

Minutes of the Finance & General Purposes Committee held on 5th January 2010 at the Old Abbey House, Abingdon.

Present:

Councillor Peter Fulk	- Chair of Amenities & Recreation
Councillor Jim Halliday	
Councillor Angela Lawrence	
Councillor Lesley Legge	- Chair of Finance & General Purposes
Councillor Patrick Lonergan	- Chair of Best Value Sub Committee Councillor
Councillor Julie Mayhew-Archer	- Chair of Museum Management Committee
Councillor Alison Rooke	
Councillor Martin Smith	- Chair of Planning & Highways

In attendance:

Nigel Warner - Town Clerk

91 **Apologies**

Apologies were received from the Mayor of Abingdon, Cllr Patricia Hobby.

Members were concerned with the inclement weather as an urgent weather warning was in operation for very heavy snow, which was already falling. It was agreed that the meeting proceed but that if it had not finished by 9.00 pm, that an adjournment would be sought at that point, and that the meeting would then reconvene at 5.30 pm on Tuesday 12th January 2010.

92 **Declarations of interest**

Councillors Jim Halliday, Angela Lawrence, Patrick Lonergan, Julie Mayhew-Archer and Alison Rooke all declared personal interests in any matters relating to the Vale of White Horse District Council as elected Members of that Council, specifically the items in relation to the budget, which included discussion of the effects of proposed changes to the Vale's budgets in relation to grants; the twinning grant (referenced in minute 100); the consultation on the District Council's budget proposals; the consideration of consideration of property matters which included reference to the Guildhall and the Old Abbey House, both of which are owned by the District Council; and the item in relation to the Abbey Meadows Swimming Pool, which is owned by the District Council.

In relation to minute 99 (Vale budget consultation) Councillors Angela Lawrence and Alison Rooke considered their interests to be personal and prejudicial as they are, respectively, an Executive Member and the Chairman of the District Council, and they left the room during discussion of this item.

93 **Minutes**

Resolved: *that the minutes of the Finance and General Purposes Committee meetings held on 11th November and 8th December 2009 be signed as a correct record.*

94 **Matters Arising from previous meetings**

Minute 75 (34) – civic matters: It was reported that a meeting to discuss procurement of saleable civic goods would take place during the afternoon of 7th January 2010.

Minute 78 – Christmas lights: The Town Clerk reported that he had requested that the Council's contractors come forward with a suitable date over the coming month at which plans could be discussed for next year, particularly with regard to the purchase of new lights, as it was likely that significant discounts could be obtained due to end of season sales and new line promotions. It was agreed that such a meeting should take place at the start of the period of offers to increase the choice available, that the meeting time be late afternoon (from 3.30 pm onwards) and that approximately 45 minutes should be allowed at the start of the meeting to review the performance of the contractor during 2009/10.

Minute 86: Local Flood Action Groups: Members requested that the form for registration of these groups be obtained from the District Council officer Peter Dela.

95 **Matters Referred from Other Standing Committees**

All budgetary matters were referred to the meeting of 8th December 2009. There were no additional matters referred.

96 **Grants Sub-Committee Meeting**

The Chair of the Committee, Councillor Lesley Legge, gave a verbal report of the meeting of the Grants Sub Committee held the previous evening, on 4th January 2010. The Committee received and considered this report.

The sub-committee had considered an application by Sue Ryder Homes for a grant of £1,000 towards the replacement of specialist baths at their Nettlebed Hospice. This had been deferred to the next meeting pending further enquiries, these being:

- Confirmation of the number of former residents of Abingdon being cared for in the home (the application referred to the "Abingdon area");
- Confirmation of the criteria for becoming a resident in the Home.

It had also been noted that funding had been requested from a small number of scattered parishes and it had been suggested that the organisation be approached regarding their rationale as to who had been approached.

A Member of the Committee stated that he understood that entry to the Home may be based on an ability to pay and asked that this be part of the enquiries being made.

Resolved:

That the following grants be approved:

General grants

John Mason School: grant application towards loans arts scheme, amount applied for £400. A grant of £300 was approved and it was suggested that the school also approach other Parish Councils in their catchment area; this would also have the advantage of spreading word of the scheme, possibly leading to other venues at which the art could be displayed.

Twining Grants

John Mason School: French Exchange visit - £200.

