

## HEREFORD CITY COUNCIL

### POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE 1 March 2022

#### MINUTES OF MEETING

**Present:** The Right Worshipful the Mayor Councillor Paul Stevens (Chair) and Councillors Polly Andrews, Sue Boulter (from 6.10 pm), Kath Hey (from 6.15 pm), Cat Hornsey, Aubrey Oliver, Kevin Tillett, Diana Toynbee, Brian Wilcox and Rob Williams

**Attending:** Steve Kerry Town Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer, Becci O'Reilly Administration and Events Manager and Ali Tolley Administration Officer

#### **PR2021/22.61 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

None

#### **PR2021/22.62 SUBSTITUTIONS**

None

#### **PR2021/22.63 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

None

#### **PR2021/22.64 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING AND NOTES OF INFORMAL MEETING**

It was proposed by Councillor Andrews, seconded by Councillor Tillet and unanimously

**RESOLVED That the minutes of the meeting of 9 November 2021 be agreed as an accurate record and signed accordingly by the Chair, and that the notes of the informal meeting were accurate.**

#### **PR2021/22.65 SCHEDULE OF PAYMENTS**

The schedule of payments made since the last meeting in November 2021 was presented and the following points were noted.

The payment of £165.70 for the Youth Council Christmas event had been for burgers which was the menu choice of the members of the Youth Council. The burgers were from a local supplier who uses locally sourced, high quality produce.

Amazon purchases had only been used when no other purchasing route was available.

The item for £1,191.63 for pear trees was for a rare type of local tree the 'Holmer Perry' which was close to extinction. Where possible, these would be planted at sites in the City, but Balfour Beatty were proving slow and complex to do business with in identifying sites. Some had already been planted on high visibility sites outside the city with a plaque explaining who put them there, what they were for and with agreements from local organisations to take on on-going maintenance, so there was no ongoing liability to the Council. This was being done to promote awareness of the connection between the City and the cider and perry trades and to publicise the Cider Museum across the County. Some additional sites were being negotiated within the city and six trees remained of the original fourteen ordered; eight having been planted.

The schedules of payments were noted.

## **PR2021/22.66 BANK RECONCILIATIONS**

Bank reconciliations up to 31 December 2021 and 31 January 2022 were presented. It was noted that some people are still remarkably slow to present cheques. This issue will be reduced as the use of BACS develops.

The reconciliations were noted.

## **PR2021/22.67 NINE MONTH FINANCIAL POSITION**

The report of the Council's revenue position after nine months, to the end of December 2021 was presented. The Clerk reported that there was a projected underspend of around £200,000 if current trends continue, which seems likely. He drew members' attention to the suggestion in the narrative that a decision on that underspend being used to create an earmarked reserve for the bus project be considered at a future meeting when the accounts had been closed and the full picture was apparent to members. Members noted that there are other possible uses of a new earmarked reserve including the Town Hall or Platinum Jubilee items. It was noted that these would be included as options in a report to a future meeting, to enable full consideration of options.

In answer to a question from the Chair of Community Development Committee, Councillor Boulter, it was confirmed that any underspend on grants this year would be rolled into the general reserve at the year end. The grants budget for 2022-23 stood at £100,00. If this came under pressure during the financial year it would be possible to vire money from the general reserve to provide additional resources for community grants.

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

### **RESOLVED**

**That the Committee note the nine month financial report.**

**That the Committee will resolve how to deploy any underspend verified when the accounts are closed to reserves or investment based on the best information available at the time.**

## **PR2021/22.68 INTERIM INTERNAL AUDIT – HALF YEAR**

The Clerk presented the report from IAC who had been engaged to carry out this year's internal audit. He also presented his report commenting on the audit process and the quality of the recommendations. He confirmed that the dark coloured spreadsheet was the format in which the report had been sent. Members noted that there were criticisms of the timing, the extent of reliance on council officers, the lack of online preparation, the clarity of the recommendations and the quality of the report. Members were reminded that a small saving had been achieved by changing auditors, but the staff time required to support the auditor and resolve disputed comments far outweighed that.

The Clerk stated that as Responsible Financial Officer he had a legal obligation to make sure the Council had adequate arrangements for internal audit, and the completion of the year end internal audit was very time sensitive as it needed to be complete before the Annual Governance and Accounting report was done. Based on IAC's performance at half year he was not confident they would deliver on this requirement. After consultation with the Chair of the Committee he had re-engaged Audit Solutions to carry out our final internal audit, which for

technical reasons meant they had to review and carry out their own half year audit. This would cost around an additional £400-450, but in his view, this was necessary to ensure good quality and timely internal audit report.

Members asked if we could break the contract at half year and the Clerk will certainly seek to do this and pay IAC only for work done on the half year audit.

Members thanked the Clerk for a very clear report of the problems and the Mayor asked for his apology to those staff who had been put under undue pressure to carry out work that should have been done remotely by the auditor to be noted. It was generally agreed that it is good practice to change auditors from time to time to have a fresh pair of eyes scrutinising the Council, but not if that meant not having a timely and good quality output.

