

Notes of an informal consultation with Members of the Policy and Resources Committee

Tuesday 11 January 2022

Present The Mayor Councillor Paul Stevens (Chair) and Councillors Andrews, Boulter, Dykes, Hey, Hornsey, Oliver, Tillett, Toyne, Wilcox and Williams who are Members of P&R Committee and Councillors Milln and Foxton who attended this meeting.

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

1. Chair's Introduction

1.1 The Mayor announced that this meeting is not a formal committee meeting as it is not being held physically but by zoom. With the agreement of Members, it would be recorded and live streamed. He asked the Clerk to explain the legal background.

2. Legal Background

2.1 The Clerk explained that despite an overwhelming view expressed in consultation that the temporary arrangements for online meetings introduced in the COVID-19 regulations should continue, the government had failed to act on this. The Council could delegate decisions from a committee to the Proper Officer, but it was strictly lawful for the Clerk to consult with Members before making a delegated decision. The main items on this agenda were, in any case, for recommendation to full council so he would be guided in making recommendations by the majority view of Members.

3. Confirmation of all Members' ability to take part

3.1 All Members confirmed they could see and hear the meeting.

4. Confirmation of live streaming and recording

4.1 Members agreed that the meeting should be recorded and live streamed and Becci O'Reilly confirmed that this was now in place.

5. Schedules of Payments

5.1 The Chair confirmed that several Members had asked about the item headed Masonic Collection, which is simply the name of the company that supplies the uniform white gloves for the civic party.

5.2 Councillor Tillett asked why two identical payments had been made to the Royal British Legion a few days apart. The Clerk suggested these were probably for wreaths for Armistice Day 11/11 and Remembrance Day shortly afterwards. Sometimes different numbers of wreaths were required so it would be two separate orders. He would advise Members by email if this was not the case.

5.3 Councillor Wilcox raised the series of payments made to John Finch Computers and noted that this was a continually rising area of expenditure. He sought assurance that this was being checked for value for money. The Clerk explained that the main service contract with John Finch (against which he had delivered a consistently excellent performance) was price checked when it was renewed. There were other smaller local businesses who offered this sort of service, but their track record was not always impressive. Larger companies with more

resources were usually far more expensive. However, the majority of the items paid to John Finch were for equipment or services such as virus protection, or off site back up, which he purchased at very substantial discounts compared to the retail prices we would pay if we went to the market on our own. This would not be a continuing rising area of spending as claimed, the last two years had seen a new server, new back up arrangements and lots of new kit to enable working from home without which we could not have come through the COVID-19 period. However, much of this was a one off cost and the current high level of spending would not continue now the capital items had been bought. Becci added that John's support had been invaluable in getting through the COVID-19 emergency and John had even bought back some kit we had acquired in the early stages, in order to give trade in discounts on subsequent purchases.

5.4 The schedule was otherwise noted for information with no further queries to be investigated.

6. Bank Reconciliations

6.1 No questions or matters for further investigation were noted.

7. Budget, Precept and Council Tax

7.1 The Clerk reminded Members of the mandate for a 4% increase plus any benefit from a positive move in the tax base. He reported that, as expected, the tax base had been largely restored from the sharp reduction last year when the impact of increased benefit payments during furlough was worked through. This had added about 1% to the Council's revenues and the budget as presented was therefore in compliance with the views expressed by Members at the meeting in October. The cost of new staff, which had been funded this year from the Service Development and Asset Transfers budget, had been transferred into the main staffing budget as it should be in future years. The 4% increase was not to cover inflation, this would be absorbed, it was to provide match funding for the revenue costs of the electric buses with more than half of the Council's contribution coming from a planned use of reserves.

7.2 Councillor Andrews noted that most residents simply look at the global figure at the top of their council tax demand and the parish element and any increase is largely unnoticed. She felt the proposal for 4% was reasonable given that inflation was now running at 5-6%.

7.3 Councillor Tillett concurred, especially since there had been no increase last year. It was in effect 2% per annum but noted that it had been expected that the main Herefordshire Council bill would also be going up by about 4.99% but it was now thought that this would be set at 2.99%, in which case our figure might stand out more and would need some pro-active publicity and explanation.

7.4 Councillor Hey suggested it would be good if people looked at the cash figure rather than focussing on a percentage of a very small sum. She also asked about the process for confirming this. The Clerk confirmed that the final decision would be at a physical meeting of council planned for 25 January – there being no alternative to that process for setting the tax and precept, it could not be delegated.

7.5 Councillor Toynbee and Councillor Milln both suggested that we should not be afraid to be more ambitious and, in return for doing more in the City, we could perhaps justify some very much larger increases. The Mayor replied that it wasn't for the want of trying, that we had sought to do more, but Herefordshire Council were very reluctant to devolve service areas in the City.

- 7.6 Councillor Foxton raised the issues of Speed Indicator Devices. After a discussion in which several Members took part, the Clerk agreed to send her the previous notes from the Community Development Committee which would show why these were not favoured by Members in the past and confirmed that if Members decided to seek the installation of SIDs there were sufficient funds in the Street Scene budget to cover a project. This would be a matter for a future meeting of the Community Development Committee.
- 7.7 The Mayor then asked for a show of hands to confirm supporting as an advisory position to the Clerk the proposals contained within his budget report. With two abstentions this was agreed, and the Clerk confirmed he would recommend the budget and associated paper to Council on 25 January.

8. Business Plan and Key Projects

- 8.1 The Clerk gave an oral update on the current state of three major items which would be in the business plan from this committee. These were: the asset transfer of the Town Hall to a trust; the development of our Stronger Towns Fund bid for electric buses and later work to try and unlock the asset transfer of the allotments to the Allotments Society.
- 8.2 In discussion it was confirmed that if we were asked by a Trust taking over the Town Hall to act as a managing tenant and to cover routine operational matters such as the front desk, we had the necessary skills and resources to do this.
- 8.3 Councillor Tillett asked that the request for an appendix to the plan setting out in brief the contribution each member of staff makes to its delivery be remembered. The Clerk thanked him for this timely reminder.
- 8.4 Councillor Williams asked that something be included about the co-ordination of the provision of defibrillators across the City, the Clerk indicated he was aware of the interest in this and the need to include something about a partnership approach to this important provision.
- 8.5 Regarding the development of a Town Hall trust it was confirmed that Dave Tristram, the new External Funding and Community Support Officer, would be added to the working group on this matter with a specific brief to help broaden the trust, both in terms of its financial strength and its cultural and political connections.
- 8.6 Finally it was confirmed that there would be regular updates on all key projects through the year.
- 8.7 The Clerk would cover the points raised in the discussion in his final draft of a business plan which would go to Council on 25 January.

9. Membership of Committees

- 9.1 The Clerk confirmed that the Council can create a committee or dissolve one at any time, and likewise Council can resolve to fill vacancies on committees at any time. This would be an item on the Council agenda for 25 January.
- 9.2 Becci O'Reilly reminded Members that there were currently vacancies on Climate and Biodiversity Committee (2), Community Development (1 with 1 more pending confirmation), and Planning (2).

10. Risk Analysis

10.1 The Clerk introduced the combined annual risk analysis report. There were no questions, and this will go on to Council under his delegated decision.

11. Closure

11.1 The Mayor thanked everyone for a very useful meeting. It was confirmed that when full council meets, Members will be asked to take a lateral flow test before attending and to wear masks throughout to minimise the risk of COVID-19 infection.