97 **Schedule of Accounts**

The Committee received and considered the Schedule of Payments for 1st to 30th November 2009. It was noted that in many cases the payments shown include V.A.T at the standard rate and that this is reclaimable but unfortunately the computer programme does not allow the VAT element to be shown on the payments schedule. Amounts rechargeable from the accounts, e.g. from the County Council for the Residents' Parking Scheme were indicated with "R."

The Chairman of the Amenities and Recreation Committee, Councillor Peter Fulk, requested to look at the invoices relating to works fuel, protective clothing and hire of equipment and it was agreed this would be done outside the meeting.

In relation to invoice reference 14830 in the sum of £2,300 it was reported that this related to the cost of professional research in relation to potential funders for the County Hall Museum Improvement and Access project and had been wholly funded by way of a grant from the South East Museums Council.

Resolved that the Committee approve the Schedule of Payments for the period 1st to 30th November 2009.

98 **Budget estimates 2010/11**

Councillors Jim Halliday, Patrick Lonergan and Julie Mayhew-Archer declared personal interests in this item as Members of the Vale of White Horse District Council as the item included discussion of the effects of proposed changes to the Vale's budgets in relation to grants.

The Committee received and considered the report of the Projects and Technical Manager relating to the play equipment budget, as circulated with the agenda, along with the budget papers previously circulated. Members considered that budgetary provision for play area improvements should be retained in the budget in the sum of £25,000. Members requested that a portfolio of the equipment in each area be compiled to supplement the fixed assets register, as previously requested by the Amenities and Recreation Committee, and that photographs of the play areas be loaded on to the website.

Councillor Patrick Lonergan, as a local Member for Peachcroft ward, noted from the report of the Projects and Technical Manager that there was a proposal to replace grass with an artificial play/ safety surface in front of the new kick board/ goal at Elizabeth Avenue. He stated that this could be quite contentious. Councillor Peter Fulk, as Chair of the Amenities and Recreation Committee, stated that the area was a victim of its own success as the grass had worn down due to use but the matter of the surfacing would be considered by the Amenities and Recreation Committee

The Committee received and considered the further report of the Town Clerk as circulated on 31st December 2009. Members noted that the draft estimates showed net expenditure on Council services for 2010/11 amounting to £1,090,354, an increase of £10,617 on the 2009/10 expenditure. Estimates have kept the revenue

budgets at a minimum commensurate with service delivery and economies have been made; consequently the budget allowed provision for an additional edition of the Town Crier magazine £3,000, office equipment renewals £2,500 and vehicle replacement renewals £6,000. This base budget also included provision for the County Hall Museum Improvement and Access scheme £117,000 and Council Property Maintenance and Improvements £53,000. There were however major pressures on expenditure relating to property improvements and new projects.

It was noted that since the last meeting the District Council's draft budget had been published for consultation. There were proposals relating to grants to this Council and to the Joint Environmental Trust (JET) and if the District Council implemented these budgets there would be the following impact on the Town Council's budget

Possible loss of twinning grant	£2,000 added to net expenditure;
Possible loss of information centre grant	£1,000 added to net expenditure;
Reduction of grant to JET	-£5,000 reduction in net expenditure on basis that Town Council matches Vale grant;
Net impact	-£2,000 reduction in net expenditure.

There did not appear to be any proposals to alter the grant awarded to Abingdon County Hall Museum.

Members discussed the apparent reduction in Town Council net expenditure which would result should the Vale's draft budget proposals be adopted. It was noted that there were proposals which would result in the reduction of community grants and the withdrawing of funding for one-off grants and this could result in more grants applications being submitted to the Town Council. Consequently, with regard to the Town Council's draft budget it was **recommended that no changes be made at this stage but that if the Vale's draft budget results in a reduction of Town Council net expenditure, the net saving be vired to increase the Town Council grants budget by £2,000.**

Discussion on the budget was then adjourned as Members needed to consider a number of items on the confidential agenda, principally in relation to property, which could have a budgetary implication. These items were correctly being discussed under confidential agenda due to their commercial sensitivity and because of ongoing negotiations with other bodies; to disclose such items could seriously compromise the Council's position. However the budget was then considered in open session and minuted accordingly.

