

Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council

Minutes of the Finance and General Purposes Committee held on 8th January 2013

At 7 pm in the Committee Room at the Old Abbey House, Abingdon

Present:

Cllr Sandy Lovatt	Chairman
Cllr Marilyn Badcock	Vice Chairman
Cllr Iain Littlejohn	
Cllr Patrick Lonergan	
Cllr Monica Lovatt	Ex-officio, Mayor
Cllr Julie Mayhew-Archer	
Cllr Helen Pighills	
Cllr Alison Rooke	
Cllr Andrew Todd	

In Attendance

Cllr Samantha Bowring	
Mr Jimmy James	Chairman, Abingdon Branch National Market Traders Federation (for items up to and including minute F64)
Mr Nigel Warner	Town Clerk (Clerk to the meeting)

F60 **Apologies for absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Michael Badcock.

F61 **Declarations of Interest**

None.

F62 **Minutes**

The Committee received and considered the minutes of the meeting of the Finance and General Purposes Committee held on 13th November 2012.

In relation to Minute F47 – Grants Sub-Committee, Cllr Iain Littlejohn stated that he had declared a non-pecuniary interest in the grant application by Larkmead School as his daughter was participating in the trip which was being organised. This was noted.

Resolved: that subject to the above, that the minutes of the meeting of the Finance and General Purposes Committee held on 13th November 2012 be signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

F63 **Matters Arising**

Minute F47 – Grants Sub-Committee: Church in Abingdon Twinning. A Member stated that it was her recollection that this grant had been refused on the basis that it was an application which was towards the costs of food and hospitality etc, and stated that it should be made clear to applicants that if these were not activities which the Council felt able to support, this should be made clear so that applicants did not take time to make an application which would be refused.

Minute F55 – Publicity: A Member stated that there should be liaison with the Highways Department of the County Council in relation to any additional signage in the town as it was her understanding that there was a policy of “de-cluttering”.

F64 Statements and Questions from the Public

The Chairman of the Committee, Cllr Sandy Lovatt, introduced Mr Jimmy James, who was the Chairman of the Abingdon Branch of the National Market Traders’ Federation (NMTF). The NMTF managed and organised the Monday retail market on behalf of the Town Council.

Mr James stated that he wished to put forward the views of the Monday market traders in relation to the application to allow the “Veg Van” to operate on the Market Place on a Friday morning. The Monday market traders were concerned that this could set a precedent for other traders to come onto the Market Place and lead to the creation of a full Friday market. The Monday market traders acknowledged that competition was healthy but trading conditions were difficult for markets and they doubted that there was sufficient capacity for the town to be able to support two markets each week. There was a worry that a market on a Friday would undermine the viability of the Monday market and the Council could end up with two struggling markets.

In response, the Chairman of the Finance and General Purposes Committee, Cllr Sandy Lovatt, stated that one of the major objectives of the Town Council was to increase footfall in Abingdon town centre, and increased use of the Market Place was an important way in which this could be achieved. He stated that a full Friday market was not proposed; what was being proposed was a single stall in the form of the “Veg Van” which would trade for up to one and a half hours on Friday mornings. His recommendation was that this should be trialled for a period of three months and there was no intention to allow any other trading on the Market Place at the same time. However the Council may look at other types of markets in future, such as an antiques market.

The Town Clerk confirmed that it was the Town Council which owned the market rights to Abingdon and therefore the Town Council was in a position to decide on how the Market Place operated.

The Chairman of the Committee thanked Mr James for his contribution and Mr James left the meeting at this point.

F65 Choose Abingdon Partnership (ChAPS)

The Committee received and noted the minutes of the Choose Abingdon Partnership Board Meeting which took place on 2nd October 2012. It was noted that both the District Council and the County Council were looking at their budgets over the next month, and their contribution towards the partnership would be under pressure.

A Member requested that draft minutes be available as soon as was possible after each meeting.

F66 Communications Sub-Committee

The Committee received and considered the minutes of the joint meeting of the Communications Sub-Committee and the Website Working Group which took place on 10th December 2012.

