

**Minutes of the Finance & Policy Committee meeting held on
Thursday 3rd December 2020
at the St James's Church Centre, Pottergate, Alnwick at 6.30pm**

Present: Councillors S Allcroft, P Broom, G Castle, W Grisdale, J Humphries, S Patience, A Symmonds, G Watson, L Wearn and L Wood-Mitchell.

In attendance: P Hately, Town Clerk; J Pibworth, Assistant to the Town Clerk.

FP 20/21 Apologies

Councillors Swinbank.

FP 20/22 Declarations of Interest

Councillor Castle declared a non-pecuniary interest in County Matters.

FP 20/23 Minutes of the last meeting

The minutes of the last meeting on 22nd October 2020 were tabled for approval. Councillor Patience had a correction to item FP 20/19.

RESOLVED: The minutes of the Finance & Policy Meeting held on 22nd October 2020, with one amendment, were agreed as a true copy.

FP 20/24 Minutes of the last meeting - matters arising not on the agenda

None.

FP 20/25 Budget Update 2020/21

The Assistant to the Town Clerk highlighted the budget lines where there had been expenditure since the last meeting:

Administration - £34,168.96 (7 months salaries)

Grants - £34,150 paid out

Audit fee - £1,750 (£450 internal audit fee, £1,300 external audit fee)

Project & Funding Officer - £16,224.93 (7 months' salary)

Council Priorities -£2,808.63 (includes 2nd payment for new website £1,746)

COVID - £2,906.10 (£959.27 hand sanitiser/gloves/boxes)

General - £978.52 (£119.57 copying, £520.40 phones, stationery £359.72)

Council Van £690.53 (fuel £342.53, MOT £65, road tax £265)

Councillor Broom asked how many months the fuel expenditure was for. The Assistant to the Town Clerk advised that the figure was for the year-to-date figure.

Councillor Wearn felt that the in-month phone expenditure looked high and asked if it included officers' phones. The Assistant to the Town Clerk advised that most of the cost was standing charge and also included Broadband charges every three months.

The Town Clerk advised she was looking to purchase digital phones which would enable officers to answer the office phone from home.

RESOLVED: To note the 2020/21 budget update.

FP 20/26 Draft Budget 2021/22

The Town Clerk explained that, following discussions with the Mayor and Deputy Mayor, officers were working towards budgets that would not increase the precept.

Draft budgets for Cemetery and Recreation & Amenities had already been agreed as:

Cemetery – a decrease of £4k in the budget for 2021/22

Recreation & Amenities – no change in the budget for 2021/22

The total precept for 2020/21 was £329,290 and to have a 0% increase in precept, and based on the Band D tax base, the total budget could be £330,483.

Salaries – pay freeze so no increase.

Room bookings – the same.

Insurance– slightly increase.

Town Twinning – small budget put unlikely to spend.

Audit fee – increased slightly.

Council Priorities – £14.143. This is the remainder of the Finance & Policy budget but could be used elsewhere if councillors felt it was needed.

He showed a comparison sheet showing other Town & Parish Councils, with precepts of over £200k, showing that Alnwick could stay about mid table.

Councillor Grisdale asked the Town Clerk to confirm that the Town Council were not aiming to increase the precept for 2021/22. The Town Clerk advised that his was how the budgets had been worked out but was would be discussed and agreed at Full Council in January.

Councillor Wearn advised that she was not usually in favour of a 0% rise but that in light of COVID-19 she felt it was the right thing to do.

Councillor Broom asked with the extra developments in the town how this affected the figures and where this could be found. The Town Clerk advised that the figures were taken from the tax base numbers from NCC.

Councillor Symmonds asked if there was any contingency for any staffing review. The Town Clerk advised that the carry forward budgets should cover anything needed.

Councillor Castle asked if there was enough budget available to provide new play equipment for older children. The Town Clerk advised that money was put into the Recreation & Amenities budget and that there was extra in the Council Priorities budget if needed so there could be up to £35k available. Councillor Castle advised that his county councillor money could be put towards a larger project. He advised that the NCC's endowment money was for maintenance and not capital items.

Councillor Broom explained that the Project & Funding Officer had been asked to research potential play equipment for older children including input from young people. The Town Council also have part of the endowment for Swansfield Park and asked if that NCC endowment for Swansfield Park could be used towards new equipment. Councillor Castle advised this money was for maintenance and probably not capital items.

Councillor Patience explained that the Town Council could apply for grants some of which will match fund especially if the request was based on input from potential users. She confirmed that the NCC endowment money was for maintenance.

The Town Clerk explained that Swansfield Park Endowment was the investment with Santander.

He added that budgets should be much more based on Town Council priorities for the following year.

RESOLVED: To agree the draft 2021/22 budget and recommend to Full Council for approval.

FP 20/27 Initial Consideration of the 2021/22 Precept

The Town Clerk explained that based on the Band D tax base the overall precept could increase by £1,193 with no increase to individual property precepts.

Reserves – should be between 4 and 8 months expenditure. Reserves at the last stable point end of March 2020 was £204,000 so his recommendation would be that reserves not be used for the precept.

RESOLVED: i) To agree the draft 2021/22 precept and recommend to Full Council for approval, ii) That reserves not be used.

FP 20/28 On-Line Banking

The Town Clerk advised that for the last 6 months he had been working to set up systems to enable the Town Council to make on-line payments. He explained that in order to action this there are some changes needed to the Constitution. He took councillors through the proposed changes to the Constitution relating to payments in line with the changes needed to undertake on-line payments.

Authorised signatories – recommended to change from 3 signatories to Mayor, Deputy Mayor, the Town Clerk and Chairs of Committees.

Councillor Watson asked how the on-line payments would be authorised. The Town Clerk advised that this would be done on-line. Councillor Allcroft advised that she and the Town Clerk had discussed a possible solution would be for the authorised signatories to login in at the end of a Full Council meeting and authorise payments.

Wages Account - the Town Council has a separate wages account which he felt was not needed and would ask Full Council to recommend that the account be closed.

Direct Debits – allow more payments to be made by Direct Debits especially those who get monthly payments.

Petty Cash – amount increased to £150.

Councillor Broom asked how wages were paid. The Town Clerk advised that NCC invoice the Town Council monthly and are paid by cheque.

Councillor Castle asked if the bank would need named people to sign cheques. The Town Clerk advised that this would be needed.

RESOLVED: To agree the changes to the Constitution and recommend to Full Council for approval.

FP 20/29 Any Other Urgent Business

Councillor Watson reported that the new Alnwick Flag looked very good.

Councillor Broom reported that there were quite a few flag poles around town and wondered if flags could be flown from the ones above shops.

Councillor Watson reported that Northumberland flag was being changed by NCC for The Centre in Fenkle Street.

Meeting closed at 7.15pm