



HEREFORD CITY COUNCIL

POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE 7 NOVEMBER 2023

MINUTES OF MEETING

Present: Councillor Paul Stevens (Chair) and Councillors Cat Hornsey, Sam Potts, Debbie Hobbs, Rob Owens, Kevin Tillet, Mark Dykes and Diana Toynbee.

Attending: Steve Kerry Town Clerk, Alyson Kinsey Finance Officer.

PR2023/24.41 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were noted from Councillors Polly Andrews and Sue Boulter.

PR2023/24.42 SUBSTITUTIONS

Councillor Owens was substituting for Councillor Andrews.

PR2023/24.43 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

PR2023/24.44 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Minute PR2023/24.35 was amended to read “should” instead of “would” in the resolution regarding the use of high quality paper to replace parchment or vellum, and the final resolution on presentation of scrolls had the following words added at the end “funded by the Council. Further celebrations can be arranged if the recipient is willing to fund them.”

Subject to those amendments it was proposed by Councillor Hornsey, seconded by Councillor Owens and unanimously

RESOLVED That the minutes of the meeting of 12 September 2023 as amended be accepted as a true record and signed accordingly by the Chair.

PR2023/24.45 SCHEDULE OF PAYMENTS

The Finance Officer presented the schedule of items paid since the last meeting. In answer to a question, it was confirmed that two items for advertising boards for AppleFest appeared because we needed more of them so sent a second purchase order.

The schedule was noted.

PR2023/24.46 BANK RECONCILIATIONS

The Finance Officer presented the bank reconciliations for August and September 2023. It was confirmed that Councillor Tillet would be signing these quarterly retrospectively, in accordance with the financial regulations.

PR2023/24.47 AGAR SECTION THREE EXTERNAL AUDITOR'S REPORT

The external auditor's unqualified report was noted.

PR2023/24.48 HALF YEARLY FINANCIAL POSITION

The Clerk explained that very large transactions regarding the Hereford Zipper had passed through the accounts distorting the half yearly position somewhat. The VAT would be outstanding until the end of December so there would be an apparent overspend but this would be received from HMRC and the accounts would correct themselves at that time. Otherwise, expenditure was proceeding broadly in line with budget, except for items that are front loaded such as insurance, which is paid in full at the start of the year.

The Finance Officer illustrated how these transactions were shown with gross amounts spent and net recovery from Stronger Towns and VAT awaited.

There were no other questions, and the reconciliations were noted.

PR2023/24.49 BUDGET DIRECTION AND MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY

The Clerk explained the purpose of the report, which was not to set the precept for next year, but to give a steer to officers as to what to aim for in setting the budget and how the Council expected to cover future projected liabilities. It was not a legal requirement to have a medium term financial plan, but it was good practice, which he felt was especially important in terms of his upcoming retirement in order to set a framework for the new Clerk to work within.

Councillor Tillett acknowledged that the report was necessary and presented the known facts, but so much was unknown. The costs of any possible trust arrangement regarding the Town Hall and the earning potential of the Zipper going forward being two large items about which there was no data. He would prefer a zero increase this year and a decision on the medium term plan when more data is available. The discussion continued around this point of what was known, what was projected and what was entirely unknown. The Journeo system being applied to the buses will provide very comprehensive data about passenger use, including data on the busier stops, etc. Councillor Toyne suggested that the report makes a good case for a phased increase this year and in future and that the impact of such a change is very low, as set out in the report. It was also noted that general inflation is running at about 8%, some areas such as contract prices for small works have risen much more than that, so a 0% increase is in fact a significant cut in real terms. The tax base will probably change in our favour this year, but this cannot be stated with certainty until Herefordshire do the calculation in December. It is very unlikely to generate more than a 1% increase in revenue in a year. There was a case for an increase whether ring fenced for the Zipper in future or not.

The Clerk explained that while he disagrees with the suggestion of a 0% increase because it is making it more difficult to address foreseeable issues and may limit the Council's options, he did not feel that it was a reckless proposal that would put the Council's financial stability at risk and would not therefore be minded to issue a statutory warning to members as Responsible Financial Officer. If a 0% target is set, then there will need to be savings, some of which might be quite painful in their implications.

It was noted in the debate that the funding the Council provides for CCTV benefits the Police and Crime Commissioner rather than the City Council and that cutting this item from the budget would

provide a substantial item to be saved to help address the problem of a 0% tax movement when inflation is significant.

