

Minutes of the **FINANCE AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE**
held at the Town Hall, Swanage on **WEDNESDAY**
13th DECEMBER 2023 at 9.30 a.m.

PRESENT:- Councillor T Foster (Town Mayor) – Chair

Councillor J Bishop
Councillor M Bonfield
Councillor A Harris
Councillor C Moreton
Councillor M Whitwam

Also in attendance: -

Dr M Ayres	Town Clerk
Mr C Milmer	Visitor Services and Business Development Manager
Ms G Percival	Assets & Compliance Manager
Miss A Spencer	Finance Manager

In addition to Members of the Council and Officers, six members of the public attended the meeting.

Public Participation Time

The following matters were raised during Public Participation Time:-

- Agenda item 3 a) - three members of the public spoke of their concern at the proposed significant increase in Private Site Beach Hut fees for 2024/25.
- Agenda item 3 c) – the inclusion of a £245k scheme for seafront shelter refurbishment on the draft capital programme for 2024/25 was questioned, as was the absence of any budget for children’s play equipment for Herston Community Fields.
- Agenda item 3 d) - concern was raised regarding business rates paid for the Spa Beach Huts.
- A request was made for all agenda papers to be made available further in advance of council meetings and the inability of members of the public to contribute to the debate during council meetings was challenged.

1. **Apologies**

Apologies for their inability to attend the meeting were received from Councillors Tomes and Trite.

2. **Declarations of Interest**

Members were invited to declare their interests and consider any requests for Grants of Dispensations in accordance with Section 9 and Appendix B of the Council’s Code of Conduct.

Agenda Item No. 3 (b) – Councillor Bonfield declared a non-pecuniary interest in the scale of charges under the Code of Conduct by reason of being employed as a taxi driver and hiring a grid space in the boat park.

Agenda Item No. 3 (b) – Councillors Bishop and Bonfield declared non-pecuniary interests in the scale of charges under the Code of Conduct by reason of being regular hirers of Town Council beach huts.

3. **Budget Setting 2024/25**

(a) **To consider recommendations from Committees:**

Environment Committee-11 October 2023

Members were informed that the Sustainable Swanage Officer at Dorset Coast Forum would be leaving their post imminently. It was noted that the future of the post was uncertain at present and alternative options for service provision would be reviewed, potentially reducing the funding requirement. It was noted that a budget provision of £20k, £10k and £10k was included in the draft estimates for the next three financial years.

Recommendations made by the Environment Committee were:

- To allocate £25k to an earmarked reserve from 2024/25 to 2030/31 to fund the installation of heat pumps
- To include budgets for the following works;
 - i. Pathway repairs at Prince Albert Gardens - £40k
 - ii. Water refill point – Main Beach Car Park - £2.6k
 - iii. Climate Crisis Training - £2.5k to be funded from existing training budgets

It was proposed by Councillor Whitwam, seconded by Councillor Moreton and **RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY:**

That the budget requests recommended by the Environment Committee are included in the draft Estimates for 2024/25.

Personnel Committee – 13 October 2023

Recommendations made by the Personnel Committee were:

- Approve the draft staffing budget, including the retention of a Communications & Community Engagement Officer post (£27.5k for 2024/25), which, further to Minute No. 18 of the Community Services Committee, is to be reviewed by the Communications Strategy Working Party .
- The three staffing proposals put forward for Visitor Services to be reviewed by the Tourism & Local Economy Committee.
- Training budget - £21k.

It was proposed by Councillor Harris, seconded by Councillor Bonfield and **RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY:**

That the draft staffing budgets as recommended by the Personnel Committee are included in the draft Estimates for 2024/25, subject to a review of the Communications Engagement Officer post and Visitor Services proposals.

Community Services Committee - 8 November 2023

Recommendations made by the Committee were:

- Allocate £21k per annum for the health & Wellbeing Hub at Chapel Lane for 2024/25 & 2025/26.
- Allocate £15k to a tennis court upgrade, subject to a VAT refund and revised contributions to earmarked reserves. It was noted that discussions were still ongoing with the tennis club regarding this matter.

It was proposed by Councillor Moreton, seconded by Councillor Bonfield and **RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY:**

That the budgets as recommended by the Community Services Committee are included in the draft Estimates for 2024/25.

