

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

Held on Monday, 25 March 2024

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

Present:

Councillor R Crouch (Vice-Chair, in the Chair)

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| Councillors: | O Collins R Smith D Newcombe | G Meadows T Ashby (In place of J Doughty) |
| Officers: | Adam Clapton Sharon Groth Derek Mackenzie Nigel Warner Mark Lewis | Deputy Town Clerk Town Clerk Senior Administrative Officer & Committee Clerk Responsible Financial Officer Head of Estates & Operations |
| Others: | Councillor James Robertshaw | |

F156 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Aitman & L Cherry (the latter by previously agreed dispensation).

An apology for absence was also received from Councillor J Doughty, Councillor T Ashby attended as a substitute.

F157 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor O Collins declared a non-pecuniary interest in agenda item 16 as he was an unpaid Director for West Oxfordshire Community Transport.

There were no other declarations from Members or Officers

F158 MINUTES

The minutes of the Policy, Governance & Finance Committee meeting held on 5 February 2024 were received.

F75 – Cllr Collins thanked officers for the management of the Annual Town Meeting. He had personally received positive feedback on the night and after the event.

F79 – Cllr Collins advised he had left the meeting for the discussions on West Oxfordshire Community Transport and a mayoral subsidised letting request due to conflicts of interest.

F79 – The Committee Clerk advised the amount approved for Witney Carnival was £2,400, not £2,100 as noted in the minutes.

Resolved:

That, the minutes of the Policy, Governance & Finance Committee meeting held on 5 February 2024 be approved, subject to the above amendments, as a correct record of the meeting and be signed by the Chair.

F159 **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

There was no public participation.

F160 **CORN EXCHANGE ILLUMINATION POLICY REVIEW**

The Committee received the Corn Exchange Illumination Policy which had been received and recommended for approval by the Halls, Cemeteries & Allotments Committee.

Resolved:

That, the Corn Exchange Illumination Policy, as presented, be adopted by the Council.

F161 **PUBLIC HALLS CANCELLATION POLICY**

The Committee received and considered the report of the Deputy Venue & Events Officer and an amended Public Halls cancellation policy, which would form part of the terms and conditions of hire.

There were questions on the various group definitions but recognition that stronger conditions were required to avoid financial and reputational loss for the Council.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted.
2. That, the bookings cancellation policy, as presented, be adopted by the Council and reviewed after six months.

F162 **PESTICIDES POLICY**

The Committee received and considered the report of the Operations Manager and the accompanying policy document. The item had previously been considered by the Climate, Biodiversity & Planning Committee on 7 November 2023 (minute number P600).

Members welcomed the final policy and recognised the sensitivity around the issue; the Council had to balance biodiversity against the upkeep of its green spaces. As such, they were pleased to see spray/no spray zones listed but asked if there could be more detailed information under each zone heading, possibly even mapping attached.

It would also be useful to include best practice sources, along with acts of parliament which enabled the Council to discharge its functions. It was confirmed that all re-wilding areas were identified, and the use of pesticides would not affect their development.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted.
2. That, the Pesticides Policy, as presented, be adopted by the Council.
3. That, delegation be provided to the Head of Estates & Operations to work with officers on including further details including mapping of zone areas and best practice sources.

F163 **GRANTS POLICY REVIEW**

The Committee received and considered the report of the Deputy Town Clerk and an amended policy document.

Members welcomed the updated document and agreed the grants budget and frequency of awards should remain the same. They also recognised the changes which enabled support for ecclesiastical properties were required in line with National Association of Local Council advice and the inclusion of other items concerning social value, grant monitoring, transparency and data protection.

There was agreement the Council's vision was still evolving as part of a strategic plan so should not be included but its aims and objectives, including gender identity in point 4.1.6 should.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted.
2. That, the Grants Policy, as presented, be adopted by the Council with the above amendments.

F164 **PROCUREMENT POLICY REVIEW**

The Committee received and considered the report of the Responsible Financial Officer (RFO) and accompanying policy document.

The Committee welcomed the amendments to the current policy to help ensure adherence to financial controls and legislation. With regard to the final table in the report, Members felt under 'Above Procurement threshold', the text should be 'Professional or legal advice shall be obtained on the most appropriate processes, if necessary.'

There was further discussion on when the policy should be reviewed as national legislation on procurement was due to change later in the year. It was agreed the review should be one year, or in response to these changes if before that time.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted.
2. That, the Procurement Policy, as presented, be adopted by the Council subject to the above amendments on professional advice and review.