It was proposed by Councillor Tillett and seconded by Councillor Potts that there be a 0% increase in 2024/25 and that the other recommendations remain as on paper.

It was proposed by Councillor Toynbee and seconded by Councillor Owens that the proposed 5% increase in 2024/25 remains.

On being put to the vote it was, by five votes to nil with two abstentions.

RESOLVED

That noting the uncertainties around service cuts by Herefordshire Council and possible cost implications of a partnership or trusteeship solution to the future of the Town Hall, an annual 5% increase of the Council's precept is assumed in budget setting for the medium term financial plan covering the financial years 2025-2026 and 2026-2027, with 0% assumed for 2024-2025.

That the percentages above may be varied in each year by more detailed information on projected costs and income as well as the movement of the tax base, which affects the value of a change to the precept.

That the medium term financial plan is also based on the maintenance of the current level of the general reserve as a hedge against the liabilities and risks identified in the report above.

PR2024/25.50 REVIEW OF COMMITTEE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The Clerk introduced the report which is the culmination of a long process which has involved every committee reviewing how it operates and what this remit is. Some of the changes were recommendations to Council as only Council could adjust the role of a committee, but along the way, committees have found ways of improving their working within their remit and these had been implemented where possible.

The first element of the report covers grants and suggests that grants where the main effect is to improve biodiversity or address the climate emergency would be more logically considered by that committee, using the same streamlined process and criteria used by Community Development Committee. The report referred to an annual budget of £100,000 for grants in fact this should read £150,000 but with only one grant meeting to come after this month it was still reasonable to transfer £10,000 this year to Climate and Biodiversity Committee and to apply the 70/30 ratio as a starting point, with the option of viring funds in either direction if this estimate proved incorrect. The Chairs of Community Development (Cllr Hornsey) and Climate and Biodiversity (Cllr Owens) both supported the proposal.

After a very brief discussion it was proposed by Councillor Owens, seconded by Councillor Hornsey and unanimously

RESOLVED

That the Committee recommends to Council that grants for projects whose primary purpose is to improve biodiversity or ameliorate climate change will be considered by the Climate and Biodiversity Committee and that in 2023/24 the sum of £10,000 is vired from the grants budget to Climate and Biodiversity Committee.

That both Committees have a £5,000 limit on grants, with awards above £3,000 only being made for projects of very high value to the City.

That both Committees may recommend awards above £5,000 to full Council.

That in future years 30% of the grants budget is assigned at the start of the financial year to Climate and Biodiversity Committee and 70% to Community Development Committee.

That the balance of fund allocation between the two committees is reviewed in the half yearly financial report to Policy and Resources Committee and any recommendation for an adjustment is determined by full Council.

That officers amend the terms of reference of committees to give effect to members' wishes, as set out above.

The next section refers to ongoing business relationships with partners. There is a distinction to be made between a recurring grant for a finite project, which would stay with the grant awarding committee, and a continuing business relationship which will only stop if either party terminates it. Thus, the funding of Close House, CCTV, Hereford in Bloom, the allotments, etc. were in a different category and in order to equalise workload between committees it would be appropriate to shift these from Community Development to Policy and Resources Committee. The Zipper was currently the subject of a small discreet committee which had been set up in case it was necessary to get a mandate for a fresh decision of substance and there was a need for a meeting during the run up to the last elections. In fact, this committee had never met, and the project had been run within the mandate given by Council by a working group of the members of the Zipper Committee plus the service provider, professional advisors, and volunteer specialists in support. Therefore, the Zipper Committee could be wound up and the ongoing management of the Zipper project be assigned. On this point both Policy and Resources and Climate and Biodiversity Committees had seen merit in each of them having the oversight role. In the end the Clerk has recommended Policy and Resources, but it was for Council to decide.

It was noted at this point that CCTV is a significant financial commitment that brings limited benefit to the City Council, most of the benefit is felt by the Police and Crime Commissioner and the Police Service. This would be considered in detail in the budget setting process.

It was also noted that in order to tidy up the relationship with the Hereford BID which had a number of ad hoc projects within it, there would be a proposal to have a single comprehensive service level agreement to bring this relationship into line with the others.

