

HEREFORD CITY COUNCIL
COUNCIL MEETING 24 January 2023

MINUTES OF MEETING

Present: The Right Worshipful the Mayor Councillor Mark Dykes and Councillors Andrews, Boulter, Carwardine, Foxton, Hey, Hornsey, Kenyon, Milln, Oliver, Owens, Powell, Stevens, Tillett, Tyler, Wilcox and Williams.

In attendance: Steve Kerry Town Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer.

C2022/23.76 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Toynbee. Councillor Williams stated that he would have to leave for part of the meeting due to an appointment.

C2022/23.77 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The Mayor declared a non-pecuniary interest in Item 10 Proposal Regarding the Athletics Track, relating to his employment at HALO in a role not affected by this proposal.

Councillor Powell declared a pecuniary interest in Item 6 Courtyard SLA relating to his partner's earnings.

C2022/23.78 PRESENTATION REGARDING NEW FIRE STATION

The Mayor welcomed the Chief Fire Officer Jonathon Pryce and the Assistant Chief Adrian Elliott to the meeting and invited them to present their proposals.

It was explained that several sites had been looked at as part of a process that had taken several years. The plan now was to replace and repurpose the St. Owen Street site as it was unsuitable for the modern equipment and vehicles and the ways of working in the Fire and Rescue Service. The new building will have good environmental characteristics, enabling a move to electric ancillary vehicles, solar power and the use of grey water. The building has needed to be replaced for a long time.

In answer to questions the following additional points were noted.

Fire cover will be maintained through the period of demolition and construction, possibly from more than one site, with some vehicles such as the high platform and Land Rover being located outside the City, but sufficient immediate response will be maintained. The building will enable co-operation with other agencies with surplus office space for joint working. Close co-operation happens now with Police, Ambulance, etc. and will continue whatever sites are used by other services. There will still be a pole!

The building is of similar size to the present one, minus a basement, but the Fire Service are confident it will provide sufficient room for any possible service expansion. An adequate meeting room means all decision meetings won't have to be held in Worcestershire, and also provides a space for joint working with other agencies. The rear entrance will be maintained but will be slightly wider. Blood Bikes will be welcome to use the facilities as a resting place between rides. The training tower will go, it was actually built for air drying fabric hoses and used opportunistically for training. There will be a well equipped training facility at Leominster in future.

There being no more questions, the Mayor thanked the officers for their presentation.

C2022/23.79 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

None.

C2022/23.80 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

It was proposed by Councillor Kenyon, seconded by Councillor Stevens and

RESOLVED That the minutes of the meeting of 6 December 2022 be accepted as a true record and signed accordingly by the Mayor.

C2022/23.81 COURTYARD SERVICE LEVEL AGREEMENT

Having declared a pecuniary interest in this matter Councillor Powell left the meeting.

The Mayor welcomed Clare Wichbold and David Durant to the meeting.

The Clerk explained that this was a referral from the Community Development Committee, who had agreed a one year grant and recommended acceptance of an SLA going forward to support this project around developing children's involvement, especially those with special needs and disabilities. It had been unanimously supported at Committee.

Councillor Andrews added that the Courtyard Theatre is in her ward and does a great deal of valuable work; this project is particularly important and should be supported.

There being no further comments it was proposed by Councillor Andrews, seconded by Councillor Tillet and

RESOLVED That a three year service level agreement be put in place at £10,000 per annum to support the Courtyard Trust's Arts and Drama Workshops for Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.

The representatives of the Courtyard expressed their thanks for the Council's support over many years and for supporting this venture.

At the conclusion of this item Councillor Powell re-entered the meeting.

Councillor Williams left the meeting as he had indicated he would do to keep an appointment.

C2022/23.82 ANNUAL BUDGET PRECEPT AND COUNCIL TAX

The Clerk and RFO reminded members that Council had asked for a zero per cent increase in tax this year, when inflation was running at around 6%. This was difficult but had become much harder when inflation rose to double figures. In order to cope with this, four main measures were set out in the proposed budget. Firstly, the unused budget for Asset Transfers and Service Development of £118,000 would be wound up. This year's unspent money will be reallocated to the Bus Reserve ensuring sufficient funds in that accumulated reserve, with the government's revenue contribution to the Stronger Towns Fund, to enable free to use operation for three years, based on reasonable estimates of costs. Secondly, the council tax base had moved slightly in the Council's favour, creating slightly more Band D equivalents, so the same tax level yielded slightly more than it had this year. Thirdly, higher interest rates meant the Council's income from deposit funds and investments had improved. Finally, it was necessary, to balance the budget, to make a planned draw on the reserves of just under

£20,000. Drawing on reserves for revenue items was not recommended as good practice year on year but could be justified this year in the face of counter-veiling pressures to cope with inflation, whilst not increasing Council Tax. The budget contained a recommendation that after the elections the new administration considers a medium term financial strategy for the management of the reserves and possibly reducing them with capital investment in community projects.

