**HEREFORD CITY COUNCIL**

**FINANCE AND POLICY COMMITTEE 3rd November 2015**

**MINUTES OF MEETING**

**Present :** Councillors Tawn, Michael, Hall, Edwards, Griffiths, Boulter (part), Baker (part). Councillor Dykes also attended as a non-member of the Committee

**Officers attending :** Steve Kerry, Town Clerk and Lesley Bruton, Finance Officer

**F2015/16.27 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies were received from Councillors Wilcox and Rone.

**F2015/16.28 SUBSTITUTIONS**

None

**F2015/16.29 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

None

**F2015/16.30 MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meeting of 22nd September were agreed as a correct record and signed accordingly by the Chairman.

**F2015/16.31 SCHEDULE OF PAYMENTS**

The Finance Officer presented the schedule of payments made since the last meeting. In answer to a question it was noted that the leaflets regarding a meeting at Saxon Hall had been funded from the ward allocation.

The schedule was accepted for information.

**F2015/16.32 BANK RECONCILIATION**

The Finance Officer reported that the accounts with RBS had finally been closed and that all the Council’s banking was now with Lloyds. The Chairman thanked her for her tenacity in recovering fees charged by both banks as a result of the slow transfer, which had bene due to the banks themselves. It was noted that the £400,000 funds which matured on 15th October had been immediately reinvested to maximise interest income for another six months. It was also noted that the Internal Auditor had counter-signed the reconciliations as they were done during his interim inspection, reported later on this agenda.

**F2015/16.33 REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING REPORT**

The Finance Officer presented the budget monitoring repot for the quarter ending 30th September 2015. The Chairman drew members’ attention to the over and under spends referred to in recommendation 3.3, namely that an overspend on advertising would be covered by a saving on insurance, and a saving on service charges would be vired to cover a higher than expected charge for business rates. The higher charge had arisen for a re-assessment of rateable values. The increased allocation to floral displays for watering would be covered by underspending in street scene. All of these would be accepted if members agreed to recommendation 3.3.

It was noted that the two double member wards had a local allocation of £2,000, not £1,000 as stated. Members discussed the efficacy of the ward budgets, citing small works such as benches, parish noticeboard etc as useful things members could do quickly. The Chairman added that there as now discussion with Councillor Rone at Herefordshire about finding a way to deploy local funding to get small traffic works such as signage or junction safety improvements moving much more quickly as the back log on works agreed by the County Council was now rising towards seven years. Ward funds could be deployed here too. Councillor Griffiths advised that there was now an initiative by the Co-op to operate local notice boards to help build communities which members might find helpful.

 It was proposed by Councillor Tawn, seconded by Councillor Edwards and

 **Resolved :**

**That the Committee notes the contents of the report, and the correction of ward budgets to £2,000 in Newton Farm and Hinton and Hunderton wards.**

 **That the Committee notes the expenditure up to 30th September 2015**

**That the Committee approves the actions proposed in section 5 of the report to address forecasted over and underspends.**

**F2015/16.34 SUPPORT FOR BUS SERVICES TO SHELTERED HOUSING**

The Town Clerk introduced a summary of usage for the service over the last seven months, from March to September 2015. When Committee had agreed to subsidise the service they had envisaged a use level that would equate to £3.50 per journey. In fact that figure had been improved on in every month, with August the best at £1.93 per journey. The average throughout the period had been £2.55. The suggestion made earlier that there had been a dip in July which called the value of the service into question appeared to have arisen from partial data.

In answer to a question it was clarified that the earlier suggestion of adding an additional street stop was only for one person and that the pattern of destinations and timings would make this difficult to achieve.

Members noted the report and that renewal of the subsidy in the next financial year would be an item for the next meeting of the committee.

**F2015/16.35 DONATION TO ST JOHN’S AMBULANCE IN RESPECT OF FIRST AID COVER FOR REMEMBRANCE DAY**

The Clerk presented a brief report summarising the past service and the tradition of a donation for a service which is provided without charge on this important occasion.

 It was proposed by Councillor Edwards, seconded by Councillor Michael and

 **RESOLVED That the Committee endorses a donation of £250-00 to the St John’s Ambulance in gratitude for their support in providing first aid and emergency medical cover for Remembrance Day.**

**F2015/16.36 INTERNAL AUDIT REPORT**

The Chairman drew members attention to the closing paragraph on the first page of the repot and added his appreciation for the high quality of work done by the Finance Officer to maintain our financial systems and produce another clean bill of health. Councillor Edwards seconded this, which was endorsed by the Committee.