The Chairman outlined the progress which had been made towards the establishment of the town portal. A contractor had been appointed and work was due to start shortly. There would be a further meeting of the joint group later this month. The Council had appointed Ms Michelle Gliddon to act as its Project Manager and she would be coming forward to that group with a comprehensive list of issues on which decisions would need to be made. The aim was to ensure that the contractors would not be delayed awaiting decisions. There would still need to be a clear structure regarding decision making and delegation from the group.

It was **resolved** that the minutes of the joint meeting of the Communications Sub-Committee and the Website Working Group be approved and any recommendations contained therein be adopted.

F67 Mayoral Allowance Working Party

The Committee received and considered the minutes of the meeting of the Mayoral Allowance Working Party which took place on 7th January 2013.

The Committee considered in detail the recommendations of the Working Party. It was acknowledged that the role of Mayor was an important one in the town and the Mayor was required to devote much of their time to undertaking their duties. Whilst there were some differences of opinion between Members regarding the level at which an allowance should be paid, it was acknowledged that under all the proposals which were coming forward, it was likely that the allowance would not cover the full cost of undertaking the duties of Mayor.

It was noted that the Council was not permitted to pay an allowance to the Deputy Mayor but that it was established practice that the Mayor make a payment to the Deputy Mayor for undertaking Mayoral duties, from his or her Mayoral Allowance. In debating the recommended contribution, there were four Members in favour of this being set at £250; two Members at this being set at £200; and three abstentions.

It was noted that the Council's current practice was that 50% of the costs of Mayor Making were funded from the Mayoral Allowance. The recommendation of the Working Party was that the whole cost of the Mayor Making be transferred entirely to the Civic budget.

It had been further recommended that the Mayoral Allowance be reduced from £3,190 to £3,000 in 2013/14. Cllr Monica Lovatt considered that, taking into account the costs of performing the duties of Mayor, the Mayoral Allowance should not be reduced but retained at its current level of £3,190. She moved this as an amendment to the recommendation and this amendment was approved.

Following this debate it was **resolved** that the minutes of the meeting of the Mayoral Allowance Working Party which took place on 7th January 2013 be noted and it was **recommended**:

1. That the Council's civic events budget continues to be responsible for expenses in relation to Remembrance Day, the Civic Service, creation of Freemen and Freedom Exercises. This to be subject to payment from Members and Freeman for any lunch/ supper provided, in accordance with the current practice.
2. That the Mayor be responsible for paying for any items which are entirely under their control, such as a Christmas reception and the sending of Christmas cards.
3. That the format of the reception following the annual Mayor-Making ceremony remain as that adopted for 2012, i.e. a drinks and finger buffet reception open at all those attending the ceremony, and that this be funded from the Civic Budget.
4. That the Council continue to pay the allowance in two half yearly instalments.
5. That the Mayor's Allowance be set at £3,190 for 2013/14 and for 2014/15 (2012/13 - £3,190).
6. That the Mayor be asked to allocate a sum of £250 towards the expenses of the Deputy Mayor in undertaking Mayoral duties (2012/13 - £200).

F68 **Matters Referred**

The Amenities and Recreation Committee, the County Hall Museum Management Committee and the Guildhall Committee had referred their draft budget estimates to the Finance and General Purposes Committee and these were considered at F69.

F69 **Financial Report including Estimates 2013/14**

The Committee received and considered the report of the Town Clerk / Responsible Financial Officer in relation to the above.

The Chairman of the Committee, Cllr Sandy Lovatt, led the Committee through its consideration of the budget estimates and the various proposals were fully debated by the Committee. As part of the report, the Town Clerk had detailed the impact of the localisation of council tax support which had resulted in a reduction in the council tax base. This meant that for a given level of council tax, the Council would raise less from the precept although for 2013/14 much of this difference would be met by a Government grant. Based on the current year's council tax level in the draft Local Government settlement there was a shortfall of £15,473. However, Cllr Sandy Lovatt stated that through careful budgeting and targeting of its priorities, he was pleased that he would be able to recommend a precept which would mean that the Council Tax payable in relation to Town Council services would be frozen for 2013/14.

Members considered the proposed bids for capital and revenue projects.

