

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

Held on Monday, 10 June 2024

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	L Cherry D Newcombe D Edwards-Hughes (In place of J Doughty)
Officers:	Adam Clapton Derek Mackenzie Sharon Groth Mark Lewis Nigel Warner	Deputy Town Clerk Senior Administrative Officer & Committee Clerk Town Clerk Head of Estates & Operations Responsible Financial Officer
Others:	Nine members of the public. Councillor James Robertshaw	

F308 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Councillor J Doughty, Councillor D Edwards-Hughes attended as a substitute.

F309 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor O Collins declared a personal, non-pecuniary interest in Agenda Item 8 – Mayor Tree Policy owing to him being the current and previous years Mayor

Councillor Collins further declared a personal, non-pecuniary interest in Agenda Item 13 – Subsidised Letting owing to one of the subsidised letting requests being for the Mayoral Charity events for the municipal year.

There were no other declarations from Members or Officers

F310 ELECTION OF VICE-CHAIR

The Chair called for nominations for the position of Vice-Chair of the Committee.

It was proposed and seconded that Councillor Rachel Crouch be elected. There being no other nominations it was:

Resolved:

That, Councillor Rachel Crouch be elected Vice-Chair of the Committee for the 2024/25 municipal year.

F311 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the Policy Governance & Finance Committee meeting held on 25 March 2024 were received.

F167 – The Mayor advised that he had received thanks from Witney Photo Group for the subsidised use of the Corn Exchange.

Resolved:

That, the minutes of the Policy Governance & Finance Committee meeting held on 25 March 2024 be approved as a correct record of the meetings and be signed by the Chair.

F312 **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

The Committee adjourned for this item.

The Committee received representations from representatives of Windrush School, 1st Witney Rangers, Lowland Resue Oxford and Be Free Young Carers all concerning their respective grant applications to be discussed under Agenda Item 13.

The Committee reconvened.

F313 **COMMITTEE OBJECTIVES & WORK PROGRAMME FOR THE MUNICIPAL YEAR**

The Committee received the detailed report of the Town Clerk/CEO along with a verbal update concerning the Committee Objectives & Work Plan for 2024/25.

The Town Clerk/CEO explained that some of the objectives listed in her report overlapped with other Committee's objectives however, due to the financial, legal or policy nature they also appeared on this Committee plan.

The Chair offered thanks on the comprehensive update on projects and noted the Council was doing a huge amount and was constantly doing more and more for the town and residents.

Members were disappointed to note that the Community Ownership Fund was on hold due to the general election and the impact this would have on the Council and its plans for the West Witney Sports & Social Club development. A Member proposed that the Council write to both the Labour and Conservative House of Lords leaders to make the request that the fund is reopened as soon as possible.

Resolved:

1. That, the Committee Objectives & Work Plan for 2024/25 be noted and,
2. That, the Town Clerk/CEO write on behalf of the Council to the Lords leaders in respect to the suspended Community Ownership Fund.

F314 **TREE POLICY REVIEW**

Members received and considered the updated Tree policy; the Head of Estates & Operations advised that the policy will be further updated with Bio-Diversity net gain details and a tree planting policy in the future.

He also advised that though Witney Town Council were responsible for 9,000 trees and there were many more around the town that fell under the responsibility of Oxfordshire County Council, West Oxfordshire District Council, as well as those with private or no known owner; hence there was a need for a robust Tree Policy so as not to put a financial burden on the Council.

Resolved:

1. That, the verbal update be noted and,
2. That, the updated Tree Policy as presented be adopted.

F315 **MAYOR'S TREE PLANTING POLICY**

The Committee received the joint report of the Deputy Town Clerk and Operations Manager regarding the Mayoral Tree Planting Policy.

The Deputy Town Clerk explained that a review of the policy was necessary following approaches from ex-mayor's families as some of the dedicated trees had fallen into poor health or died.

Following consideration, a vote on whether to continue the planting of an annual mayoral tree was taken with the result being six members in favour and one against.

Members agreed that any planting should be in conjunction with the forthcoming tree planting policy and that the tradition of dedicating a tree should be retained, though this could also be extended to a Bench or Shrub if preferred by the incumbent Mayor.