99 **Vale of White Horse DC – draft budget proposal 2010/11 (for consultation)**

Councillors Jim Halliday, Angela Lawrence, Patrick Lonergan, Julie Mayhew-Archer and Alison Rooke declared personal interests in this item as Members of the Vale of White Horse District Council, which had launched this consultation. Councillors Angela Lawrence and Alison Rooke considered their interests to be personal and prejudicial as they are, respectively, an Executive Member and the Chairman of the District Council, and they left the room during discussion of this item.

Copies of the above papers had been circulated to all Members and the District Council had requested the Town Council's thoughts on the budget proposals.

Members appreciated the significant challenges which the District Council face in balancing the budget during a time of reductions in investment income, reductions in income sources such as planning and building regulations which had resulted from the recession and further reductions in Government grants. It was noted that year on year the District Council was having to reduce operating costs by 5% and consequently had some difficult decisions to make in order to reduce costs. It was regretted that central government policy was effectively leading many principal authorities to have to cut services to the public whilst Council Tax continued to rise, and there were concerns regarding the resulting erosion of local democratic control. Members considered the various items in the budget consultation, noting that there were a number of items affecting Town Council services. Members expressed their concern over proposed reductions in grants. It was also noted that, in accordance with the original understanding, funding for the Choose Abingdon Partnership of £20,000 a year was shown as ceasing at 31st March 2012. Members were concerned regarding the impact of this funding ceasing and the likelihood of it being replaced from other sources.

It was **resolved**:

1. *That the Vale of White Horse DC – draft budget proposal 2010/11 be noted and the District Council be thanked for consulting the Town Council.*
2. *That the Town Council note the difficult position within which Councils such as the Vale of White Horse District Council find themselves in, for the reasons outlined above, not least of which is government policy.*
3. *That the Town Council express its concern regarding the proposals to cease the grants to the Town Council in relation to twinning and the information centre and to reduce the grant to the Joint Environmental Trust; all these grants help to maintain important town services and their cessation/ reduction will reduce effective partnership working.*
4. *That the Town Council express its concern regarding the proposals that grants to outside bodies be reduced and that one-off grants cease as this Council believes that such grants provide an essential source of support to many local groups and that the value of such grants is multiplied by the consequential use by such groups.*
5. *That the Town Council express its concern that funding for the Choose Abingdon Partnership was shown as ceasing at 31st March 2012.*

100 **Financial, Performance Monitoring and General report of the Town Clerk**

Councillors Jim Halliday, Patrick Lonergan and Julie Mayhew-Archer declared personal interests in this item as Members of the Vale of White Horse District Council as the item included discussion of the twinning grant from the District Council.

The Committee received and considered the report of the Town Clerk in relation to the above, as circulated with the agenda. This report incorporated the summary of income and expenditure for the year to date and details of known variances. The Committee had examined the detailed budgets as part of the budget cycle and an up to date copy of the detailed report had been provided to the Chair and was available on request.

Internal audit report

The Committee received and considered the first interim internal audit report for 2009/10 and **resolved** that the report together with its recommendations be adopted. Members were pleased that there had been no findings of financial malpractice or inappropriate behaviour. However it was noted that the Internal Auditor had found some instances where official orders had not been raised and the Town Clerk stated that he would tighten up procedures in this regard.

Annual audit letter

It was noted that the Audit Commission had already issued an unqualified report in relation to the Council's financial statements and the Council's arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the use of resources. The letter had been approved under delegated powers by the Town Clerk in consultation with the Chair of the Committee on the basis that there were no matters in the letter of which Members were aware (through previous correspondence) or with which it was considered the Council would contend. **Resolved:** *that the letter be noted and the approval by the Town Clerk in consultation with the Chair of the Committee be endorsed.*

Member- Officer protocol

The above document was received and considered. Members indicated that there were some areas which it was felt required further consideration, one being the section on appointment of officers (paragraph 6) and the definitions of "otherwise related" and "close friend" and it was **resolved** *that this item be referred back for further consideration at the March meeting of the Committee.*

Fraud and corruption policy

The above document was received and considered.

Recommended: *that the above policy as detailed in the agenda, be adopted by the Council.*

Twinning grant

Members noted the correspondence from the District Council in which it was stated that the grant towards twinning had been reduced from £2,500 to £2,000. Members were disappointed with this decision as the twinning grant was the subject of a service level agreement and the Council considered that it undertook a good job in maintaining and improving its strong and long-standing twinning links. It was **resolved** that the Town Clerk write to the District Council to express this Council's dissatisfaction with their decision and requesting that this matter be reconsidered.

