

HEREFORD CITY COUNCIL
POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE 15th June 2021

MINUTES OF MEETING

Present The Right Worshipful the Mayor Councillor Paul Stevens and Councillors Andrews, Boulter, Dykes, Hey, Hornsey, Oliver, Tillett, Toynbee and Wilcox

Attending Steve Kerry Town Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer and Becci O'Reilly Administration and Events Manager

PR2021/22.1 ELECTION OF CHAIR AND VICE CHAIR

It was proposed by Councillor Andrews and seconded by Councillor Tillett that the Mayor takes the Chair.

It was proposed by Councillor Boulter and seconded by Councillor Wilcox that Councillor Wilcox takes the Chair

On being put to the vote there were for Councillor Stevens 6, for Councillor Wilcox 2 and 2 abstentions and it was therefore

RESOLVED That Councillor Stevens be elected as Chair of the Committee for the municipal year 2021/2022.

It was then proposed by Councillor Andrew that Councillor Wilcox be elected Vice Chair but Councillor Wilcox declined that nomination.

It was then proposed by Councillor Boulter, seconded by Councillor Hornsey that Councillor Hey be elected Vice Chair. There being no other nominations it was put to the vote and by 7 votes in favour and with 2 abstentions it was

RESOLVED That Councillor Hey be elected Vice Chair.

The Mayor stated that he was satisfied that the number of mayoral engagements foreseen this year meant he would be able to give sufficient time to chairing the committee but if that changed he would not hesitate to step down in favour of the Vice Chair.

PR2021/22.2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were noted from Councillor Williams.

PR2021/22.3 SUBSTITUTIONS

None.

PR2021/22.4 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

PR2021/22.5 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

The Clerk explained that as this is the first meeting of a new committee there were no minutes of previous meetings as such. However, this committee replaces Governance and Procedures and Finance and Policy Committees, so the unapproved minutes of the last meetings of both those committees are presented here for approval.

It was proposed by Councillor Hornsey, seconded by Councillor Dykes and, with abstentions from those not present at the meeting,

RESOLVED That the minutes of the meeting of Finance and Policy Committee held on 27th April 2021 be accepted as an accurate record and signed accordingly by the Chair.

It was proposed by Councillor Andrews, second by Councillor Hey, and, with abstentions from those not present at the meeting,

RESOLVED That the non-confidential minutes of Governance and Procedures Committee held on 28th April 2021 be accepted as an accurate record and signed accordingly by the Chair.

It was proposed by Councillor Andrews, seconded by Councillor Dykes and, with abstentions from those not present at the meeting,

RESOLVED That the confidential minutes of the Governance and Procedures Committee held on 28th April 2021 be accepted as an accurate record and signed accordingly by the Chair.

PR2021/22.6 SCHEDULES OF PAYMENTS

The Administration and Events Manager presented the schedules of payments since the last meeting of the Finance and Policy Committee. In answer to a question, it was confirmed that the payment to Mr Lea of Close House was for his support to the Youth Council and was an annual sum based on an hourly rate. All other question raised by members had been answered outside the meeting.

The schedules were noted.

PR2021/22.7 BANK RECONCILIATIONS

The bank reconciliations since the last meeting of Finance and Policy Committee were presented. The Chair thanked Councillor Wilcox for his work over many years of verifying the reconciliations and also thanked Councillor Oliver for agreeing to take this on in the new financial year.

There being no questions the reconciliations were noted.

PR2021/22.8 CLOSURE OF ANNUAL ACCOUNTS, REPORT ON VARIANCES AND COMPLETION OF THE ANNUAL GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY RETURN

The Clerk briefly introduced his covering report and suggested that the annual accounts for 2020/2021 and the statements made in the AGAR be recommended to Council for approval.

Councillor Oliver challenged the accounts referring to an amount which he believed related to the transactions around the mayoral car and that the wrong figures had been inserted into the accounts. He proposed specific alterations to correct this. The Administration and Events Manger said the amount was not related to the mayor car, it was in fact the purchase of sound recording equipment for the meeting room, IT equipment for the TIC and the purchase of laptops to enable home working when lock down was imposed. The amount was correctly shown and it was also correct that these items had been capitalised and added to the new asset register. Councillor Oliver accepted this point.

Councillor Oliver further stated that he felt the fixed assets were over-valued in the accounts and that no depreciation was being shown on items such as notice boards, litter bins etc.

In answer to this point it was stated that Fattorini's have revalued the chain and although a figure hasn't been received they have said they believe it is significantly under-valued at present. They are visiting the Town Hall to re-value the silver, which is also likely to rise significantly and the charters, which are extremely difficult to value as they are parchments of moderate intrinsic value but of incalculable historic value and significance. There had been no reports of litter bins or benches being destroyed or stolen and therefore no reason to dispute the asset register. One notice board had been heavily vandalised but had been removed, repaired and reinstalled on a new site, so the overall number quoted was still accurate. The Practitioners Guide, which is the bible of accounting practice for parish councils explicitly states that councils do not depreciate their fixed assets so the accounts were correct on that point.