Resolved:

1. That, the report and verbal update be noted and,
2. That, the Council continue with planting a tree, shrub or erection of a bench for each Mayor, with a preference for that Mayors electoral ward being chosen and,
3. That, trees that are currently deceased or unhealthy should be replaced, their locations being deferred to Officers to arrange suitable locations and,
4. That, it be deferred to Officers to decide if any future damaged or unhealthy tree should be replaced.
5. That, further information on planting sites is considered/included in the Council's tree planting policy.

(Cllr D Edwards-Hughes left the meeting at 7:09pm , rejoining at 7:11pm)

also

(Cllr L Cherry left the meeting at 7:17pm and returned at 7:19pm)

F316 **ACCOUNTS & AUDIT (ENGLAND) REGULATIONS 2015 - ANNUAL GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY RETURN (AGAR) 2023/24**

The Council received the report of the Responsible Financial Officer (RFO) concerning the Annual Governance & Accountability Return (AGAR) 2023/24 under its obligations of the Accounts & Audit (England) Regulations 2015 along with the final report of the Council's independent Internal Auditor.

The RFO outlined the historical changes to the Audit practice and pointed out that Members took a collective responsibility for ensuring there was a sound system of internal control in order to agree.

It was proposed by Cllr Smith, seconded by Cllr Cherry that questions 1 to 8 be answered "yes" and question 9 answered "Not Applicable" in Section 1 – Annual Governance Statement and that the statement be agreed and recommended for signing at Full Council on 17 June. All Members were in agreement.

It was further proposed by Cllr Smith, seconded by Cllr Cherry that the Accounting Statement which formed section 2 be recommended to Full Council for agreement and adoption. All Members were in agreement

The RFO advised that the remainder of the report was for information; Section 3 would be submitted to the External Auditor with supporting information and would be an analytical review concentrating on variances year on year, or above a certain percentage. The general public would have the right to inspection of the documents which would be published following adoption.

Lastly, it was proposed by Cllr Crouch, seconded by Cllr Edwards-Hughes that the Annual Internal Audit Report be approved, all members were in agreement (excluding Cllr Cherry who had briefly left the meeting)

The Leader of the Council thanked officers, particularly the RFO for their diligence in presenting the information in such an understandable format.

Recommended:

1. That, the report and verbal updates be noted and,
2. That, the Annual Governance Statement at Section 1 of the Annual Return for the year ended 31 March 2024 be approved, and formally adopted by the Council and,
3. That, the Statement of Accounts at Section 2 of the Annual Return for the year ended 31 March 2024 be approved, and formally adopted by the Council and,
4. That, in light of the above the Annual Governance & Accountability Return (AGAR) for 2023/24 be formally agreed and adopted by the Council and,
5. That, the internal Audit report for 2023/24 be approved and,
6. That, the draft notice advertising electors rights for 2023/24 be noted.

F317 **FINANCE REPORT**

The Committee received and considered the report of the Responsible Financial Officer (RFO) detailing income and expenditure for budgets for the Council which along with details of the investment activity for 2023/24.

The RFO advised that regarding the management accounts, only a small amount of work remained outstanding before the financial end of year could be completed, this being to deal with the earmarked reserve movements. However, all income and expenditure had been allocated.

Members considered continuation of the membership to Co-operative Councils Innovation Network (CCIN) and felt that this membership, which had previously been provided free, had not been fully utilised. The Town Clerk/CEO expressed her opinion that membership was more beneficial to Members rather than Officers and was aimed more at District and County Council level.

It was proposed by Cllr Bailey, seconded by Cllr Edwards-Hughes that the Council continue with membership for one year with an evaluation review to be carried out as it its benefit at the end of the 2024 membership year. All Members were in agreement and suggested Committee Chairs could also consider the work of their committees for future case studies.

In respect to the recommendation contained in the report it was:

- Proposed by Cllr Bailey and Seconded by Cllr Crouch that the Management Accounts to 31 March 2024 be noted and approved.
- Proposed by Cllr Cherry and Seconded by Cllr Bailey that the update on Investment Returns report be noted and approved.
- Proposed by Cllr Smith and Seconded by Cllr Crouch that the Investment Activity report for 2023-24 be noted and approved

All Members were in favour of the three proposals.

Resolved:

1. That, the report and verbal update be noted and,
2. That, the management accounts to 31 March 2024 be approved and,
3. That, the update on Investment Returns report be noted and approved and,
4. That the Investment Activity report for 2023-24 be noted and approved and,
5. That, the Council renew its membership of the Co-operative Councils Innovation Network for a further year with a review to be carried out at the end of the 2024 membership year.