F165 **FINANCE REPORT**

Members received and considered the written report of the Responsible Financial Officer (RFO) along with a verbal summary of the report.

Along with the management accounts, the report also contained information relating to investments and in particular, sustainable investment through Churches, Charities and Local Authorities (CCLA) Investment Management Limited and their ethical standards.

In response to a non-committee member's question, raised ahead of the meeting, the RFO advised the projection for the current year showed a budget surplus for varying reasons, some of which were not known when the budget was prepared in the autumn. Whilst most income for the year had been received, the second instalment of the precept having been paid in September 2023 there was here still a significant amount of expenditure for the year yet to be accounted for. This meant that the surplus of income over expenditure for the year would not be as large as a reading of the management accounts to 31 January 2024 might suggest; the surplus will be at or perhaps above the level we projected - £96,055 to reserves, £103,833 if you include a transfer from earmarked reserves to fund Corn Exchange work.

The RFO went on to state that with regard to the precept for 2024/25 the main driver of the precept was the budget requirement for that year, rather than that of the previous year. The Council had some very large projects ongoing, and the Capital expenditure budget was in excess of £1mi (gross), requiring £190K funding from council tax to deliver. Based on the projections during the budget cycle an additional £238K was required to fund total expenditure for 2024/25, over and above what would have been raised by freezing the council tax at £166.83 (Band D). The 2023/24 surplus and accumulated balances put the council in a favourable position and gave it choices. At the budget meeting in January a number of options for councillors had been presented to consider, ranging from a 0% increase, which would have required drawing £238K from reserves through to a 12.7% increase, which would have required no drawing from reserves. At the meeting one proposal was made, to increase by 6.1% to £177.00 and this was agreed by the Council. Whilst judgement of council tax levels was for members, it should be noted that 6.1% was the RPI as at October 2023 when the budget cycle was well-advanced and Members considered in the context that since the last increase in Council tax the RPI has increased by approximately 20%.

The Town Clerk also advised the Council had received a subscription invoice from the Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils of £3,700. Which included the direct access service subscription to the National Association of Local Councils. The subscriptions were important as both organisations provided professional advice, training and more specifically for the town/parish council sector.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted.
2. That, the management accounts of the Committee services to 31 January 2024 be approved.
3. That, information regarding investment returns and sustainability of investments with the CCLA be noted.
4. That, the Council subscribes to OALC and NALC for the 2024/25 year.

F166 **FINANCIAL MATTERS REFERRED FROM SPENDING COMMITTEES**

The Committee received the report of the Deputy Town Clerk outlining the financial implications pertaining to recommendations of the Council's spending Committees.

The Head of Estates & Operations advised a ticket sales split for an event at the Corn Exchange in August had not been financially viable, so the event organiser would be charged under a Group 4 performance rate.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted.
2. That, the recommendations of the spending Committees be approved.

F167 **GRANTS & SUBSIDISED LETTINGS**

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

A grant request had been received from Madley Park Hall Trust for help towards running costs and for replacement internal doors. Although sympathetic, the Committee were aware of financial support the Council had provided in previous years and wanted to learn more about the financial issues they were encountering.

Subsidised letting requests for the Corn Exchange were received from Witney Photo Group and Thames Valley Police, the latter having already been recommended for agreement by the Halls, Cemeteries & Allotments Committee. Members agreed to both requests.

The Deputy Town Clerk also referred to a request received from Thames Valley Police asking for financial support towards hire of the Witney ATP during the summer. The Council's supported youth workers, The Station would be in attendance.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted.
2. That, Madley Park Hall Trust request be declined until representatives of the Council met with them to learn more about these issues. The Members selected for the meeting were Cllr R Crouch (Chair of Halls, Cemeteries & Allotments), Cllr R Smith (Leader of the Council), and the Town Clerk/C.E.O.
3. That, the recommendation of the Halls, Cemeteries & Allotments Committee to provide subsidised hire to TVP to the value of £175 be noted.
4. That, Witney Photo Group be awarded subsidised hire of the Corn Exchange to the value of £374.
5. That, these amounts be awarded under the General Power of Competence.
6. That, the request for funding towards the hire of the ATP by TVP be refused and that they be signposted to other potential funding opportunities such as Better Leisure.

F168 **PAYMENT OF ACCOUNTS**

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

In response to a Member, the Town Clerk advised Officers had reviewed the Council’s banking details in recent years, but recognised the current banker was not considered by many as the most ethical option. It would be looked at again in due course.