Councillor Stevens as Chair of Policy and Resources Committee thanked the staff for their work in producing the budget and confirmed that, as in previous years, there had been a line by line review of current and projected spending. This year the grants budget had been substantially increased despite other pressures. The Committee had thoroughly scrutinised the budget and recommended it to Council for acceptance.

Councillor Wilcox suggested that a sum of £100,000 should be withdrawn from the general reserve and reallocated to an earmarked reserve for pump priming the work of the trustees proposing to take over the management and ownership of the Town Hall from Herefordshire Council. The Clerk confirmed that this was an acceptable proposal within the standing orders as it did not alter the council tax level or the levels of reserves, simply changing them from one category to another. He was concerned that such a measure might contradict the Council's stated position of not being able to take over the building itself, and that the trustees had not asked for this. Some investment in feasibility studies to support the trustees could be funded from existing balances or the general reserve. The suggestion was not formally moved as an amendment.

A number of members supported the 0% increase, noting that although the City Council was a small element in the overall precept it was incumbent on every tax levying body to do everything it could to minimise the burden on tax payers during a cost of living crisis.

Councillor Milln suggested the tax should in fact be increased, to avoid drawing on reserves and to move away from a commitment to 0% increases which was unrealistic. He felt that moving the City tax to levels more commensurate with the levels of the other market towns would raise the City Council's profile and enable it to be more ambitious. This was not formally moved as an amendment.

Several members spoke against this proposal and confirmed their support for a 0% increase as a small, but necessary, contribution to restrict further pressures on people already struggling financially.

It was proposed by Councillor Kenyon, seconded by Councillor Stevens, and by fourteen votes to one

RESOLVED That Council approves a total expenditure budget of £998,676 and a precept requirement of £934,630.

That Council agrees to maintain the Band D council tax level at £56.86 pa, delivering the previous mandate for a 0% increase in council tax.

That Council agrees to the Policy and Resources Committee giving further consideration to the levels of reserves and the options for capital investment of surplus reserves in community projects as part of a medium term financial strategy at future meetings.

C2022/23.83 ANNUAL RISK ASSESSMENT

The Clerk presented the risk assessment for 2023/24, noting that it was an audit requirement that the council receives this at least once a year for consideration.

There were no questions or comments, and it was proposed by Councillor Stevens, seconded by Councillor Tillett and unanimously

RESOLVED That the annual risk assessment be approved.

C2022/23.84 FINANCIAL REGULATIONS

The Clerk reported that, although the financial regulations were formally adopted each year, at the meeting following Mayor Making, it was possible to amend them at any time. The cash limit on transactions of £10 and the amount of the petty cash float of £100 had been fixed many years ago and were no longer adequate. It was therefore suggested that they be increased to £20 and £200.

It proposed by Councillor Stevens, seconded by Councillor Hornsey and unanimously

RESOLVED That the individual transaction limit for petty cash be raised to £20 and the amount of the float to be £200.

C2022/23.85 PROPOSAL REGARDING THE ATHLETICS TRACK

The Clerk explained the background to this proposal and also drew members' attention to the amendment agreed by Policy and Resources Committee to the original recommendations which had been circulated to members by email and was also printed in hard copy on the desks. The situation remained pretty much as described in the report with an urgent need to inject substantial capital if the track was to be kept at competition standard. Preliminary discussions had taken place with both Herefordshire Council and HALO and the planned asset transfer was a viable solution if no other means of restoring the track to adequate condition could be found.

Councillor Kenyon reported that he had been involved in discussions with Amy Pitt of Herefordshire Council which indicated that some funding might be found from Public Health funds, similarly to the way it had been released for investment into the cycle track. He supported the recommendations as amended, and stressed the importance of having a substantial amount of money pledged to give the fund raising effort credibility with potential external funders and sponsors.

