

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

Held on Monday, 25 November 2024

At 6.05 pm in the Gallery Room, The Corn Exchange, Witney

Present:

Councillor J Aitman (Chair)

Councillors:	R Crouch O Collins R Smith	J Doughty D Newcombe
Officers:	Sharon Groth Adam Clapton Nigel Warner	Town Clerk Deputy Town Clerk Responsible Financial Officer
Others:	None.	

F647 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Cllr A Bailey.

F648 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor O Collins declared a registrable non-pecuniary interest in respect of Agenda Item 10 as he was a non-paid Director and Interim Chair of West Oxfordshire Community Transport.

Cllr R Smith declared a personal, non-pecuniary interest in respect of Agenda Items 12 and 16 as she was a member of the Church affiliated to Bright Futures, who ran The Station Detached Youth Project, and who were recommended to receive a Christmas Lights social value grant.

A personal, non-pecuniary interest was declared later in the meeting by Cllr O Collins during Agenda Item 12 as APCAM was one of his chosen Mayoral charities for 2024-25.

F649 MINUTES

The minutes of the Policy, Governance & Finance Committee meeting held on 30 September 2024 were received.

Resolved:

That, the minutes of the Policy, Governance & Finance Committee meeting held on 30 September 2024 be approved as a correct record of the meetings and be signed by the Chair.

F650 **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

There was no public participation.

F651 **CO-OPTION POLICY**

The Committee received and considered a draft policy on co-option to the Council.

Officers advised it was best practice to adopt such a policy for the future should it be required. A Member noted a small minor administrative amendment was required but the Committee supported adopting the policy.

Resolved:

That, following the amendment above, the Co-option Policy be approved and adopted by Witney Town Council.

F652 **BIODIVERSITY POLICY**

The Committee received and considered a draft Biodiversity Policy.

Members were pleased to see most of the suggestions in the policy were already being undertaken by the Council and asked that the employment of a Biodiversity & Green Spaces Officer be included as a further way it demonstrated its biodiversity obligations.

Resolved:

That, subject to any amendments by the Climate, Biodiversity & Planning Committee on 26 November 2024, the Biodiversity Policy be approved and adopted by Witney Town Council.

F653 **THIRD PARTY EVENTS POLICY**

The Committee received and considered the report of the Venue & Events Officer concerning disabled parking provision at third-party events held at The Leys, the item being referred via Full Council on 29 July 2024.

Members were pleased this item was being considered and recalled issues arising from the Witney Carnival. Further discussions for disabled parking provision should continue to ensure the Council was adhering to inclusivity obligations.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, a discussion is held between the Town Council, the Rotary Club of Witney & Courtside Hubs about the potential use of disabled parking in bays at events held on The Leys and,
3. That, Officers work with the Rotary Club of Witney to see if there is any possibility of parking on The Leys and,
4. That, an updated policy concerning this is presented to the Committee at a future meeting.

Clr R Crouch left the meeting briefly at 6.19pm, returning at 6.21pm

F654 **PAYMENT OF ACCOUNTS**

The Committee received the report of the Responsible Financial Officer with the accompanying payment schedules, bank statements and reconciliations.

There were no questions from Members but officers advised there were several direct debits taken without authorisation totalling £374.89 to 5 November 2024. As of that date, £190.45 had been claimed back following submissions by the Town Clerk under the Direct Debit Liability scheme. Further information was awaited from Barclay’s Bank to understand how this had happened.

The Town Clerk advised the Council had financial measures and checks in place which identified the issue and that appropriate and timely action had been taken in response.

Resolved:

1. That, the report, bank statements and reconciliations be noted, and the following schedule of payments be approved and,
2. That, the matter of unauthorised direct debits payments be noted.

Payment reference/ Cheque Numbers	In the sum of:	Account
DDs and Standing Orders August 2024 , Cheques 101261-101262 Transfer to BPA via cheque 101260	£79,510.21 £250,000.00	General CB 1
Cheques 100059(manual), 34862-34898; DDs and Standing Orders August 2024	£158,487.12	Imprest CB 2
Cheques 101263-101265, DDs and Standing Orders September 2024	£63,155.52	General CB 1
Cheques 34899- 34963, DDs and Standing Orders September 2024	£186,087.25	Imprest CB 2

F655 **INTERNAL AUDIT - INTERIM AUDIT REPORT**

The Committee received the interim 2024/25 audit report from the Council’s internal auditors, Auditing Solutions.

Officers advised it was a satisfactory report and there were some minor areas where actions could and would be strengthened.