It was proposed by Councillor Wilcox, seconded by Councillor Boulter and unanimously

**RESOLVED**

**That the interim internal audit report from IAC and the comments of the Clerk and RFO be noted.**

**That Auditing Solutions be re-engaged to complete the internal audit processes for the Council in 2021-22.**

**That the Clerk writes to IAC releasing them from their contract to complete the final internal audit, having already voiced his concerns to them about timing, impact on normal working and quality of recommendations.**

**PR2021/22.69 PHONE CALLS THROUGH MICROSOFT TEAMS**

The Administration and Events Manager introduced a proposal from John Finch, the Council's IT consultant, that we introduce a system whereby calls to office land line numbers would be diverted on non-availability to laptops and be picked up by staff working from home. This would mean officers would neither have to be issued with Council mobiles at considerable cost, nor to use their personal mobiles for work matters. Members generally favoured this idea but wanted it to be trialled to see if it was as effective as it sounds. It was also emphasised that numbers of staff would still be required to work in the office either to ensure service and contact points such as the TIC were staffed or to ensure the main office was covered. It was noted that not all staff can work in the main office at one time as numbers have grown and it can become too noisy and distracting to be able to do some jobs, which are much better done from home. The Clerk confirmed that he has been using his private mobile number for council calls since the first lockdown and has had no problems with members abusing this and is happy to continue with that arrangement while the alternative is trialled by other staff.

It was proposed by Councillor Williams, seconded by Councillor Wilcox and unanimously

**RESOLVED That the proposed system be operated on two staff numbers as a trial for six months and the results reported to a future meeting of this Committee.**

**PR2021/22.70 REVIEW OF POLICIES**

The Clerk presented a number of policies which are due for periodic review and one new one on special leave.

**a) Behaviour, Code of Conduct and Disciplinary Policy and Procedure**

This was a periodic review, the main changes being to the names of committees, e.g., deleting reference to Governance and Procedures Committee and replacing it with Policy and Resources and removing references to the role of Deputy Town Clerk.

Members noted that the level of gift and hospitality at which a declaration must be made was different in the staff code from the level in the members' code. To bring both into line it was agreed to change this document in paragraph 4.2 to set the value at £20.00.

On page six it was agreed to delete the words "a close personal relationship at the end of the second paragraph and insert "such a relationship".

After some discussion it was decided to leave the wording of the third paragraph regarding membership of closed organisations as stated.

Noting the amendments above the policy and associated documents were adopted by affirmation.

**b) Equality & Diversity Policy**

It was agreed to alter paragraph 5.4 to delete the words in the eighth line "people from ethnic minorities, younger people and women" and insert "encouraging a wide diversity of applicants".

It was also noted that some mention should be made of changing the name of the artefact from "Mayoress's chain" to "Consort's chain" so that wording was consistently gender neutral throughout (paragraph 5.6).

Finally, paragraph 2.1 would be modified to reflect the fact that the Council had already introduced, as opposed to proposing to introduce, equality impact assessments in key areas of work.

Noting these points, the policy was readopted by affirmation.

**c) Managing Attendance and Absence Policy and Guidance**

It was noted that a change in employment law due to take effect at the end of 2022 might bring forward the next review, as referred to at the end of the document.

Members agreed to insert a new paragraph 1.5 in the Policy to read "This policy is supported by Managing Attendance and Absence Guidance which should be referred to as appropriate" so that the two documents are formally linked.

It was agreed not to change wording related to critical illness.

Absence due to an employee testing positive for COVID-19 would be required under the manager's duty within the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and where a staff member was able to work from home during isolation from the office imposed by the Clerk this would not be absence in the terms of this policy. If they were ill and unable to work that would be sickness absence like any other.

With the amendment in section one the policy was affirmed by members.

**d) Business Continuity and Disaster Recovery Policy**

The Clerk acknowledged that the short-notice lockdown of March 2020 had taught the Council a great deal about resilience. Despite losing access to offices, having no alternative workplace, and for a while no means of lawfully meeting, the Council had nonetheless continued to operate and to uphold democratic accountability and decision-making. The policy reflected this experience and had been adapted to include lessons learnt in that period.

There were no suggestions for changes and the policy was affirmed by members.

**e) Special Leave Policy**

The Clerk explained that this was a new policy document, and that he had purposely avoided trying to attribute values to particular traumas as each circumstance was different. The policy simply set out who could authorise what, and in what circumstances.

There being no suggested changes the policy was affirmed by members.

**PR2021/22.71 ITEMS FOR FUTURE MEETINGS**

It was noted that with 28 policy documents to be reviewed periodically it would not be practical to bring them all to review at the same meeting.

Health and Safety and parental leave and social media policies would be reviewed at the next meeting.

**PR2021/22.72 DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

Tuesday 26 April 2022 at 6pm

There being no further business the Chair closed the meeting at 7.25pm

Signed .....

Date .....