In discussion the following points were noted. The track is an important asset, and it should be retained in good order for the benefit of the City as a whole. It was disappointing that Section 106 (planning gain) funds had not been maintained, having been allocated in 2017. Councillor Andrews presented the report of the Hereford Athletics Association who had carried out a very thorough assessment of the track and the costs of putting it back into good order. It was noted that having invested in the cycle track and the skate park, supporting this project would add to the sports and leisure hub that was forming in Holmer. The purpose of the report was not to propose a prescriptive solution before all facts are known, but to give the Council as many options as possible, but if an asset transfer is to be considered, work needs to start now as these things take time. The need for an asset transfer if the Council is the main investor was explained, as was the possibility if other funders are identified, that the track might not be transferred to the Council and we would simply make a grant.

The value of a pledge of funds now, both to encourage the local fund raising and to establish community support to assist in raising funds from sporting and public health bodies, was identified. It was thought that the crowd funding launched by the HAA had so far raised about £1,000 but was rising slowly all the time.

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

RESOLVED That Council agrees that the retention of a good quality running track is an important part of the sports and leisure hub in the City, but cannot be secured without significant investment.

That Council agrees to officers exploring the possibility of an asset transfer as set out above to bring the track into the ownership of the City Council, and to the deployment of reserves to finance a capital scheme to carry out the necessary renewal of the track.

That Council agrees to officers exploring any possible avenues of external funding to support this project before a final decision is made on the deployment of reserves.

That Council agrees that a further report should be brought to Policy and Resources Committee with the information set out above included, and that a final decision on this matter be reserved to full Council.

That in the interim, the Council agrees to a pledge of £70,000 to the Hereford Athletics Association fund raising effort to pump prime their efforts and as evidence of community support for their endeavours. This funding to be released when the fund reaches the point where refurbishment can be undertaken.

C2022/23.86 MOTION TO COUNCIL RE ELECTIONS VOTERS' ID REQUIREMENTS (full motion attached at the end of the minutes)

The motion was proposed by Councillor Stevens who stressed that with 32 million people voting in 2019 only 164 allegations had been made and only 4 had resulted in prosecutions. There were more lottery winners than election frauds. The problem was minimal. The requirement for voters to prove their identity would place an unreasonable burden on people, passports could be out of date, many do not have a photo driving license and still use their old paper license. With no police officers at most polling stations, it would be left to Presiding Officers to enforce these rules and exclude people from the poll who would turn up, with a poll card, believing they were fully entitled to vote. The disruption and disturbances this would cause would have to be dealt with and would inevitably disrupt the poll. Many others would be deterred from voting at all which, when turn outs were slow anyway, was harmful to democracy.

Seconding the motion Councillor Tillett suggested many traditional conservatives would be as hostile to this measure as anyone else, but it had been pushed through with the parliamentary whip and a lacklustre response from the official opposition. With only 100 days to the election, the website offering photo ID had only just gone online. No extra funds had been provided to local authorities for administering this measure. He suggested that the disproportionate effects of the measure on first time voters, the elderly and those on lower incomes, for whom the charges just to get photographs would be a deterrent to voting, were the real reason behind the measure. It was gerrymandering rather than fraud prevention that lay at the heart of this proposal.

Several members added their concerns about the effect of this on first time voters, and other groups who had low rates of participation and would be even less inclined to get involved and vote than they were now. It was reported that the level of impersonation fraud was so low that this measure was pointless.

Councillor Wilcox specifically asked that references to political parties should not be part of the debate, as the parish council was not a party political body. With that provision he otherwise supported the motion.

Members asked what would happen to the motion if it was passed and the Clerk explained that if it was passed, members could then add a second resolution directing those as to whom it should be sent.

The motion as circulated on the agenda was proposed by Councillor Stevens, seconded by Councillor Tillett and it was unanimously

RESOLVED That the motion on the agenda referring to compulsory photo ID for voting in the forthcoming election was passed.

It was the proposed by Councillor Stevens, seconded by Councillor Powell and unanimously

RESOLVED That the Clerk shall send the motion as passed to the Chair and Chief Executive of Herefordshire Council, the local MP and the Prime Minister.

C2022/23.87 MAYOR'S COMMUNICATIONS

The Mayor commented that the Christmas meal at Saxty's had been a great success and that it had been a good idea to hold it away from the Town Hall so the staff could enjoy it as much as the councillors.

There had been a lull in engagements after Christmas, but it was picking up now.