Members thanked officers for their hard work in obtaining the clean report, it was reassuring for them to see in their roles overseeing the Council’s finances.

Resolved:

That, the Interim Audit Report be noted.

F656 **GRANT MONITORING**

The Committee received and considered the report of the Deputy Town Clerk highlighting how funds awarded under the General Power of Competence by the Council had been expended.

Members were pleased to receive the updates, noting the social value of how awarded grants had benefited Witney and its residents. Providing evidence of services and payments was a key grant award condition and showed good governance and transparency on the dispersal of public funds.

The Committee later discussed the Witney Music Festival and the financial information they had provided regarding this year's event. As the Council was setting budgets for 2025-26, a decision on the level of funding which should be provided under the terms of the partnership agreement it held was required. Members agreed the event organisers should be congratulated on running such a hugely well received and managed event but, under scrutiny, felt further detailed figures from the 2024 event and information regarding the Festival's financial governance were required, due to the close association it held with them. The Committee suggested £10,000 should be budgeted at this juncture.

West Oxfordshire Community Transport should be thanked for providing monthly usage figures. Members felt it would be helpful to have month-on-month comparisons from previous years to assess the success of the town centre services. A Member also advised there were changes to bus services in 2025 and it would be helpful to engage at that time to see how it was effecting them.

The Town Clerk advised a Freedom of Information request for information relating to the grant payments made to Where The Fruit Is had been made following the Council's decision to award funds. The lawfulness of the payment had been challenged on the basis that it was a private, limited liability company and in the complainant's opinion, it was questionable that their services would qualify as a significant benefit to the town.

Members were advised that the latest correspondence requested that the Council inform its External Auditors however, they would not entertain an enquiry from the Council or give advice. In order to get clarity and reassurance the Council had not acted ultra vires, the Town Clerk sought clarification from the National Association on Local Council's legal team who advised it was for a council to justify its spending in exercising its discretionary powers, if challenged. Council's eligible to exercise the general power of competence had broad spending powers and payments have been made in this case.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, grant recipients in the report be thanked for providing updates and,
3. That, the grant recipients be reminded that they should acknowledge the Town Council in any digital or physical publication and,
4. That, no further information is required from Where The Fruit Is, Witney Town Band, Oxfordshire Mind, Witney Day Centre and Broad Hill Play Group and,
5. That, further information be requested from Witney Buttercross Scouts and,
6. That, further information be requested from Witney Music Festival including on governance and detailed 2024 event figures and,
7. That, the legal advice relating to a challenge against payment to Where The Fruit Is be noted, while acknowledging the benefit the Nature Now sessions had provided and,

8. That, comparable year-to-year quarterly usage figures be requested of West Oxfordshire Community Transport.

F657 **FINANCE REPORT: REVISED REVENUE BUDGET 2024/25 AND DRAFT BASE REVENUE BUDGET FOR 2025/26**

The Committee received and considered the report of the Responsible Financial Officer (R.F.O) which outlined the revised revenue budgets for 2024-25, draft estimates for 2025-26 and the budget parameters being worked to.

Members were advised the revenue budgets were concerned with costing the things the Council was already doing and committed to taking on. The Council was very active in improving services and facilities which meant there were large infrastructure pressures; there were new areas being taken on from the District Council and the cost of providing services was increasing year on year.

The RFO advised some caution should be exercised with the new year figures in the report as this was the first draft based on current information, and at this meeting and in coming weeks further work would be required, the Council Tax base would also be known. There may be small savings to be made and there were earmarked reserves, but if these did not fill the funding gaps, recommendations from Committees would have to be scrutinised further or modest reductions made to other budgets.

Options regarding the 2025-26 precept level and potential use of reserves would be presented at a Special Meeting of Council on 16th December but as reserves had been used to offset the budget in the last year, that option would be less favourable.

Members agreed this would be a difficult budget to navigate and decisions would need to be made on what was essential and what was desirable. The whole Council needed to work collaboratively in the spirit of achieving the best result for residents.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, further consideration be given to the draft revenue budgets and estimates later in this meeting.

Cllr R Crouch left the meeting at 19.25pm during the next item.

Cllr O Collins left the meeting at 19.29pm during the next item.

F658 **REVENUE GROWTH ITEMS, SPECIAL REVENUE PROJECTS, AND CAPITAL PROJECTS**

The Committee received and considered the report of the Responsible Financial Officer (R.F.O)

Members were advised this part of the budget included all the ideas and recommendations from the Council's spending Committees and all had different statuses. This was where the real budgetary pressures would arise for 2025-26.