It was proposed by Councillor Hornsey, seconded by Councillor Hobbs and unanimously

RESOLVED

That the oversight of the following ongoing business relationships be transferred from Community Development Committee to Policy and Resources Committee:

Herefordshire Citizens Advice Bureau

Herefordshire Council Closed Circuit Television

Hereford Allotments and Leisure Gardeners

Close House

Hereford City Business Improvement District

Hereford in Bloom

That the Hereford Zipper Committee be abolished, and the oversight of the project be added to the business relationships overseen by Policy and Resources Committee.

That subject to agreement at Council, officers amend the terms of reference of committees to give effect to the Council's wishes as set out above.

The next section referred to a proposal for civic awards, in particular an annual set of awards below the level of Freedom of the City to celebrate the contributions of citizens to the life of the community. The Clerk described the process of Mayor's Commendations and former mayors described how they would send letters of thanks and a mounted crest as a gesture of appreciation whenever it was appropriate to do so. Councillor Potts who had raised this matter during the review suggested it needed to be a more open and inclusive process, with an opportunity for every member to get involved and to promote recognition of good works in their wards. This could cover people who live, work or study in the City. Councillor Hobbs described the process by which she had been recognised with a King's Award as a comparator. It was suggested that we could retain the system of ad hoc letters and crests rather than have a formal award process but invite people to send in nominations from time to time.

After more discussion it was proposed by Councillor Hornsey, seconded by Councillor Dykes and, with one vote against,

RESOLVED

That the Committee recommends to full Council a process for annual awards of Mayor's Commendations be developed and that the Committee stage of that process be considered by the Policy and Resources Committee as a confidential matter.

That subject to Council agreement to the recommendation above a further report is brought to the next Committee meeting setting out a process in detail.

The next section of the report sets out the details of the improvements which had been trialled and proved very successful for managing grants at Community Development Committee. These had enabled all relevant information to be properly considered but for meetings to be much shorter and the need for Monday morning meetings had been removed. Strictly this was a matter for the Committee, but it was asked that Council note the changes which would also apply to grants considered in future by Climate and Biodiversity Committee.

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

RESOLVED That the Committee recommends that Council notes the changes introduced by Community Development Committee for the processing of grant awards.

The next section refers to Planning Committee. The Clerk explained the changes that had been introduced within the Committee's remit to enable swift responses to be made to 5g mast applications without the need for emergency meetings. This had been tested and worked well. The next proposal concerned all the other items on the agenda. At present all of these are loaded by the officer clerking the meeting onto a data stick for display at the meeting. The officer then "green flags" those that appear to be non-controversial and the vast majority of these pass without comment. This is wasteful of officer time, and it had been suggested that instead of this, each ward

member will be asked to keep an eye on the Herefordshire Council planning portal which shows up applications by ward as they are logged in. Each member could identify from the objections logged, correspondence with their constituents and their own observations which applications are controversial and deserve to be considered at Planning Committee with a view to the City logging an objection. In this contest it was noted that all members who receive any correspondence about planning from their communities should encourage everyone to make their views known by using the facility to send objections to Herefordshire Council and not assume that an objection to the City Council would determine the matter.

It was noted that where there are two ward members only one need to log an item for Planning Committee to consider, it would not require both of them. Also, members who sit for one ward on the City Council and another on the County should log their planning concerns relating to their City ward. Finally, it was noted that two wards are located in the county ward of Holmer and Shelwick and that therefore Councillors Stevens and Foxton would need to check that ward for new applications and identify those in their city wards by street name. When a member who is not on Planning Committee logs an application as worthy of consideration it would be helpful if they added a brief note as to why, unless they wish to come to the meeting and speak on that particular application.

It was proposed by Councillor Tillett, seconded by Councillor Dykes and unanimously

RESOLVED

That the Committee and Council note the changes agreed to the processing of applications for masts and for general applications.

That the Committee recommends that Council agrees to the call for all members to review planning applications in their wards and to raise controversial applications for consideration by the Committee, noting that other applications will be passed by the relevant officer as “no comment”.

Finally the Committee acknowledged the work that had gone into the review of committee remits and practices and made arrangements for consideration of how well it was working after a reasonable time.

It was proposed by Councillor Hornsey, seconded by Councillor Tillett and unanimously

RESOLVED

That the Committee thanks all those members and officers who have participated in the review for their ideas and suggestions and thanks the Clerk for drawing them into a single report.

That the Committee agrees to review these changes after six months to see how they are working and whether any further changes are desirable.

