

**MEETING OF THE
WITNEY TOWN COUNCIL**

Held on Monday, 11 December 2023

At 7.00 pm in the Gallery Room, The Corn Exchange, Witney

Present:

Councillor O Collins (Chair)

Councillors:	G Meadows	G Doughty
	J Aitman	J Doughty
	T Ashby	D Edwards-Hughes
	D Enright	D Newcombe
	R Smith	J Robertshaw
	R Crouch	J Treloar
Officers:	Adam Clapton	Deputy Town Clerk
	Sharon Groth	Town Clerk
	Derek Mackenzie	Senior Administrative Officer & Committee Clerk
Others:	Twelve members of the public.	

668 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors A Bailey, S Simpson, D Temple and L Cherry.

669 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor O Collins declared a registrable non-pecuniary interest in agenda item 5 & 6 following his appointment in August 2023 as an unpaid Director of West Oxfordshire Community Transport (WOCT) and left the meeting for the duration of the items discussion and votes.

There were no other declarations from Members or Officers.

The Responsible Financial Officer arrived at 7:03pm

670 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The council heard from Mike Parker, Chair of West Oxfordshire Community Transport (WOCT) concerning Agenda Items 5 & 6.

Mr Parker provided a verbal update to the council along with a written summary of WOCT activities over the past few years outlining the issues they faced, such as the ageing bus fleet and the effect of COVID on the operation. He also provided the current position of its finances.

The Council received additional representation from David Miles, Witney's Independent Transport Representative, again concerning Agenda Items 5 & 6. He provided historical information and his views on the type of support the Council could provide to WOCT in order to support its operations.

*During the discussion of the following Motion:
Cllr J Treloar left the meeting briefly between 7:43pm and 7:46pm*

671 **MOTION - CORN EXCHANGE DRAFT BUSINESS PLAN**

The Council received and considered the following Motion.
Proposed by Cllr D Edwards-Hughes and Seconded by Cllr T Ashby.

This council acknowledges the work which has taken place at the Corn Exchange, bringing new events and a different audience into the building so far. However, this council is concerned with the rising Cost:Income ratio. In the first draft of the councils 2024/25 Budget the Corn Exchange (including Café 1863) shows a subsidy required of £199,453 this year (Although it is acknowledged that this is not the final budget) equivalent to 10.7% of the town's precept. This council requires the current draft business plan to be revised to reduce the subsidy to 5% of the precept, hence improving value to the taxpayer.

Cllr Edwards-Hughes opened the debate with an explanation of why a of 5% target had been declared in the Motion, he explained this was to ensure that the Council moved in the "right direction" and was based on the historical subsidy information he had reviewed. He also expressed his disappointment that despite the notification to Council in January 2023 that a Business Plan would to be drawn up by Officers this was not presented to the Halls, Cemeteries and Allotments Committee (HC&A) until November 2023, and only a Draft plan at that. He felt the motion was necessary to ensure that a final version of such a critical plan was completed, so that it was put to work as soon as possible.

The Chair advised that Officers stated at the November 2023 HC&A meeting that an updated Business Plan would be presented to the Committee on 22 January 2024 for consideration.

Several members provided their own thoughts and comments supporting the work which had gone into making the Corn Exchange successful and outlined the support it provided to the residents of the town, ranging from hosting free and subsidised events for all ages as well as it being a venue for theatre, art, jazz, tea dances and a general hub for individuals and community groups to meet.

Members agreed that the Corn Exchange provided a huge social value, one that was difficult to measure in monetary terms and that, like any business it would take some time to build up its provision. It was hoped the plan would lead to a clearer picture of the subsidy required, however some members questioned if residents understood the true cost and how much they contributed from their council tax payments.

Closing remarks on the discussion were made by Cllrs Edwards-Hughes and Ashby. They asked that it be made clear that by bringing the Motion it was not their intention to cut services; it was important to provide a community space that could support the increasing growth of the town at an acceptable cost to the taxpayer.

A vote was taken with 6 for, 7 against with no abstentions. Therefore, it was:

Resolved:

That, the above motion proposed by Cllr Edwards-Hughes and seconded by Cllr Ashby be rejected by Witney Town Council.

Following the presentation and discussion of the motion and at the request of a point of order by a member, the Responsible Financial Officer provided an updated subsidy figure of £189,278 for 2023/24 which was a reduction on that which was provided in the draft business plan of November following further budgetary calculations.

*Cllr O Collins relinquished the Chair-ship to Cllr G Meadows as Deputy Mayor.
Cllr O Collins left the meeting at 7:50pm*

672 **MOTION - WEST OXFORDSHIRE COMMUNITY TRANSPORT (WOCT) FUNDING SURPLUS**

Prior to the discussions commencing, the proposer received a request lead by Cllr Enright for this Motion and the following Motion both in relation to West Oxfordshire Community Transport (WOCT) to be withdrawn. The reason given was that the Council had received detailed explanations during Public Participation earlier in the meeting.

The proposer considered and declined the request. Therefore, the Council received and considered the following Motion – Proposed by Cllr D Edwards-Hughes and Seconded by Cllr T Ashby.

Given that in each of the previous 3 years West Oxfordshire Community Transport has recorded a surplus in their annual accounts totalling £101,660, this council asks that the Leader of the Council writes to the directors of WOCT with a view to establishing if grant funding from Witney Town Council remains critical to them delivering these services, or if a reduction in the grant would be appropriate to maintain the same service levels.