F318 **PAYMENT OF ACCOUNTS**

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

Officers pointed out that due to the financial year end, the schedules were slightly further behind than they would normally be, due to the technicalities of the accounting system, but this would be rectified at the next meeting.

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 101236-101238, DDs and Standing Orders February 2024 – net excluding transfers from BPA	£572,799.32	General CB 1
Cheques 34533-34588 (cheques 34573-34588 voided), DDs and Standing Orders February 2024	£183,909.39	Imprest CB 2
Cheques 101239-101240, DDs and Standing Orders February 2024 – net excluding transfers from BPA	£121,398.08	General CB 1
Cheques 34589- 34677, DDs and Standing Orders February 2024	£210,061.66	Imprest CB 2

(Cllr Bailey left the meeting at 7:40pm and returned at 7:42pm)

F319 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.

No questions arose.

Resolved:

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

F320 SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDER 48 A

Resolved

That Standing Order 48a) be suspended in order to allow the meeting to continue as it had now lasted for two hours.

F321 GRANTS & SUBSIDISED LETTINGS

The Committee received and considered the report of the Deputy Town Clerk detailing requests for the award of Grants and Subsidised lettings.

Discretionary Grants

Members had heard earlier in the meeting during Public Participation from the representatives of Windrush School, 1st Witney Rangers, Lowland Resue Oxford and Be Free Young Carers concerning their respective grant applications.

Prior to the Committee considering Discretionary Grant Applications for the 2024/25 financial year the Leader of the Council reminded members of the amount of Grant funding that remained in the budget (£17,000) and that a further grant window would open in January 2025, therefore it would be necessary to view the grant requests with this in mind.

Windrush School – Members felt that rather than fund a salary, they preferred to fund equipment or training to existing staff to help with the needs of the children up to the value of £1,000. Therefore, they made no official award and asked that Officers request that the school submit a revised request should they wish.

1st Witney Rangers Girl Guides – It was proposed by Cllr Cherry and seconded by Cllr Edwards-Hughes that the award be increased to £1,000. Members were unanimous in support for the social value the opportunity the request would provide for young people. Members also asked Officers to make offer of the Council's Halls to the group to host fundraising events so that they may be considered for subsidised lets.

Lowland Rescue Oxford– It was proposed by Cllr Bailey, seconded by Cllr Crouch that an award of £2,500 be made. Members were unanimous in support and thanked the group for what they did, particularly recently in Witney.

Be Free Young Carers – Members considered the reach of the group which was intended to cover the whole West Oxfordshire area. They agreed that as Witney held approx. 40% of the young people in the district then the award should reflect that data. Members were unanimous in their agreement to award £2,000. Members also requested that the council write to the Witney schools to highlight the award and encourage them to engage with the group.

A Member raised and it was agreed by the Committee that it was clear from all four applications received and the representations given, that Mental Health featured in all which is a representation of the pressures that all sections of society were facing.

Subsidised Lettings

The Committee was unanimously in agreement for the request from the Mayor of Witney for subsidised letting of the town council halls totalling approx. £300 to support his charity fundraising efforts in 2024/25. *(The mayor having removed himself from the meeting whilst the item was considered)*

Members also considered additional subsidised letting for Witney Fairtrade Action Group, Witney Traffic Advisory Committee, CoHSAT and Oxfordshire County Council these were unanimously approved.

Other Grants

The Committee considered an extra ordinary grant award for Witney Town Band which was agreed unanimously approved. The Committee asked Officers to extend the offer of free use of The Leys or Corn Exchange for the Band to use for a future fundraising event following an update from the Deputy Town Clerk to advise that their fund reserves were low. A Member also asked that if they knew of any opportunities at which the Band could play for a fee that they should be forwarded to the Band.

Members considered the draft policy criteria for the Council's 50th Anniversary Grants. The Committee agreed to delegate to Officers in conjunction of the Chair of the Committee for

agreement of these small awards. They also asked that a photo of how the individual grant awards were spent so that these may be used to publicise the grant scheme.