Financial regulations and standing orders

The Committee received and considered the report of the Town Clerk in relation to the above, as previously circulated. This report proposed changes in the financial regulation and standing orders in relation to cheque signing and also included a briefing from the National Association of Local Councils regarding changes which are being lobbied for in order to allow Councils to make changes to the way they make payments with a view to updating legislation to allow for electronic payments to be made.

The report also proposed changes to financial regulations with regard to payment of salaries and wages and also orders for work, goods and services which the Town Clerk considered would enhance internal controls.

Recommended:

1. *That the Council amend Standing Order 31 to read:*

“The Council’s control of expenditure shall be governed by its Financial Regulations.

“All cheques for payments will be drawn on an Abingdon Town Council Payments Account, and all receipts deposited into the Current Account.

“All cheques shall be signed by two Members of the Council. All such payments shall be detailed on a monthly schedule and these schedules shall be presented to the next meeting of the Council’s Finance and General Purposes Committee.

“The Chair of the Finance and General Purposes Committee and the Town Clerk shall be authorised to approve expenditure up to a maximum of £1,000 for which budgetary provision has not been made and where the matter is considered by him/her to be too urgent to wait for the appropriate Committee.

“All orders shall be issued by the officers of the Council in accordance with the Financial Regulations.”

2. *That the Financial Regulations in relation to banking arrangements and cheques (section 6), payment of salaries and wages (section 9) and orders for works goods and services (section 12) be amended in accordance with the report of the Town Clerk.*

Resolved: *that the report of the Town Clerk (Financial, Performance Monitoring and General report) be noted.*

101 **Community Safety**

The latest report from the Town Council part-funded Police Community Support Officer December 2009 was received and considered.

Resolved: *that the above report be noted.*

102 **Consultations**

Members received and considered the following consultations, the documents in relation to which had been circulated – with the agenda.

- (a) Oxfordshire Pension Fund – Funding Strategy Statement. Members felt that this was an important consultation which by its nature required detailed consideration. It was **resolved** that authority to draft the Council's response be delegated to the Town Clerk, Councillor Patrick Lonergan (from this Committee) and Councillor Tim Oates (the Council's representative to the County Pension Fund Forum)

(b) Oxfordshire Fire Authority Integrated Risk Management Consultation Action Plan 2010-11 and Proposed Changes to Shift Patterns at Abingdon and Didcot Fire Stations. Documents circulated at the Member briefing on 25th November 2008 were attached.

Members considered the Council's response to the Consultation and firstly requested that the Town Clerk thank Oxfordshire Fire Authority for consulting the Town Council and meeting with Members to talk through this matter. Members did not feel they required a further meeting with the Fire Authority at this stage; the Council had been provided with a lot of detail and this had been appreciated. Members, whilst recognising the responsibilities of Oxfordshire County Council "countywide", did not feel that it was acceptable that the County Council were looking to improve services elsewhere in the County at the expense of Abingdon. Members considered that it was of great concern that the proposals would adversely affecting the service in Abingdon, particularly with regard to night time and weekend cover. Oxfordshire has a very good, efficient and effective Fire and Rescue Service and Abingdon benefits from having full -time fire fighters employed at Abingdon Fire Station. Members were concerned that if fire fighters were asked to travel to other fire stations there could be a retention problem with the full-timers. Consequently the Town Clerk was asked to write to the Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service objecting to the proposed changes. However, if the proposals did proceed, the Fire Authority are requested to comeback in one year's time and inform the Council of the impact of the changes. **Resolved:** that the above form the basis of the Town Council's response to the consultation.

Exclusion of the public, including the press

Taking into account the business on the confidential agenda the Chair will proposed and it was **resolved:**

That in accordance with section 1 (2) of the Public Bodies (Admissions to Meetings) Act 1960 (as extended by Section 100 of the Local Government Act 1972), the public (including the press) be excluded from the meeting because of the confidential nature of the business to be transacted, as summarised below:

- Confidential Minutes of the Finance & General Purposes Committee held on 8th December 2009;
- Matters arising and matters referred;
- Property matters;
- Abbey Meadows outdoor swimming pool;
- Police Community Support Officers;
- Radley Lakes.

The meeting adjourned at 9.00 pm.

Signed Date