Cllr Edwards-Hughes thanked the two members of the public that spoke for the information provided and explained that he was simply seeking transparency and to ask the Council if the grant to WOCT was appropriate as the council had not received any update reports from the nominated Town Council representative.

With the support of his seconder, Cllr Edwards-Hughes moved an amendment to the original motion to replace the word “reduction” to “change” so as to make clear this the motion was not about reducing or removing the service provided by WOCT.

Members discussed the merits of the service that WOCT provided, a member spoke passionately in support of the service that WOCT provided and felt the motion intimated less support from the Council in the future.

All members were in support of the service and appreciated the information provided by the Chair of WOCT earlier in the meeting. Members looked forward to receiving future updates from WOCT via the Town Council Representative so that they may continue to provide support.

A vote was taken on the amendment to the Motion with 6 for and 6 against. As a tie, the Chair exercised her casting vote against. Therefore, it was:

Resolved:

That the amendment to the above motion, proposed by Cllr Edwards-Hughes and seconded by Cllr Ashby be lost.

A further vote was taken on the original Motion as presented with Members unanimously voting against. Therefore, it was:

Resolved:

That the above motion, proposed by Cllr Edwards-Hughes and seconded by Cllr Ashby be rejected by Witney Town Council.

673 **MOTION - WEST OXFORDSHIRE COMMUNITY TRANSPORT (WOCT) PASSENGER NUMBERS**

The Council received and considered the following Motion – Proposed by Cllr D Edwards-Hughes and Seconded by Cllr T Ashby.

In order that Witney Town Council can be assured that its grant to West Oxfordshire Community Transport is providing value for money for taxpayers, this council asks that officers of the council request the following information from the organisation ahead of the next meeting:

- *Daily passenger numbers for each route serving Witney (213 / 214 / 215)*
- *An estimation of the number of unique users of each service*

Cllr Edwards-Hughes again advised the bringing of the Motion was not about looking to cut the services, but more about obtaining transparency and to ensure that Councillors were carrying out their elected duty to justify expenditure and he felt that the supply of passenger numbers and other measurable metrics, as is the case of other grant awardees, would satisfy this aim.

A member advised that it was not necessary to raise a Motion to obtain the level of data required, only a request to officers was necessary to allow them to gather the necessary information or invite an organisational representative to meet with the Stronger Communities or Policy, Governance & Finance Committee.

A vote was taken with 6 for, 6 against with no abstentions. As a tie, the Chair exercised her casting vote against. Therefore, it was:

Resolved:

That, the above motion proposed by Cllr Edwards-Hughes and seconded by Cllr Ashby be rejected by Witney Town Council.

674 **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.

*Cllr O Collins returned to the meeting at 8:36pm
The majority of Members of the public left*

675 **COUNCIL BUDGET: REVISED BUDGET 2023/24 AND ESTIMATES 2024/25, INCLUDING REVENUE GROWTH ITEMS AND CAPITAL PROJECTS/SPECIAL REVENUE PROGRAMME FOR 2024/25**

The Council received and considered the presentation from the Responsible Financial Officer along with a verbal explanation, summarising the budget-setting process of the Council so far.

The RFO explained the current position of the budget for 2023/24 as well as the options for 2024/25 so that members could review this information prior to the meeting of the Council on 8 January 2024 to formally agree the budget and level of precept.

Members were aware that it remained a difficult time for the whole country resulting from the setting of National policies and rising inflation of everyday items. However, they were aware that a level of service needed to be maintained and that to do so consideration to increasing the level of precept or drawing on the council general fund would be required.

The RFO advised that due to the expected surplus in 2023/24, the drawing of £80,000 from the general fund was a responsible consideration. Also, the last increase to the town council level of precept was in 2022 and since then RPI had increased by 21.1% therefore the options proposed by the RFO in the presentation would imply a real time decrease.

The various capital expenditure projects were outlined which included the Leys Masterplan, the development of West Witney Sports Ground, wheeled sports park as well as the expanding portfolio of playparks which were being adopted by the Council. The RFO outlined that it could be necessary, due to insufficient capital funds, that the Council arrange loans to finance the WWSCC development and the resulting move of the Works Depot as part of the Leys Masterplan project. These loans would be arranged over a period of 30 or 40 years and therefore help spread the cost of the major capital improvements.

In closing, the RFO advised that the meeting provided the last opportunity for Members to provide input into the Budget setting for 2024/25. Members agreed that they were content to choose from the increase options provided in the presentation however also asked that a 0% increase option also be considered.

Resolved:

1. That, the verbal update and presentation be noted and,
2. That, Members consider the options presented and,
3. That, a final decision on the level of Precept to be set at the Extra Ordinary Meeting on 8 January 2024.

676 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC & PRESS**

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.

The last three members of the public left at 9:11pm

677 **MAJOR STRATEGIC PROJECTS**

The Council received a confidential verbal update from the Town Clerk/C.E.O who advised the Head of Estates & Operations would be meeting with Oxfordshire County Council shortly to discuss the options for the existing parking arrangements at The Leys.

She also advised that these discussions were not part of Courtside Hub's planning application currently under consideration.

Resolved:

That, the confidential verbal update be noted.

The meeting closed at: 9.15 pm

Chair