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Town Clerk – Laura Chrysostomou

Minutes of the Policy and Finance Committee held in The New Millennium Chamber, Manor House, Church Street, Littlehampton on Monday 18 December 2023 at 6.30 pm

Present:

Councillor Butcher – Chair
Councillor Lee
Councillor O'Neill
Councillor Tandy
Councillor Dr Walsh KStJ
Councillor Wiltshire
Councillor Woodman

In attendance:

Laura Chrysostomou - Town Clerk
Jon Short – Deputy Town Clerk
Juliet Harris - Assistant Town Clerk
Kieran Gibbins - Events and Town Centre Strategy Manager
Elise Bicknell - Town Centre Strategy Project Officer

2023 to 2024

32. Evacuation Procedures

The evacuation procedures were noted.

33. Filming of Council Meetings, Use of Social Media and Mobile Phones

The procedures were noted.

34. Apologies

There were apologies from Councillor Northeast and Councillor Wiltshire attended as substitute in his place.

35. Declarations of Interest

Members and Officers were reminded to make any declarations of disclosable, pecuniary, or personal and prejudicial interests that they might have in relation to items on the agenda. The standing declarations were noted.

In addition, Councillor Wiltshire declared a personal interest across the agenda in matters relating to Arun District Council as a District Councillor.

36. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 23 October 2023, previously circulated, were confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chair.

37. Chair's Report and Urgent Items

37.1. Urgent Action

The Committee received an Urgent Action, copy attached to the minutes, that had been approved regarding the upgrade to the Town Council's website content management system. The Supplementary Estimate of £4,500 authorising the upgrade had been approved by the Property and Personnel Committee and in accordance with the Town Council's Financial Regulations had also been signed by the Chair of this Committee. Observing the lack of advance notice of the upgrade, it was noted that the IT contractor be requested to provide timelier notice in the future.

It was resolved that:

The Urgent Action including the supplementary estimate of £4,500 be noted.

38. Public Forum

There was one member of the public present, and no questions were raised.

38.1 Written Representation from a Resident

"I would like to take this opportunity to wish all Councillors and Council staff a very happy Christmas and New Year and to thank you for all your hard work. I have one suggestion, that is to use the money previously anticipated to be used for Town Centre parking to reduce the rather high suggested precept increase in 2025 to 2026."

In response:

The Chair thanked the resident for their good wishes and wished them a happy Christmas. It was noted that their suggestion related to the 2025 to

2026 financial year was currently a forecast figure. The Chair however confirmed that the resident's representation had been noted.

39. Officer Reports

39.1. Town Centre Strategy and Action Plan Update

39.1.1. The Committee had before it an update following the recent meeting of the Town Centre Action Group (TCAG) and progress with the work on the Action Plan. The Town Clerk also reported that the first edition of the newsletter for local businesses had been sent and that the Town Council would resume coordinating the community stall in March 2024.

39.1.2. The Committee praised the content and format of the newsletter which augured well for the development of the Town Centre identity and brand. It was noted that developing a brand would be part of the work that would be undertaken by the consultants and that the business representatives were also keen to see this piece of work progressed. It was agreed that the newsletter would be added to the website and circulated to all Councillors for information.

39.1.3. Turning to the Action Plan, the provision of key facilities such as banks and the post office was discussed. It was observed that there was an action in the Town Council's Business Plan to introduce a community hub in the High Street. Commenting on the popularity of the Barclays Bank popup consultancy previously at the Manor House and now based at The Wave, Members noted that banking hub initiatives were starting to come forward elsewhere in the country. Noting that the Halifax was the only remaining bank on the High Street, it was therefore considered that the popularity of these initiatives demonstrated that there was still a need for banking facilities in the Town and suggested that these be investigated as part of this work.

39.1.4. Regarding the upcoming Business Forum, it was noted that it was principally for town centre retailers and businesses and would be facilitated by the consultants. Notes from the Business Forum would be shared with the TCAG and all Councillors.

It was resolved that:

The content of the report and the updates be noted.

39.2. Town Centre Events Periodic Report and 2024 to 2025 Programme

39.2.1. The Committee received a report, previously circulated, which set out feedback from the Christmas Lights Switch on event, an update on the Love

Local Prize Draw scheme, and progress with the 2024 to 2025 Town Centre events programme. In addition, Members were asked to consider a proposal to introduce a town trail in the summer 2024 programme and the draft Christmas Market and Festival tender.