Finally, Councillor Oliver queried the presence of £20,000 in the asset register relating to a wooden bridge. The money was the Council's contribution to the cost of the footbridge at the Belmont Country Park and was a capital payment, not a grant, so it had been shown as the acquisition of an asset. The Clerk undertook to take professional advice as to whether this must be changed in the accounts for last year or whether it could be dealt with by a notional asset transfer. The council did not have any repair or insurance liabilities for the bridge and was not its part owner.

It was then proposed by Councillor Dykes, seconded by Councillor Hey and by 8 votes to 0 with 2 abstentions

RESOLVED That, subject to clarification at Council of the query concerning the capitalisation of the bridge payment referred to above, the Committee endorses the statements above and recommends acceptance of the accounts and AGAR as drafted by Council at its meeting on 22nd June 2021.

It was then proposed by Councillor Hey, seconded by Councillor Boulter and unanimously

RESOLVED That subject to the comments above, Committee recommends that Council accepts the final accounts and the draft AGAR and authorises the Mayor and Clerk/RFO to sign the AGAR and publish the accounts for public scrutiny.

PR2021/22.9 INTERNAL AUDIT REPORT

The Clerk introduced the final internal audit report of 2020/21 and was pleased to draw members' attention to the fact that there were no recommendations or qualifications. The Chair confirmed this was very satisfactory and thanked Becci O'Reilly and Alyson Kinsey for their work through the year in managing our financial business so well.

It as proposed by Councillor Andrews, seconded by Councillor Hornsey and unanimously

RESOLVED That the internal audit report be accepted and that the thanks of the committee to the staff involved be recorded.

PR2021/22.10 STANDING EMPLOYMENT PANEL

The Clerk reiterated the history of this idea which had arisen from the merger of the two former committees and the need to have a panel of member to hear grievances, sickness

reviews, capability actions or disciplinaries. By having a standing panel, debate over who should be selected for which hearing would be avoided and training effort could be concentrated on those members elected so they would be able to fulfil the role with confidence. It was noted that the first draft of terms of reference had been increased to include a duty to raise with the main committee any matters arising from a hearing where it felt a change in policy or procedure would be beneficial (item 6) and to present its conclusions to any subsequent appeal hearings (item 7).

Councillor Wilcox suggested adding an item 8 "To consider any matter referred to the panel by the Committee on a task and finish basis". He explained that this would enable a matter of some detail to be referred for focussed review by a small panel rather than holding up the main committee which had many other items on its agenda. There being no objection, this was added to the proposal.

It was confirmed that training would be sought from either Hoople, who provide the Council's ad hoc HR advice when needed, or Shropshire HR who run a lot of very good short courses at reasonable rates.

The Chair then asked for members willing to volunteer to serve on the panel and Councillors Hornsey, Andrews and Boulter volunteered for the panel, with Councillors Hey and Dykes being respectively first and second reserves.

It was then proposed by Councillor Andrews, seconded by Councillor Toynbee and unanimously

RESOLVED

That with the addition of a new item 8 "To consider any matters referred to it by Policy and Resources Committee on a task and finish basis" the proposed terms of reference for the Standing Employment Panel be agreed.

That the members of the Standing Employment Panel be Councillor Andrews, Boulter and Hornsey with Councillor Hey as first reserve and Councillor Dykes as second reserve.

PR2021/22.11 POLICY FOR WORKING FROM HOME

The Clerk introduced his report explaining that he had no interest in working from home through most of his career, and indeed had been somewhat sceptical that it could work well. The enforced lockdown on 20th March 2020 had pitched the whole staff team into a completely new way of working, and had fundamentally altered council decision making, initially with everything being done under delegated authority then with zoom meetings. During this time there had been challenges in terms of managing work life balance, the temptation to check emails before going to bed leading to late night conversations when no-one is at their best for example. These had settled down and staff generally and the Clerk himself had adapted, building their competence in remote technologies and adjusting. During this lengthy enforced experiment, the Council had closed its accounts twice, achieved no comment reports from both internal and external audits, completed its first Stronger Towns Bid under extreme time pressure and with erratic external support and had also completed a contentious staff restructuring. This had not been a case of making the best of a bad job and hanging on for better times; it had been a time of significant organisational change and growth. Our social media output had improved vastly, both in quantity and quality, our public profile was much higher and staff had developed a greater ability to work

more independently and to bring more initiative to their work than had been seen in the traditional office based set up. He had become a zealous convert to working from home and sought the Committee's agreement to a broadly permissive policy with suitable management controls, the test being that staff working from home would need to demonstrate that they were delivering at least the same level of output as when they were in the office, but preferably a better level. Some staff such as the TIC team would always have to be physically present, and likewise the Mayor's Officer could not attend the Mayor's engagements other than physically, but many tasks, such as minute writing, generating reports, resolving accounts, developing event or marketing plans were much better done from home.