Tourism & Local Economy Committee – 22 November 2023

Recommendations made by the Tourism & Local Economy Committee were:

- Continue the procurement of lifeguard services from the RNLI - £32k
- Option 1 staffing budget plus additional hours for Beach Gardens

It was proposed by Councillor Moreton, seconded by Councillor Bonfield and **RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY:**

That the budgets as recommended by the Tourism & Local Economy Committee are included in the draft Estimates for 2024/25.

It was noted that all of the committee recommendations considered under this agenda item would be taken forward for further review as part of the draft estimates at the next meeting of this committee on 10th January 2024.

(b) Draft Scale of Fees and Charges 2024/25

Consideration was given to a draft scale of fees and charges for the Council's services for the 2024/25 financial year, drawn up further to discussion at the Tourism & Local Economy Committee, the Community Services Committee and council working party meetings. It was noted that the Council's Beach Hut rental fees had already been approved by Council and would be excluded from any voting requirement.

Further to Minute No. 8 a) of the Tourism & Local Economy Committee meeting held on 22nd November 2023, the proposed increase of £70.00 applied to the private beach hut sites licence fee for 2024/25 was discussed. Consideration was given to the concerns raised in public participation time and attention was drawn to the rising costs that the Council was having to bear in connection with the beach and related services. The need to ensure that Council communications reached site licensees was acknowledged. It was further noted that a direct comparison with BCP beach hut fees may not have been the best comparable in a previously distributed briefing note.

The meeting was briefly suspended under Standing Order 1 p) to enable a Member of the Public to present relevant evidence.

After further discussion it was **AGREED:**

That a meeting should be arranged between representatives of the Beach Hut Owners' Association, Councillor Bonfield and officers to further consider representations regarding the licence fee to be charged for the private beach hut sites for the 2024/25 financial year.

Members considered the fees & charges, excluding the charges for Taxis and the Boat Park. It was **RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY:**

To approve the Scale of Fees and Charges for inclusion in the draft Estimates 2024/25 for consideration by the Finance & Governance Committee on 10th January 2024.

Further to his declarations of interest in sections of the scale of charges under item 2) above, Councillor Bonfield left the meeting.

It was proposed by Councillor Whitwam, seconded by Councillor Moreton and **RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY:**

To approve the charges for the Boat Park, for inclusion in the draft Estimates 2024/25 for consideration by the Finance & Governance Committee on 10th January 2024.

It was proposed by Councillor Bishop, seconded by Councillor Moreton and **RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY:**

To approve the charges for Taxis, for inclusion in the draft Estimates 2024/25 for consideration by the Finance & Governance Committee on 10th January 2024.

(c) **Draft Capital Programme and Minor Works Schedule**

Consideration was given to the draft Capital Programme and One-Off Minor Works Schedule for 2024/25. The contents of both had been considered by each of the relevant council committees and a recent councillor workshop.

In response to a point made during public participation time, it was noted that following a public open day earlier in the year, no clear public demand had been expressed for the installation of children's play equipment at Herston Community Field; instead, the general feedback had been in favour of retaining the area as a green open space. It was reported that the matter had been considered at the Sports, Leisure & Wellbeing Working Party and that any change in public opinion could be considered in the future.

It was further noted that the proposed works to the three seafront shelters, with estimated costs of £245k, had been included in the draft Capital Programme recommended by the Community Services Committee. However, it was noted that current reserve forecasts implied that there was no internal funding available for this project. It was consequently agreed that it would move onto an addendum to the main capital programme and external funding would be sought for the project.

The financial impact of the Green Seafront Stabilisation Scheme was noted, with a potential funding gap of £325k presently being forecast. It was noted that this was subject to change over the coming year while the project was developed and funding options reviewed.

It was proposed by Councillor Bonfield, seconded by Councillor Harris and **RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY:**

That the draft Capital Programme be included in the draft Estimates 2024/25 for consideration by the Finance & Governance Committee on 10th January 2024.

It was proposed by the Town Mayor, seconded by Councillor Moreton and **RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY:**

That the Minor Works Schedule 2024/25 be included in the draft Estimates 2024/25 for consideration by the Finance & Governance Committee on 10th January 2024.

(d) **National Non-Domestic Rates Forecast**

Members received a report outlining the forecast costs for National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR), commonly known as Business Rates, included in the draft Estimates for the next three financial years.

Given the revaluation of NNDR on 1st April 2023, forecast costs had risen significantly. It was reported that a check on 5 property valuations by the Valuation Office Agency (VOA) had been requested, predominantly beach huts, with one of the properties currently at the challenge stage. It was noted that the process to check the council's properties by the VOA was expected to be a lengthy one.