In response to a query from a Member, Cllr Marilyn Badcock, Chairman of the Amenities and Recreation Committee, stated that £3,000 had been placed in the budget against the summer events due to take place on Saturday 1st June 2013. It

was planned that the events would be self financing and therefore this budget should be considered to be a contingency which would only be called on if required. The Cemetery Improvements bid was to enable the Council to complete the setting out of the new ashes interment area and also for a number of other essential items including replacing the hedging in areas where unfortunately it was now diseased.

Members considered a budget bid towards the Community Fund, noting that this would provide a very helpful fund for groups, as revenue grants were not available from the other local authorities. In this regard a Member mentioned the possibility of a grant application by "Abingdon Bridge". A Member stated that this would also be an appropriate fund from which the Science Fair could make a bid for funding; however another Member stated that she considered that this fund should be kept solely for community groups.

The Committee considered the adequacy of its general reserves and reviewed its capital receipts and earmarked reserve balances. Members considered that all of these balances and reserves were at an appropriate level, taking into account the current responsibilities and the potential future commitments and liabilities of the Town Council.

In relation to the capital receipts reserve, a Member stated that the Council may wish to consider utilising at least part of this money to assist with the planned capital works at the Guildhall.

It was noted that there was an earmarked reserve amounting to £764 in relation to the Joint Economic Forum (JEF). The Town Clerk said the JEF had been put "on hold" when the Choose Abingdon Partnership had been set up and the balance retained in the accounts case it was needed at a future date. It was noted that 50% of this balance had originally been funded by the District Council and 50% by the Town Council and therefore Members considered that enquiries should be made of the District Council to establish whether they were content for this reserve to be extinguished and its balances transferred to those of the Choose Abingdon Partnership.

Members considered a number of items which had been transferred from the 2012/13 capital and revenue projects budget into the base budget for 2013/14. In response to a query regarding the base budget proposal of a sum of £5,000 for the Council website and £2,000 for youth communications (the same as the 2012/13 capital budgets) the Chairman of the Communications Sub-Committee, Cllr Marilyn Badcock, stated that it had been considered prudent by that Committee and the Website Working Group to retain these sums in the budget to cover expenditure for the first year of the new portal.

In considering the base revenue budget, Members considered the position regarding the re-charges from the central services of office administration and the works depot. Following discussion, Members considered that it was appropriate to continue to make recharges from the costs of the Works Team to individual services as these were readily identifiable and discreet elements of service costs. However, it was noted that with the change in accounting regulations in 2010/11, the Council was no longer required to make apportionments from its central administration costs. Members considered that administrative costs should be represented in one cost centre without recharges and noted that this would decrease accounting costs; it was also considered that this would make the Council's accounts more transparent.

A Member queried the scope of the cost centre and capital bid in relation to street furniture. The Town Clerk stated that street furniture covered bus shelters; Town Council owned seats, litter bins and similar items. Members noted that whilst these items were contained in cost centres under the auspices of this Committee, there was a certain amount of committee overlap and the labour resourcing for these functions were primarily a function of the Amenities and Recreation Committee. Therefore Members considered that these cost centres should be transferred over to the control of the Amenities and Recreation Committee.

After having made a number of adjustments to the budget, Members noted that the overall budget requirement for the Council for 2013/14, the Council's net expenditure requirement would amount to £1,334,191 (2012/13 - £1,344,208). A Council Tax of £106.01 in Band D (2012/13 - £106.01) would produce a precept of £1,227,649 (2012/13 - £1,344,578) and the estimated Government grant, in accordance with the draft Local Government Settlement, was £101,396 (2012/13 - £0). This would produce an overall income of £1,329,045 (2012/13 - £1,344,578) and therefore a need to fund £5,146 from revenue reserves (2012/13 budgeted transfer to revenue reserves £370).

(Cllr Patrick Lonergan left the meeting at this point, it being 8.45 pm).

There was a debate regarding the contribution towards the grants disbursed as Joint Environmental Trust (JET) grants. It was noted that the Trust retained significant balances and that when formed, an equal annual grant to the Trust was made by the Town and District Councils. The District Council had ceased its contribution in April 2011, when the residual trust funds had been transferred to the Town Council. It was considered that there may be some scope to reduce the Town Council's contribution towards the JET. However, Members noted that there had been significant grant applications in the past and they were reluctant to reduce or remove this budget. It was noted that when the JET had been transferred to the Town Council their spending was governed by a Service Level Agreement. Members considered that the Council should account separately for any new funds which it chooses to contribute in order that scope for flexibility of use of the funds can be retained for the future.