39.2.2. Members commented on the success of the Christmas lights switch on event and thanked officers for their work. Regarding other aspects of the pre-Christmas High Street events programme, it was considered that the lack of take up of the late-night shopping indicated it was time to revisit the current billing. The limited benefit achieved for retailers who had participated in the Love Local prize draw initiative was also questioned. Overall, it was thought that future initiatives designed to get visitors into the Town Centre should not be restricted to retailers and include hospitality venues.

39.2.3. Looking forward to the 2024 events programme, the proposal for a Trail was discussed. At its previous meeting the Committee wished to explore developing a heritage trail which it was thought could be a useful means of linking arrival points such as the train station to the Town Centre, the riverside and the seafront, as envisaged in the Town Centre Strategy objective. Commenting on the attention that the Artsworks project to create Chips the Seagull had attracted, Members felt this demonstrated how well something unusual could work in terms of promoting the Town Centre positively and increasing footfall. It was suggested that involving young people be explored and a brief developed around a theme encompassing the seafront with the ability to extend the Trail to Wick if successful. This could also boost the summer High Street Events Programme and reflect the multi centred Town. It was therefore considered prudent that work on the Town Trail be paused to allow time for this to be explored further with Artsworks. Members supported Artwork involvement with the summer High Street Events Programme.

It was therefore resolved that:

1. The feedback on the Christmas Events be noted and the Committees suggestions regarding next year's activities as set out in Minute 39.2.2. above be investigated as part of the plans for the 2024 Christmas Events Programme.
2. The update on the Love Local Prize Draw be noted.
3. The update on the plans for the Pancake Olympics and the launch event for the summer High Street Programme be noted.
4. Work on the Town Centre Trail be paused to allow time to explore options with Artsworks as set out in Minute 39.2.3.

39.2.4. Christmas Market

39.2.4.1. The Committee proceeded to review the draft tender document, previously circulated to Councillors only. Reflecting on the thorough document there was a view that the Town Centre may not be ready to host an event on such a large scale. Observing that income generated on the market stalls did not necessarily directly benefit the Town, it was felt that the commercial offer on the High Street needed to be stronger before the Christmas Market was introduced. This also highlighted the importance of potential contractors being able to provide clear evidence of having successfully delivered markets in comparable locations and without damaging the local economy.

39.2.4.2. This led the Committee to discuss whether the Market was best value for money at this time or if as previously discussed, the Town Council's resources might be more effectively deployed on developing a programme of activities in the High Street throughout the summer. By focussing on getting residents of the Town into the High Street rather than going elsewhere, it was thought that this would increase footfall, promote a sense of place, support initiatives designed to deter unacceptable behaviour and create a positive atmosphere and image of the Town.

39.2.4.3. In view of the reservations highlighted during the Committee's discussion it was considered prudent to defer the Christmas market for a further year. This would also provide time for the newly appointed consultant to undertake their work, noting this was an 18-month long project, as well as the opportunity to seek feedback with local retailers in the upcoming business forum.

It was therefore resolved that:

1. The launch of the Christmas market tender be deferred to 2025 to 2026 to allow further investigation of the issues raised at this meeting and seek feedback from the Business Forum.
2. The contents of the report be otherwise noted.

39.3. Proposals to improve support for businesses in reducing business crime and anti-social behaviour

39.3.1. The Committee received a report, previously circulated, which contained proposals by Arun District Council (ADC) for a partnership scheme to support local businesses in reducing crime and anti-social behaviour. The Town Clerk explained that discussions were still at an early stage and that two options were proposed to take the initiative forward. One involved setting up an information and support system managed by a dedicated remote Business Crime Liaison Officer. Alternatively, a formalised, district-wide Business Crime Reduction Partnership was proposed which would be managed by a full-time employee focused on the Bognor Regis and Littlehampton town centres initially.

39.3.2. The Committee proceeded to review the options in more detail and discussion focussed on effective enforcement. Currently retailers had access to a reporting system which was voluntarily managed by a local trader. Whilst this was a useful tool to gather evidence it was not the deterrent that businesses wished to see. The consensus was that the Business Crime Reduction Partnership could offer a better opportunity to address the problem of retail crime for retailers and in terms of tackling the causes of retail crime in the longer term. It however also acknowledged that this would require a significant investment.

