching, Raleigh Crescent Waterford Road and Madley Park Playing areas and agreed the Heads of Terms for latter two, subject to caveats.

Also in the report, the Committee received updates on lease renewals for Ley's recreation ground (courtside CIC area), West Witney tennis courts, West Witney Clubhouse and Madley Park Hall, agreeing delegation recommended at the Halls, Cemeteries & Allotments Committee for the latter.

There was discussion on the additional costs to be incurred by the Council as a result of the Leys Hub project – specifically the result of having to invest in a new Works Depot as well as moving the infrastructure supporting the splashpad. Members agreed that these costs should be factored into the lease negotiations in the first instance rather than establishing a sinking fund for the new facility.

Finally, the Committee discussed Heads of Terms for town council land in respect of land in East Witney.

Resolved:

1. That, the confidential report be noted and,
2. That, the Heads of Terms for Madley Park Play Area & Teen Zone be approved on a short-term basis and,
3. That, the Heads of Terms for Waterford Road Play Area be approved, subject to works being arranged and paid for prior to the transfer and,
4. That, negotiation on the terms of the lease for Madley Park Hall be delegated to the Town Clerk in conjunction with the Chair of Halls, Cemeteries & Allotments and The Leader of the Council and,
5. That, the Council should seek financial recompense through ongoing lease negotiations in respect of the Leys Hub and,
6. That, the Council should support active travel recommendations in relation to the East Witney Heads of Terms while receiving the best outcome for the town, while also raising access to Windrush Cemetery during negotiations.

F633 STAFFING MATTERS

The Committee received and considered the confidential minutes of the Personnel Sub-Committee meeting held on 15 November 2023.

Resolved:

That, the confidential minutes of the Personnel Sub-Committee held on 15 November 2023 be noted, and the recommendations contained therein approved.

The meeting closed at: 8.18 pm

Chair