Finally, Members were pleased to receive correspondence from Witney Day Centre, West Oxfordshire Citizen Advice and West Oxfordshire Community Transport for the grant awards they had previously received.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, Windrush School be contacted, and a revised grant application be requested for Play Therapy equipment and,
3. That, the sum of £1,000, be awarded to 1st Witney Rangers Girl Guides and,
4. That, the sum of £2,500, be awarded to Lowland Rescue Oxford and,
5. That, the sum of £2,000, be awarded to Be Free Young Carers and,
6. That, the subsidised lettings applications for Witney Fairtrade Action Group (£199.50), Mayor of Witney (approx. £300), Witney Traffic Advisory Committee (£78.50), CoHSAT (£157) and Oxfordshire County Council (Lettings discounted by approx. 48%) be approved and,
7. That, the extra-ordinary grant of £1,000 be approved for Witney Town Band and,
8. That, the Councils 50th Anniversary Grant Aid policy be approved and,
9. That, the awarding of the 50th Anniversary Grant Scheme be delegated to Officers in conjunction with the Chair of the Policy, Governance & Finance Committee and,
10. That, all grants be awarded under the General Power of Competence and that the recipients be asked to acknowledge the Council's financial contribution in their promotional literature and provide pictorial evidence of their spending and,
11. That, the correspondence from Witney Day Centre, West Oxfordshire Citizen Advice and West Oxfordshire Community Transport be noted.

(Cllr Cherry left the meeting immediately following the awarding of Discretionary Grants at 8:10pm and therefore did not take part in the discussion or agreement of the Subsidised Lettings or Other Grants)

F322 SUBSCRIPTION OPPORTUNITY - SAFER ROADS STRONGER COMMUNITIES

The Committee received and considered the request to subscribe to the Safer Roads Stronger Communities initiative.

Members agreed that the work was a duplication of the Witney Traffic Advisory Committee that the Council already facilitated and therefore agreed, unanimously to not join the initiative at this time.

Resolved:

That, the correspondence be noted.

F323 **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.

F324 **CHRISTMAS LIGHTS TENDER EVALUATION**

The Committee received the confidential report of the Head of Estates & Operations along with a verbal update and a visual presentation provided by the successful contractor.

Resolved:

1. That, the report and verbal update be noted and,
2. That, the award of the contract be made in open session after the conclusion of the confidential session.

F325 **PROPERTY & LEGAL MATTERS**

The Committee received the confidential report of the Town Clerk/CEO.

As well as the written report, the Town Clerk/CEO gave a verbal update on Deer Park & Raleigh Crescent Training Pitches, Madley Park Pitches, Windrush Place Pavilion, Pitches and Play Zone/MUGA and the prospective 3G pitch.

The report also contained updates on Leases with third parties including Courtside CIC, West Witney Sports & Social Club, Madley Park Hall Trust and the Witney Allotment Association.

Member were pleased to see the details of the lease agreement with Witney Lawn Tennis Club and hear of the advantages this has to both the Council and the Tennis Club.

An update was also provided on other legal matters including the Council's Temporary Welfare Units at West Witney Sports and Social Club and the Windrush Place Adventure Play and Raleigh Crescent MUGA/MUSA.

A summary was provided to the Committee of Insurance Claims involving the Council that are currently being dealt with.

Finally, the Town Clerk/CEO provided details of an offer to purchase land had been made to the Council. The Committee agreed with the Town Clerk/CEO pursuing this further.

Resolved:

1. That, the confidential report be noted and,
2. That, the offer of land be pursued further by the Town Clerk/CEO to establish more information.

F326 **STAFFING MATTERS**

The Committee received the minutes of the Personnel Sub Committee meeting held on 3 June 2024.

Resolved:

That, the confidential minutes of the Personnel Sub-Committee meeting held on 3 June 2024, and the recommendations contained therein be approved.

F327 **REVERT TO OPEN SESSION**

Following the completion of the closed session to consider confidential matters the Committee reverted back to open session to formally award the Christmas lights tender.

F328 **CHRISTMAS LIGHTS CONTRACT 2024-2027**

Members were pleased to hear and see of the advances in lighting that would be part of the agreed contract.

It was proposed by Cllr Collins seconded by Cllr Edwards-Hughes that the contract be awarded to LITE (Lighting and Illumination Technology Experience Limited). All members were in agreement.

Resolved.

That, the Christmas Light Contract be awarded to LITE (Lighting and Illumination Technology Experience Limited for 3 years from 2024 to 2027 subject to necessary checks and contractual legislation. The whole life cost of the awarded contract being £133,467.

The meeting closed at: 8.40 pm

Chair