Cllr Boulter thanked the Clerk and all the staff for their efforts during the lockdown period which had been very impressive and they had all done a very good job. This was echoed by a number of other members.

In discussing the detailed implications of a home working policy the following points were made which were agreed to be built into a final draft for formal consultation with staff.

The policy is permissive – no-one will be required to work from home if they do not wish to.

Where staff wish to work from home on a regular basis some consideration of office equipment will be given to make sure they can do so safely, and a basic risk assessment will be applied. It was noted that some staff used a facility that enabled them to use a laptop with a larger screen or keyboard which improved posture in accordance with DSE regulation requirements.

Whether working from home or from the office, staff should try to work within normal hours, ie be available during their normal working hours but not fall into the trap of late night working unless there was a genuine emergency. Members were also asked to contact staff mainly through email rather than phone (whether home or office based) as this makes it much easier to manage a work flow, and not to ring outside normal hours again except in genuine emergency.

Staff must be able to communicate effectively from home, it was noted that it is easier to contact staff on mobile phones when they are outside the town hall.

Team meetings would continue to be held with at least one a month being a physical meeting of all staff. (During lockdown these had been weekly zoom meetings and if sub-teams within the staff group wanted to meet weekly this was to be encouraged.)

Managers reserved the right to say that working from home was causing issues and require a modification or ultimately the cancellation of arrangements if this was justified. This was already explicit within the policy.

Although the policy was voluntary it had grown ad hoc to some extent and should therefore be the subject of formal staff consultation.

Although the suggested cycle of one review per term of office of an administration (ie once every four years) was reasonable, there should be an initial review after 12 months, including any staff consultation responses.

It was very likely that Herefordshire would not re-open the town hall but that their services would continue to run on appointment only. If the town hall was re-opened in future it was

quite likely that Encore would be providing the front desk receptions as most of the walk in callers would be for their groups. The actual number of visitors to the City Council, as opposed to the TIC, was extremely small. Nonetheless, if the town hall did re-open before Encore were in a position to provide it, we would continue to operate a front desk reception service.

It was then proposed by Councillor Wilcox, seconded by Councillor Hornsey and unanimously

RESOLVED

That the Committee accepts the policy and procedures for home working as set out above, subject to the points of detail noted in discussion, and instructs the Clerk to enter into formal consultation with staff on its contents.

That, unless a change in employment law or national conditions of service require an earlier review, this policy should be reviewed at least once during the lifetime for each council administration, the next review will be in 12 months' time and will include any staff responses to consultation.

PR2021/22.12 INTIAL CONSIDERATION OF BUSINESS PLAN FOR 2021/2022/2023

The Clerk explained the process for developing a business plan alongside the consideration of the annual budget so that any plan that was agreed would be closely aligned to resources. At this stage he had set out some areas for consideration in the report and two committees (Community Development and Climate and Biodiversity) had agreed to have half days set aside for future planning that would build into the process. These would take place in early to mid-September so that they could be fed into the development of a plan for final agreement along with the budget by this Committee and Council in the January cycle of meetings. He was not at this stage looking for final decisions from the Committee, but any comments on areas to be explored, and priorities for consideration would be welcomed.

It was confirmed that this report had not yet gone beyond members of this Committee but that it would be circulated to all members of council.

The "Pipeline projects" ie those that had been developed for Stronger Towns but not selected for the Town Improvement Plan needed to be considered and some resource devoted to working with groups to develop their ideas and find other ways of achieving them, perhaps with other external funding streams. This was an important area alongside delivering our own STB projects and seeking to influence the delivery of the others.

It was suggested that the next scheduled meeting of this Committee, which was likely to have a very light agenda otherwise, would be devoted to a workshop discussion on the business plan, which would determine whether a further half day was necessary.

We need to consider how much of an increase in council tax we might be prepared to contemplate year on year if we are to do more, and also how to deploy our substantial reserves top pump priming and one off investment in community development in the broadest sense.

Paragraph 7.3 about environmental services needs more emphasis and the issue of joined up enforcement and our offer of supporting an additional post to be deployed within the city needs to be picked up. It was noted that this continues to be mired in delays on Herefordshire Council's side which is unacceptable.

There should be a clear indication of how any proposed projects would be paid for, deploying reserves, raising council tax, seeking partners and external funding etc.

The report was noted for further detailed discussion at the next meeting.

PR2021/22.13 ITEMS FOR FUTURE MEETINGS

Further consideration of the business plan (next meeting)

Options for staffing arrangements following the voluntary redundancy of the Deputy Town Clerk (next meeting as part of business plan options)

External Audit Report (expected late September – October meeting)

Half yearly financial report (October meeting)

Asset review and valuations

PR2021/22.14 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

20th July 2021 at 6 pm

There being no further business the Chair closed the meeting at 7.30 pm

Signed

Date