PR2023/24.51 FOOTWAY WEEDS AND VERGES

The Clerk presented the results of his discussion with an officer at Herefordshire Council regarding a possible adaptation of part of the lengthsman scheme relating to footway weeds and overhanging vegetation. The legal issues around overhanging vegetation and enforcement of requirements to keep public rights of way clear are complex and could create great confusion as to which council is taking which role. Therefore, the Clerk recommended that we focus solely on footway weeds.

It was noted in the report that the herbicide referred to should have been “Glycophosphate” but the suggestion of a hot water solution that avoids spraying any poison was much preferable.

Members felt this was worth pursuing to the next stage and accordingly it was proposed by Councillor Tillett, seconded by Councillor Hornsey and unanimously

RESOLVED

That the Clerk seeks hourly rates from local grounds maintenance companies for the deployment of a hot water weed killer and mechanical broom service for commencement from April 2024.

That a further report is made when the project costs are verified.

PR2023/24.52 TWINNING

The Clerk reported that following the collapse of the Twinning Association the Mayor of Dillenburg had written expressing concern as to how the relationship could be maintained and he had been sent a holding reply to allow members time to consider the matter. There had been little twinning activity of late and it was hard to justify setting aside £4,500 for a relationship with three towns if the only activity was at a civic or municipal level. This could be criticised as junketing and of little benefit to the wider community. Therefore, the Clerk was suggestion that the relationships be formally terminated.

Members opposed this on the basis that there was evidence of some active community links which had functioned despite, rather than because of, the Twinning Association. In particular two members who had offered their services some years ago had been told by the Association that they were not seeking new members and did seem to have become completely wedded to repeating the same formula which had led to the relationship becoming somewhat stale. Much of the activity that was happening e.g. links between specific schools could carry on without council funding but the council could continue to play a useful role in promoting and encouraging this and there might be grant applications in future for specific funding to support this. The Youth Council have recently held a joint meeting with similar bodies from twelve different countries so it is clear there is an appetite for international links among younger people but using new formats and new events.

On the basis of the discussion above the proposed letters to Vierzon, Dillenburg and Jaworzno would take a different form. It was proposed by Councillor Hornsey, seconded by Councillor Tillett and unanimously

RESOLVED

That the budget for this year for twinning be frozen.

That the item be reviewed as part of the budget setting process for 2024-2025.

That the Clerk drafts suitable letters for the Mayor to send to Vierzon, Dillenburg and Jaworzno confirming the relationships will not continue as they are but that we will seek to revitalise them with a focus on younger people and a more varied programme for events. The Mayor’s office will continue to act as the official point of contact for this and to develop contacts with interested parties in the City.

PR2023/24.53 INTERIM REPORT OF THE INTERNAL AUDITOR

The Finance Officer presented the report of the internal auditor who had no concerns to report and had issued an unqualified report. He would be providing separately some guidance notes on how

to assimilate the growing financial business of the Tourist Information Centre into revised financial processes which would be in place before he does his final audit for the financial year.

PR2023/24.54 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

As the following item involved the disclosure of personal information about people who were identified in the report it was proposed by Councillor Stevens, seconded by Councillor Tillett and unanimously

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

The Finance officer also left at this point.

PR2023/24.55 RETIREMENT OF THE TOWN CLERK

The majority of the report and the conclusions thereon are covered in confidential minutes and were within the remit of the Committee to resolve. One item is recommended for Council to consider and is not intrinsically confidential.

It was proposed by Councillor Hobbs, seconded by Councillor Dykes and unanimously

RESOLVED That the panel for recruitment, with delegated authority to resolve any details of the job description, person specification and to conduct the interview and selection process be the Chairs of Committees and the Deputy Mayor to wit Councillors Tillett, Stevens, Hornsey, Owens and Andrews with professional advice as required from the Town Clerk and HALC.

PR2023/24.56 READMISSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

On completion of the consideration of confidential business it was proposed by Councillor Stevens, seconded by Councillor Dykes and unanimously

RESOLVED To readmit the press and public.

PR2024/25.57 ITEMS FOR FUTURE MEETINGS

Recommendation of budget and precept to Council

Consideration of possible contract variation relating to the Zipper covering insurance and termination dates of the contract.

PR2024/25.58 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

To be announced when the calendar for 2024 is approved at Council.

There being no further business the Chair declared the meeting closed at 8.43 pm and thanked everyone for their contributions to a long but very productive meeting.

Signed

Date.....