39.3.3. It was observed that a partnership model had been adopted in Bognor Regis and was driven by the business community. Members still had questions about how the partnership model would work and these were focussed on how effectiveness was measured and employee management. However, tackling crime was a big priority for the retailers and a focus for the Town Centre Action Group (TCAG). Soundings taken from the local trader who looked after the current scheme in the Town Centre were positive with regards to option two, a partnership scheme managed by a full-time employee. It was considered that a good way forward would be to discuss the initiative at the forthcoming Business Forum. Looking ahead and if progressed, partnership funding for the scheme could be funded from the savings on the Town Centre Car Parking contribution and the Committee was therefore supportive of discussions continuing, particularly for option two, to help businesses reduce crime.

It was resolved that:

Authority be delegated to the Town Clerk, in consultation with the Chair and the Mayor, to continue discussions with the District Council on options to support businesses in reducing crime in the Town Centre in line with the Committee's views as set out in Minutes 39.3.2. and 39.3.3. above and discuss the proposals at the forthcoming Business Forum.

39.4. Members' Allowances Scheme Review

39.4.1. The Committee received a report, previously circulated, which set out proposals by the District Council's Independent Remuneration Panel to review Members Allowances. The Town Clerk explained that as part of this review the Remuneration Panel was seeking feedback from Town and Parish Councils regarding existing allowances including what would be considered a reasonable level of allowance.

39.4.2. It was noted that the Town Council offered Councillors the maximum allowed under the Parish Basic Allowance Scheme being 10% of the Arun District Council's Basic Allowance paid to District Councillors. This was currently £603 per year. In addition, both the Mayor and Deputy Mayor could claim a further

allowance for extra responsibilities if they wished. Discussion focussed on the Parish Basic allowance and the consensus was that an allowance calculated on a flat rate percentage did not accurately reflect the varying size and workloads of parishes.

39.4.3. It was observed that within Arun District there was a mixture of small, medium and large parishes including many rural parishes and three Towns, all with varying numbers of residents, councillors, issues and vastly different workloads. Acknowledging that each parish was unique, it was thought that even changing the way that the allowance was calculated to one based on the number of residents would be fairer. Members therefore believed that a more realistic level of allowance would be achieved with these factors taken into consideration and that this should be relayed to the Panel.

It was resolved that:

Authority be delegated to the Town Clerk in consultation with the Chair of this Committee and the Mayor to finalise the response on behalf the Town Council taking into account the views of the Committee as set out in Minutes 39.4.2. and 39.4.3. above.

40. Finance

40.1. Debtors Review Update

Members received a report, previously circulated, setting out the progress to date on debt recovery. Progress in recovering the long-term debt was moving in the right direction and it was noted that a small portion dated back to 2017. Most of the 60 day plus debt was however more recent and the recovery of one long term debt in particular was complicated by contractual issues. The Responsible Financial Officer confirmed that this matter was being actively pursued.

It was resolved that:

The update be noted.

40.2. Committee Budget Monitor

40.2.1. Members received a report, previously circulated, which highlighted any significant variances from budget in Income and Expenditure relating to the Policy and Finance Committee's budget for 2023 to 2024. It was noted that the invoice for election costs was still awaited and that the budget allocated was based on previous bills. It was also observed that the budget for Mayors discretionary fund had not been reviewed for many years. There was a view that this should be reviewed, and it was agreed that this be explored further as part of the discussion on the Committee budget.

40.2.2. Regarding the provision for the town centre parking, it was noted that the current scheme would be coming to end partway through the current financial year and Members questioned if a partial refund was due. It was agreed that the Responsible Financial Officer would investigate this and pursue it if appropriate. It was also observed that the interest rate on deposits was incorrectly stated in the report.

It was resolved that:

The report be noted.

40.3. Committee Draft Budgets 2024 to 2025, 2025 to 2026 and 2026 to 2027

40.3.1. The Committee considered a report, previously circulated, setting out proposals for this Committee's Budget for the next three years. The Committee proceeded to review its budget in more detail. Recalling the earlier conversation about the Town Centre events programme, Members considered it sensible to maintain the level of provision for initiatives to provide flexibility to explore ideas that might come forward through the work of the Town Centre Action Group (TCAG). It was also noted that the decision to defer the contract for the Christmas market would not impact the budget as this cost would be met from reserves.