In terms of Committees, there was little room for manoeuvre on the items from Parks & Recreation and this Committee, but with Halls, Cemeteries & Allotments some items could potentially be deferred and with Stronger Communities, there was a much wider scope due to its remit.

Members scrutinised financial implications referring to the special revenue projects recommended by each Committee in turn.

Parks & Recreation Committee

- A Climbing Facility. This was being explored at the Deer Park MUGA/MUSA so no additional budget was required in the new year.
- Windrush Place Pavilion. Officers advised the figure of £60,000 was an indicative but prudent figure of running in the first year. There were still large unknowns and this was based on running a facility of the same size such as Burwell Hall.
- West Witney Sports Ground 3g Pitch. There was no funding in the new year budgeted for. The final cost was still unknown and this was likely to be completed in the following year.
- Online Facilities Bookings System. Members were advised the figure budgeted for was £5,000 but this was more likely to be £7.5-9,000. Members agreed the system was required.

Halls, Cemeteries & Allotments Committee

- Several items had no 2025/26 budgets allocated as underspends in the current year had been identified to allow them to take place.
- Replacement Lighting. Officers advised this was a pressing financial need as the current lights were deteriorating and new parts were becoming difficult to procure. It was advised new lights would be more eco-friendly so an earmarked reserve could be used.
- Kitchen Equipment at the Corn Exchange. Members were not aware of any compliance issues which made the improvements a necessity, so it was agreed this should be considered in a future year, or from maintenance budgets during 2025-26 if they allowed.

Stronger Communities Committee

- Witney Music Festival. Members agreed the budget of £10,000 should be retained.
- West Oxfordshire Community Transport. Members agreed the Council was in a three-year agreement with the provider for the sum of £23,500 p/a so this would be retained.
- CCTV Contribution. Members agreed the Council should continue to pay annually at the agreed increased rates presented by West Oxfordshire District Council earlier in the year. The Council could not however commit to a further £10,000 capital contribution to the upgraded scheme. There had not been a proper consultation and it should have been funded for by the providers.
- Youth Services. The Committee agreed a Youth Services Grant Fund should be re-established, but for the lesser amount of £20,000 in 2025-26, not the £40,000 which was recommended by Stronger Communities. This was in addition to amounts set aside for The Station Detached Youth Project and Home Start Oxford. The Council were supportive of APCAM holding regular mental health drop-in sessions but asked that they apply to the newly reformed youth services grant; it was noted if this was held in the Corn Exchange, it would impact income so they should be encouraged to find a different venue. It was suggested The Station could be asked to see if they could provide a Youth Café from an underspend in their grant for the current year.
- VE & VJ Day 80th Anniversaries. Officers advised there were earmarked reserves where the provisionally set budget of £1,500 could be funded from, and having held the first meeting regarding these events, it was suggested only £1,000 was required.
- New Resident Leaflet. Although a budget of £1,000 had been recommended, due to the potential digital nature of the publication, it was agreed not to include an amount for this in 2025/26.

- Community Engagement Equipment & Storage. Members agreed this equipment was vital to excellent communication so agreed this, along with requested budgets for community window equipment and Youth Council training should remain.

Members noted the final piece of work outlining the larger capital and special revenue projects from 2023-26.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, above recommendations be agreed for input into the Council's budget for 2025-26.

F659 **SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS**

Resolved:

That, as the meeting was expecting to extend beyond two hours in length, standing order 48(a) be suspended in order to allow the meeting to continue for a further 30 minutes.

F660 **SCHEDULE OF PROPOSED FEES AND CHARGES 2025/26**

The Committee received and considered the recommended fees and charges for the Council's services from 1 April 2025.

The increases were modest at 2% but reflected the increased cost the Council incurred in providing the services.

Work was being undertaken by officers on some burial fees to compare against similar sized town councils. This was not yet complete, but would not affect the proposed budget and any updated recommendation regarding fees would come back to the January meeting.

Resolved:

1. That, the fees and charges for 2025/26 as recommended by Parks & Recreation & Halls, Cemeteries & Allotments Committees be approved and,
2. That, any changes to burial fees be brought to the January meeting.

F661 **FINANCIAL MATTERS REFERRED FROM SPENDING COMMITTEES**

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

Members noted the majority of recommendations throughout the last Committee cycle were for the new financial year but agreed with those for 2024/25.

Resolved:

1. That, the report and verbal update be noted and,
2. That, recommendations of the spending Committees as detailed be approved.