It was **recommended** by 5 votes in favour, 0 against and with 3 abstentions:

Overall budget, precept and reserves

- (i) That the draft base revenue budget estimates for 2013/14, as circulated in the report of the Town Clerk and subject to the amendments set out above, be approved in the sum of £1,044,191 (net expenditure).
- (ii) That the estimates for capital and larger revenue (project based) items for 2013/14 as detailed below and in the sum of £290,000 be approved:

a.	Cemetery improvements	£30,000
b.	Play equipment	£20,000
c.	Council paths and pavements	£6,500
d.	New Cemetery Fund	£75,000
e.	New and replacement Christmas lights	£10,000
f.	Noticeboards/ Street Furniture	£10,000
e.	Summer events	£3,000

h.	Pooled equipment fund	£30,000
i.	Community Fund	£11,500
j.	Treasures	£5,000
k.	Acquisitions	£1,000
l.	Pooled property fund/ reserve	£88,000

(iii) That the total net spending provided in the estimates for 2013/14 of £1,334,191 be funded as follows:

a.	Precept	£1,227,649
b.	Grant from Central Government in accordance with the draft Local Government settlement	£101,396
c.	Transfer from the general reserve	£5,146

(iv) That following the review of Council reserves, that the general reserve, taking into account the transfer detailed above, be deemed to be appropriate to the annual expenditure of the Council, that the earmarked reserves be considered to be reasonable and sufficient in relation to known and potential liabilities and commitments of the Council, that the capital receipts reserve be noted and that the projected reserve movements at 31st March 2013 be approved as detailed in Appendix B of the report of the Town Clerk.

(v) That the Council's reserves be further reviewed when considering the final accounts for the year ending 31st March 2013.

Fees and Charges

Cemetery

The Amenities and Recreation Committee had noted that comparisons with other local authorities had revealed that the Council's fees in relation to the Cemetery were lower than the average. The service was a subsidised service and the Committee considered that the Council should continue to move in the direction of reducing the subsidy whilst having regard to having a desire to limit increases in fees. However the Amenities and Recreation Committee had only recently set the fees for the new Sanctum 2000 ashes section and did not consider that these required further review at this stage. The Committee endorsed the recommendation of the Amenities and Recreation Committee and **recommended:**

(vi) That Cemetery fees and charges (with the exception of these in relation to Sanctum 2000 ashes interment fees) be increased by 5% by 1st April 2013.

Guildhall

It was noted that the Guildhall Committee had undertaken and implemented a full review of the structure of the Guildhall fees and charges during 2012/13. The Committee endorsed the recommendation of the Guildhall Committee and it was **recommended**:

- (vii) That there be no change to fees and charges in relation to Guildhall services at 1st April 2013 but that matters be reviewed by the Guildhall Committee in June 2013.

Markets

The Committee noted that fees and charges in relation to market tolls were very reasonable but considered that any increase needed to be kept modest as trading conditions were not easy for market traders. It was **recommended**:

- (viii) That tolls for the Monday Retail Market be set at £10.30 per 10 feet pitch (2012/13 - £10.00) and for the Farmers' Market £8.75 per stall (2012/13 - £8.50), this representing an increase on 2012/13 in line with the Retail Prices Index at November 2012.

Other matters

- (ix) That no apportionments in relation to administrative overheads should be made with effect from 1st April 2013 and that these costs (both budgeted and actual) be retained within cost centre 601, Central Services.
- (x) That responsibility for street furniture and the base budget detailed in cost centre 309, together with any capital and any revenue project budget relating to these items, be transferred under the Council's Terms of Reference for Standing Committees, from the responsibility and control of the Finance and General Purposes Committee to that of the Amenities and Recreation Committee.
- (xi) That enquiries should be made of the District Council to establish whether they are content for the Joint Economic Forum reserve to be extinguished and its balances transferred to those of the Choose Abingdon Partnership; and that if the District Council are content, that this should be undertaken on 1st April 2013.