C2022/23.88 DRAFT MINUTES OF MEETINGS OF COMMITTEES

- a) Climate and Bio-diversity Committee 22 November 2022, it was confirmed that the Mayor would be visiting the schools that had won awards this year.
- b) Community Development no meetings to report.
- c) Planning Committee 1 December 2022 no questions.
- d) Policy and Resources Committee 10 January 2022, most matters referred to this meeting, no other questions.
- e) Youth Council 21 November 2022 and 12 December 2022, no questions.

C2022/23.89 REPORTS FROM REPRESENTATIVES TO OUTSIDE BODIES

- a) **Municipal Charities** Councillor Wilcox reported that the AGM had been held and Councillor Andrews was re-elected as Chair. The main item of ongoing work is around fire safety certification.

- b) **Twinning Association** The Mayor reported that no one had been willing to take over any of the officer roles at the AGM and this Association had therefore ceased to operate. Their funds of some £1,600 will be passed to an organisation that can continue to keep the links alive, possibly the Council. We are still maintaining the civic relationships. It was confirmed that there had been little enthusiasm in the group for a concerted effort to recruit people and that even though Vierzon's Association has also folded, they are very much active participants through the Maire's office.
- c) **Hereford in Bloom** Councillor Boulter reported on a meeting from 19 January 2023. It was requested that the Welcome to Hereford signs could be amended to show the City had won a gold award, as many other towns do. Also, there was concern about the general state of St Peter's War Memorial and the bus shelters. Both of these are matters for Herefordshire Council. All the summer plants have been bought; the Clerk was asked to check when the planters by the Town Hall would be clear of scaffolding so they could be filled.
- d) **Close House** Councillor Hey reported concern about Novello's re-opening licensed premises so close to the youth centre. She will look into ways of monitoring the effects of this as licensing applications are difficult to resist, the grounds being quite narrowly defined and often only testable in retrospect.
- e) **Business Improvement District** Councillor Stevens reported that the business rates (NNDR) revaluations had reduced future BID income dramatically, losing £60,000 on the project's £200,000 income. A Board meeting would be held in two weeks to see how this could be managed.
- f) **Stronger Towns Fund** Councillor Hey reported that we were now very much at the sharp end of projects and there would be some good success stories. The Clerk had provided a written position statement on the Hereford Zipper project.
- g) **Bishop of Hereford's Bluecoat School Charity** nothing to report.
- h) **Youth Council** covered in minutes; this item will be deleted from the agenda now as minutes are being provided.

C2022/23.90 TOWN CLERK'S COMMUNICATIONS

The Town Clerk reported that the City Council funded Community Enforcement Officer Fiona Farrington would be invited to the next meeting to describe her ongoing work and answer questions. Liaison was good and the Clerk paid tribute to the contribution David Hough at Herefordshire Council has made in unblocking this matter after years of delay and in establishing an effective operation.

C2022/23.91 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

To enable an item of confidential business to be discussed it was proposed by the Mayor, seconded by Councillor Carwardine and unanimously

RESOLVED That pursuant to the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960 s1(2) the press and public now be excluded from the meeting.

C2022/23.92 TOWN CLERK’S CONFIDENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS

The Clerk presented a written report detailing the temporary staffing arrangements to be put in place following the resignation of the Tourism and Communications Manager, who had left because an employment opportunity had arisen in his native Guernsey. The report included details of the acting up allowances that would be paid in accordance with established conditions of service and agreed proportion of additional responsibility each would be undertaking. As no decision was required, this was an information item, no separate confidential minutes would be produced.

C2022/23.93 READMISSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

Confidential business having been concluded it was proposed by the Mayor, seconded by Councillor Carwardine and unanimously

RESOLVED That the press and public now be readmitted.

C2022/23.94 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Tuesday 14 March 2023 at 6 pm.

Signed

Date

Motion to Council

“It is a fundamental part of the democratic process that elections can run smoothly and effectively where every citizen is able to exercise their right to vote. While we accept that voter ID has now been legislated for, electoral administrators and returning officers should be given the appropriate time, resource, clarity and detailed guidance to implement any changes to the electoral process without risking access to the vote.

“We are concerned that there is insufficient time to do this ahead of the May 2023 elections and for this reason are calling for the introduction of voter ID requirements to be delayed.

Proposed by Cllr Paul Stevens

Seconded by Cllr Kevin Tillett