F662 **GRANTS & SUBSIDISED LETTINGS**

The Committee received the report of the Deputy Town Clerk/Responsible Financial Officer (RFO) concerning grant activity to local organisations.

Members were updated on the progress of the 50th Anniversary Grants fund and ratified the recommendations of the Chair of the Committee on the next set of awards. Officers confirmed an application had been received and the criteria had been met. The Chair commented that such a wide variety of groups in Witney had been able to be served by the scheme.

Following confirmation by officers that the funds were still available, it was agreed the scheme should be extended until awards were ratified at the February meeting.

With regard to subsidised letting requests, the Committee were favourable for providing free use of the Corn Exchange for the Witney Food Revolution anniversary fundraiser and noted an application had been received for the Senior's Christmas Party at Burwell, an action arising from the last meeting.

Finally, the Committee noted thanks from Home-Start Oxford and Witney Town Band regarding financial support in the year. Members were in favour of allowing the Band to hold a subsidised let again in 2025, subject to the necessary paperwork being provided.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, '£50 for Fifty' grants be awarded to 1st Witney Boy's Brigade, 4th Witney Guides, Junior Parkrun, St Mary's Cogges Community Garden, Tower Hill FC, Windrush Church, Witney Wolves Basketball, Witney Ringing Society, Witney & District Twinning Association, and Witney Arts & Crafts Society and,
3. That, the £50 for Fifty Grants scheme be extended until 3 February meeting and publicised and,
4. That, Witney Food Revolution be permitted subsidised use of the Corn Exchange to the sum of £237.50 and,
5. That, the submission of a grant application for the Senior's Christmas Party at Burwell Hall be noted and,
6. That, the correspondence from Home Start Oxford and Witney Town Band be noted and,
7. That, Witney Town Band be permitted subsidised use of the Corn Exchange for an autumn concert in 2025, subject to the necessary form and paperwork being submitted and,
8. That, the above grants be provided under the General Power of Competence.

F663 **CHRISTMAS LIGHTS SOCIAL VALUE FUND**

The Committee received and considered the report of the Project Officer concerning distribution of a £1,000 social value fund donated by the Council's Christmas Lights Contractor, LITE Ltd.

Members were delighted to be able to provide funds to several groups in Witney which would help make Christmas a more pleasant experience for those in need.

Cllr R Smith abstained from the vote given her declaration of interest at the beginning of the meeting but the remaining Members agreed an equal split of £250.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, the Christmas Lights Social Value Find be dispersed to the Methodist Church, The Parish Church, Witney Foodbank, and Witney Community Church for the sum of £250 each.

F664 **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.

F665 **STRATEGIC PROPERTY, LEGAL & INSURANCE MATTERS**

The Committee received and considered the confidential report of the Town Clerk/C.E.O.

Members were updated on the situation with the Witney Allotment Association, previously discussed at the Halls, Cemeteries & Allotments Committee, funding for the St Mary's Clock and Carillon, maintenance of which fell to the Town Council as it held the power to maintain under the Parish Councils Act 1957.

It had been recommended the Witney Allotment Association should separate into two associations following its next AGM. Further information was required from the Diocese of Oxford's Clock Officer regarding the clock and carillon. There were differing views on how to proceed with the matter but a budget was required for maintenance in the new financial year.

The Committee was also provided with updates on lease negotiations with Courtside Hubs CIC, Witney Lawn Tennis Club, West Oxfordshire District Council and ICE Centre, supporting the decision to fund repairs to the roof of Langdale Hall as a priority from earmarked reserves at this stage.

There were further updates on planning at West Witney Sports & Social Club, Windrush Place pitches and pavilion and other ongoing legal or insurance matters.

Finally, the Committee received the minutes of the Community Governance Review Task & Finish Group meeting held on 14 October 2024.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, the recommendation of the Halls, Cemeteries and Allotments Committee to provide two leases for the split in allotment management be supported and,
3. That, a budget for St Mary's Clock be set at £5,000, this being funded from an Infrastructure earmarked reserve and,
4. That, officers proceed with the required roof work at Langdale Hall, to be funded by the Council's earmarked reserve set aside for building efficiencies and,
5. That, the minutes of the Community Governance Review Task & Finish Group held on 14 October 2024 be agreed and the options therein be approved.

F666 **STAFFING MATTERS**

The Committee received the minutes of the Personnel Sub Committee meeting held on 21 October 2024.

Resolved:

That, the confidential minutes of the Personnel Sub-Committee meeting held on 21 October 2024, and the recommendations contained therein be approved.

The meeting closed at: 8.27 pm

Chair