Resolved: that subject to the above, that the report of the Town Clerk / Responsible Financial Officer be approved.

F70 **Markets and Service Review**

The Committee received and considered the report of the Town Clerk in relation to the above.

(i) Trading by “Veg Van” on the Market Place.

Resolved: that authority be delegated to the Town Clerk to make arrangements to enter into an agreement with the “Veg Van” to trade on the Market Place for up to 1 ½ hours on Friday mornings for a trial period of three months, following which period the matter will then be referred back to this Committee for review.

(ii) Service review – Markets

The Committee noted the independent service review of the markets and its findings, which had concluded that the services were “fit for purpose and do give best value.”

In relation to the suggestion that consideration be given to allowing a monthly “Excellence Market,” Members requested the Town Clerk to consult with the “Choose Abingdon Partnership” regarding this matter and report back.

The Chairman of the Committee, Cllr Sandy Lovatt, reported that the Market Place Co-ordinator was investigating the possibility of a regular Antiques Fair being held, and would report back to a future meeting. Cllr Iain Littlejohn, as Chairman of the Guildhall Committee, stated that the Guildhall was also available as a venue for the Fair, depending on the requirements of the stallholders.

Resolved: that the service review in relation to Markets be adopted, with the actions as noted above.

F71 Market Place Events

The Committee received and considered the report of the Market Place Co-ordinator in relation to the above.

Resolved:

1. That the report be adopted;
2. That the Council exercise its powers under the Market Place Act 1978 to organise a Summer Craft Fair on 15th June 2013.

F72 Publicity

The Chairman of the Committee, Cllr Sandy Lovatt, suggested that publicity should be given to the Council’s budget following its adoption by the Council on 16th January 2013.

SECTION II (Excluding the public and the press)

F73 Exclusion of the public, including the press

The Chairman moved 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.

F74 **Confidential Appendix**

The Committee received and considered the confidential appendix to the minutes of the meeting of the Finance and General Purposes Committee held on 13th November 2012 and **resolved** that these be signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

F75 **Matters Referred**

None.

F76 **Town Vitality – Service Review**

The Committee received and considered the confidential report of the Town Clerk in relation to the above, and the letter from the District Council dated 17th December 2012, in relation to the “Choose Abingdon Partnership.” This was treated as confidential due to the content in relation to staffing.

It was noted that the report of the Town Clerk included the independent service review in relation to “Town Vitality.” All the narrative and the conclusions were those of the Mr Chris Rolley, who had conducted the review. However it was noted at paragraph 3.2 (Corporate and Service Objectives), that the lead in terms of the Guildhall marketing was now undertaken by the Guildhall Manager, and whilst the Partnership was an important partner in the Portal Project, the lead on this was the Council’s Website Working Group.

Members noted that it had concluded that the Choose Abingdon Partnership had *“proved successful in uniting public service providers, businesses and community for common benefit in terms of positively addressing issues affecting the economic and social wellbeing of the Town”* and that these services had been delivered in a cost-effective manner.

See also the confidential appendix to these minutes, including the recommendation. This is treated as confidential due to staffing implications. The matter would be moved into the public domain when these matters had been resolved.

Resolved: that subject to the matters outlined in the confidential appendix, that the servicer review in relation to Town Vitality, be adopted.

F77 **Property Matters**

The Committee received and considered the confidential report of the Town Clerk in relation to the above.

(a) Open Air Swimming Pool.

Recommended:

1. That in accordance with the Council’s statutory powers and its agreement with the District Council, that the budget estimates for 2013/14 provide for a grant of £43,570

to the Vale of White Horse District Council towards the costs of the Abbey Meadow Open Air Pool.

2. (See confidential appendix).

(b) Monday Market

Resolved: that authority be delegated to the Town Clerk to give permission to the applicant, who was an existing stallholder at the Market, to sell alcohol from his stall for a trial period of three months, that authority also be delegated to the Town Clerk to terminate the arrangement within that time period for whatever reason should he consider this desirable, and that the matter be reviewed in any case at the meeting prior to the end of the three month period.

(c) Report of the Head of Service Delivery. See confidential appendix.

The meeting rose at 9.16 pm.