The Town Clerk also updated the Committee on the position regarding the bank mandate renewal which was still proving problematic.

Resolved:

That, the report, bank statements and reconciliations be noted, and the following schedule of payments be approved:

| Payment reference/ Cheque Numbers | In the sum of: | Account |
|---|-----------------------|----------------|
| Cheques 101231-101235, DDs and Standing Orders January 2024 – net excluding transfers | £61,610.95 | General CB 1 |
| Cheques 34498-34521, DDs and Standing Orders January 2024 – net including cancelled cheques | £165,852.44 | Imprest CB 2 |

Cllr G Meadows Left the meeting at 7:10pm

F169 **EFFECTIVENESS OF INTERNAL CONTROL: CORPORATE & FINANCIAL RISK ASSESSMENT 2023/24**

Consideration was given to the report of the Responsible Financial Officer regarding the Risk Management Policy and Corporate & Financial Risk Assessment for 2023-24.

The Committee recognised that the risk assessment ensured the Council was complying with legislation and statute, good practice and Council procedures.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted and
2. That, the Risk Management Policy & Corporate Risk Assessment for the financial year 2023-24 be endorsed and signed by the Chair.

F170 **INTERNAL AUDIT - SECOND INTERIM REPORT 2023-24**

The Committee considered the Interim Audit Report 2023-24 from the Council’s internal Auditors, Auditing Solutions Limited.

Members welcomed the report highlighting there were no areas of concern raised, and that recommendations in the last update had been completed.

The revised stocktake for the period October to December 2023 was considered and now included the income in relation to soft drinks. The RFO was of the opinion that the stocktake showed that income generated in the café/bar was as expected when compared with the purchases (net of stock) for the period.

Resolved:

1. That, the Interim Audit Report 2023-24 from the Council's internal auditors be noted.
2. That, the external stocktake report be noted.

Cllr G Meadows returned to the meeting at 7:16pm

F171 GRANT MONITORING REPORT

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

Members were pleased to see the reports and updates on the grants provided by the Council during the year which formed part of the Council's due diligence. There would be a further monitoring report later in the year for those organisations which were only awarded amounts at the last meeting.

Resolved:

That, the report be noted.

F172 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.

F173 MAJOR STRATEGIC PROJECTS UPDATE

The Committee received and considered the confidential report of the Head of Estates and Operations.

Members were provided with an update on the Leys Splashpark and options on whether it would be available during the summer. The Committee was aware the Parks & Recreation Committee had resolved to close it for remedial and renovation works until 2025 so any work to bring it online had to be compatible with any future changes and should be completed by the last week of May at the latest for it to be financially viable.

Resolved:

1. That, the confidential report be noted.

2. That, work to open the Splash Park for the 2024 season be approved, subject to the cost, compatibility to future improvements is guaranteed, and that they could be completed by the last week in May.
3. That, delegation on the 2024 be given to the Head of Estates & Operations in line with the above conditions.

F174 PROPERTY & LEGAL MATTERS

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

Members were updated on play area transfers and leases from West Oxfordshire District Council, lease negotiations with Council tenants and other updates on town council land and facilities. These included a change to temporary trading arrangements by Courtside CIC, a temporary Council work depot, Windrush Place Pavilion and pitches and a new MUSA/MUGA.

The Town Clerk advised the document was restricted as the items were under negotiation and the Council had no direct control over the items; while updates provided were correct and based on assumption at the time of writing, they could change and jeopardise their completion.

Resolved:

That, the confidential report be noted.

F175 STAFFING MATTERS

The Committee received and considered the confidential minutes of the Personnel Sub Committee meeting held on 18 March 2024.

Members also considered the report of the Town Clerk/ Chief Executive regarding Discretionary Policies under the Local Government Pension Scheme Regulations. This had been deferred from the above meeting.

Under the LGPS the Council had a number of discretions which it may exercise, and which would result in enhanced benefits if exercised. The Council had to have policies regarding the exercise of these discretions, whether or not these discretions were actually exercised. The Council may also choose to adopt other policies for clarity.

Resolved:

1. That, the confidential minutes of the Personnel Sub Committee meetings held on 18 March January 2024 be noted, and the recommendations contained therein be approved.
2. That, the Council adopt Discretionary and related Policies under the Local Government Pension Scheme Regulations, as detailed in the report of the Town Clerk/ Chief Executive.

The meeting closed at: 7.47 pm

Chair