 The Chairman also drew members attention to the suggestion that some variation to the pattern of cash collection from the toilets, both in terms of the days of the week on which collection occurs and using another person from time to time be made, to protect the Councillor who normally undertakes this from any risk of becoming a target of crime.

  **The report was noted by the Committee**

**F2015/16.37 BUDGET STRATEGY UPDATE**

The Town Clerk introduced the report and added that since writing it the situation with Hereford in Bloom had changed. A new Chairman had taken over and had written to advise that the proposal to use a water bowser was not now going ahead, apparently due to difficulties in finding anyone to store it and volunteers to use it. This meant the projected savings in watering might not now be fully achieved, raising a further question of how much money would be available from the City Council budget to support maintenance. Although work was well advanced on a comprehensive plan with would enable the Council to see what it was getting for the city for its investment his was not finished yet. In the period of review he recommended that Council retain the current budget allocation, but assure the Committee that he, and those members who have contact with the HiB Committee would continue to make it very clear this was a budget allocation for specific purposes not an open grant to be spent as they saw fit without reference to the Council.

 Councillor Edwards suggested there was a lot to take in in the report and that it would be appropriate to discuss it in stages, which the Chairman agreed would be a helpful way forward. It was noted that on the Council Tax Support Grant the apparent decision of Herefordshire Council to withhold the money given to them by DCLG would cost in the region of 11% of the Council’s project income next year. The Finance Officer confirmed that at an earlier briefing for Chairmen and Clerks by officers of Herefordshire Council it had been stated that the policy was to reduce the allocation to parishes by about one third every year, which was broadly in line with reductions that Council was facing in the overall rate support grant. The Clerk had advised those officers he was discussing devolution of services with that cessation of the funding could affect the city council’s position. The change had been communicated by the Leader in answer to a letter from the Market Towns Forum.

 It was proposed by Councillor Edwards, seconded by Councillor Michael and

 **RESOLVED**

 **That whilst noting the Herefordshire Council decision to withhold local council tax support money from parishes is a breach of faith with them and DCLG, the Committee recognises that the weak statutory position gives us no means to challenge this decision. Members mandate the Clerk to write to the Leader of Herefordshire Council individually, and to support any letters written collectively by the Market Towns Forum or HALC, urging him to reconsider this position, especially since it appears not to have gone to Cabinet or Council.**

 **That notwithstanding the above, the budget be prepared assuming there will be no council tax support grant payment as a prudent response to an uncertain situation.**

Members then considered the position regarding Hereford in Bloom. It was noted that the position seemed to be changing from day to day, with new officers taking over at HiB. The Council may need to consider purchasing some support services directly if the Committee aren’t able to organise this. It was noted that the budget is for floral displays, it is not “owned” by Hereford in Bloom as a body, and other partners may be funded including local groups staring their own garden schemes. The Clerk gave a brief description of the In Your Neighbourhood awards provided by Britain in Bloom. Councillor Edwards asked that members recognised the drive and enthusiasm of the outgoing HiB Chairman but agreed that a new direction was needed now with more people involved an better communication with partners.

 It was proposed by Councillor Edwards, seconded by Councillor Boulter and

 **RESOLVED That the floral displays allocation of £20,000 be retained at present but reviewed as fuller information about training and other costs is brought forward and the service plan is completed, with the intention of allowing funds to be used more widely than watering to support local groups provided there is demonstrable benefit across the whole community.**

On the matter of funding a Tourist Information Centre, the Chairman noted that the balances held by the Council demonstrate that we can afford to promote this initiative, although Council had decided not to commit a specific figure at this stage. The importance of having a centre and the range of possible sites was confirmed, with a preference for a High Town shop front being noted. The possibility of working with the Courtyard who were keen to have a shared premises for a ticket office and display point for the theatre was also noted and will be pursued.

 It was proposed by Councillor Michael, seconded by Councillor Griffiths and

 **RESOLVED That the level of reserves and unspent balances be reviewed as further information comes to light about projected costs and possible partnership contributions for a Tourist Information Centre.**

There being no further business the Chairman thanked everyone for attending and closed the meeting at 7.00 pm

Date of next meeting Tuesday, 15th December at 6 pm

Signed ………………………………………………

Date ……………………………………..