The contents of the report were noted.

(e) **Council Tax Base Update**

Members were informed that the council tax base for 2024/25 was 4,960.7, an increase of 24.8 or 0.5% on the 2023/24 figure.

A discussion ensued regarding the funding requirement for 2024/25, during which inflationary pressures on Council budgets were highlighted. The projected depletion of reserves over forthcoming financial years was noted, largely due to the extensive works programme including the Green Seafront Stabilisation Scheme. Members' desire to fund the adopted Corporate Plan and not scale back on the services provided by the Council was also noted and it was acknowledged that this would require an increase in precept.

It was proposed by Councillor Bishop, seconded by Councillor Bonfield and **RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY:**

To include a Precept increase of 3.5%, equating to a 2.98% increase on a Band D property, in the draft Estimates 2024/25 for consideration by the Finance & Governance Committee on 10th January 2024.

4. **Internal Audit Report 2023/24 – Visits 1&2 of 5**

This item was deferred.

5. **To consider council priorities/work plan winter/spring 2023/24**

(a) **Outturn Summer/Autumn 2023**

Further to Minute No. 182 of the Council Meeting held on 24th April 2023, consideration was given to a briefing note setting out the progress that had been made in implementing the Town Council's priorities over the preceding six months. It was noted that of the 19 items agreed as being urgent four had been largely completed and eight had seen significant progress.

(b) **Proposed Plan Winter/Spring 2023/24**

Consideration was given to a draft list of Council priorities for the period December 2023 – May 2024 and it was noted that this again included a large number of urgent items (17 in total). The only addition to the plan was completion of a review of the Town Council's Data Protection policies and procedures. It was noted that agreement of public realm improvements in the Lower High Street had been removed, given that the town centre flood defence scheme had been delayed by a year. In respect of next steps in connection with the Green Seafront Scheme the importance of carrying out a review of the essential scheme was highlighted, and it was agreed to incorporate this into the work plan. It was proposed by Councillor Bonfield, seconded by Councillor Bishop and **RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY:**

TO RECOMMEND:

That the draft priority list for winter/spring 2024 be approved.

6. **To consider budget allocations:**

(a) **Town Hall external works**

Members considered a detailed briefing note, prepared by the Assets & Compliance Manager outlining the scope of works required for repairing works at the Town Hall and Annexe. Additional required works were noted as clock repairs and the installation of lightning protection. An additional budget of £33k was proposed, including a £10k contingency sum and a £2.5k pc sum, totalling £88k in total for the proposed works. It was noted that it had been recommended to exclude any works to the façade at the present time, pending a further survey and a review of external funding options, with an initial estimated cost of £35k. It was proposed by Councillor Bonfield, seconded by Councillor Bishop and RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY:

TO RECOMMEND:

That approval be given to an increase of £33k in the budget allocation, totalling £88k for external works to the Town Hall.

(b) **Safety Surface – Shore Road**

Members discussed a briefing note outlining issues that had been raised during the summer season relating to the area adjacent to the showers on Shore Road. It was noted that the path was in Dorset Council ownership. However, the issues raised were as a result of Town Council owned showers. It was further noted that Dorset Council had recommended the proposed remedial works. It was proposed by Councillor Bonfield, seconded by Councillor Harris and RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY:

To approve a budget allocation of £2,572 to provide non-slip flooring to the footpath area adjacent to the showers on Shore Road.

(c) **Fencing & Benches – Herston Community Field**

Members considered a briefing note detailing a recommendation from the Sports, Leisure and Wellbeing Working Party to increase the budget provision required for improvement works at the Herston Community Field to £5,500, an uplift of £2,500. It was proposed by Councillor Bonfield, seconded by Councillor Harris and RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY:

To approve an increase in the budget for improvement works at Herston Community Fields to £5,500.

7. **Items of information and matters for forthcoming agendas**

The following matters were listed as matters for forthcoming agendas.

- a) Civility and Respect Pledge
- b) Vexatious Correspondence Policy- a date for a meeting of the Working Party would be organised for January 2024.
- c) Medium Term Financial Plan 2024/25 to 2026/27
- d) Update on Action Points from Internal Audit Report 2022/23

8. **Date of next meeting**

The date of the next scheduled meeting was noted as 10th January 2024.

The meeting concluded at 11.15 a.m.