40.3.2. Discussion turned to the Town Centre Partnership Initiatives budget of £28,250 which had previously been used to contribute towards the free disc parking. It was suggested this could enable work to start on researching options regarding the Business Plan objective to see a community hub in the town centre. Members also highlighted that a feasibility should look to include seeking contributions from commercial enterprises alongside startup costs and funding. Recalling the earlier conversation of supporting businesses to reduce business crime and anti-social behaviour, it was thought prudent to maintain a budget for partnership initiatives. £15,000 was considered a sensible sum to allocate and would have a positive impact on the budget by reducing the burden on the precept.

40.3.3. Recalling the earlier conversation regarding the budget for the Mayors Discretionary Fund, it was noted that this had not been increased for many years. The Fund had proved beneficial in the past as it enabled the Mayor to directly support community groups that they came into contact with during the Mayoral year and where the ability to make a small contribution could help get an initiative off the ground. It was therefore proposed that this budget be increased from £1,000 to £1,500 for 2024 to 2025.

It was therefore resolved that:

1. Subject to the amendments set out in Minutes 40.3.2. and 40.3.3. above, the draft Committee budget for 2024 to 2025 and the projected budgets for 2025 to 2026 and 2026 to 2027 be approved and recommended for inclusion in the Full Council Budget.
2. The Committee's Earmarked Reserve Position be noted.

40.4. Capital Programme Draft Funding 2024 to 2025, and projected funding 2025 to 2026 and 2026 to 2027

The Committee received a report, previously circulated, which set out the funding arrangements to meet the Capital Programme including the financial implications of the major projects that were a priority for the Council. The Town Clerk explained that this included building reserves to support the delivery of the new youth centre in Wick and the new community centre in North Littlehampton. The Committee reviewed the Programme in conjunction with the Earmarked Reserves (EMR) and it was noted that unlike the general reserves, the EMRs were held for specific projects or initiatives which the Council was committed to delivering. In some cases, the time frame for delivery was not yet known and for others such as the Welcome Packs, the scheme was ongoing and linked to strategic developments. It was also noted that it was prudent to maintain a reasonable level of reserves to cover unforeseen expenses.

It was resolved that:

The draft Capital Programme budget for 2024 to 2025 be approved and, noting the Programme and financial position in terms of the reserves, that it be recommended to Full Council as part of the overall Council Budget for 2024 to 2025.

40.5. Full Council Draft Budget 2024 to 2025, and projected funding 2025 to 2026 and 2026 to 2027

40.5.1. The Committee received a report, previously circulated, which set out the proposed Council budget for 2024 to 2025 and projected funding 2025 to 2026 and 2026 to 2027. The budget had been drafted following meetings held with political group leaders and the Chairs and Vice Chairs of each Committee. The Town Clerk explained that following the Property and Personnel Committee meeting on 12 December 2023, where the Committee's draft budget was discussed, it was agreed to include the provision of a Public Works Loan Board figure to complete the planned preventative maintenance works required to the Manor House. The addition of this figure changed the anticipated overall percentage increase in the Precept and the new figures projected a precept increase for 2024 to 2025 of 6.73 percent.

40.5.2. The Committee proceeded to examine the budget proposals in more detail.

The earlier discussion about the Policy and Finance budget would also have a further impact on the precept of a positive nature as the decision to reduce the Town Centre Partnership Initiatives provision to £15,000 and increase the Mayors discretionary fund by £500 to £1,500 would deliver an overall reduction in the precept. The amended precept for 2024 to 2025 was therefore of £1,523,981 and represented an increase of 5.81% or 0.16p per household per week. The Committee proceeded to vote on the budget proposals for 2024 to 2025.

It was resolved that:

1. Subject to the inclusion of the amendments made to this Committee's draft Budget earlier, Council be Recommended to set a Precept of £1,523,981.
2. Council be recommended to set Band D Council Tax at £148.26p per household, per annum for 2024 to 2025, an increase of 5.81 percent which equated to an increase of £8.13p per household, per year – £0.16p per week.

41. Exempt Business

There was none.

The meeting closed at 8.51pm.

Chair