

EAST GRINSTEAD TOWN COUNCIL

FINANCE & GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE – 21ST MARCH 2024 at 7.00pm

Committee Members: Cllr Farren (Chair)
Cllr M Belsey (Vice Chair)
Cllr Visser (Town Mayor)*
Cllr Ody (Deputy Town Mayor)
Cllrs: Barnett, J Belsey, Gibson, Whittaker

Others present:, Town Clerk, & one member of the public on zoom.

** present on zoom = not an official attendance

*= absent

350. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There were no public questions, therefore the Chairman moved along to the next item.

351. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies given.

352. MINUTES

RESOLVED: the minutes for the 14th December and 22nd January were accepted as a correct record and the Chairman bidden to sign them as such.

353. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no new declarations

354. CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chair advised: The Old Police Station is nearing completion of sale, the Clerk has been completing documents as to the correction of the land registry documents where a small error was discovered as to the plan which accompanied the deeds. This has resulted in needing to liaise with the tenants of the Old Court House as although they no longer have a lease but a rolling licence, it is the lease that remains paramount for the conditions and the leases potentially give our tenants the right to walk in a corridor which is not in the Old Court House but is in the police station. The Police are picking up the costs of the solicitors, but this has also taken up a fair amount of time of the Clerk. Council will also be asked to approve the affixing of the seal to the various amended documents. We have yet to be advised of the details of the new owners, although conversations as to access and maintenance of the drive needs to be discussed once they take ownership. It is believed the completion date is hoped to be 26th March.

The Unions pay claim has been submitted to the employers (this is Unison to the National Joint Council), the 2024/25 opening submission from the union is:

- An increase of at least £3,000 or 10% (whichever is greater) on all spinal column points
In addition:
- Reviews of the gender, ethnicity and disability pay gaps in local government
- A 2-hour reduction in the working week with no detriment
- An additional day of annual leave for personal or well-being purposes (with term time only staff also receiving a full day rather than a pro rata amount, that they can use at any time, including term time)
- A phased approach to reaching a minimum pay rate of £15 an hour in a maximum of two years.

The response from the Employers is awaited but this is unlikely to be agreed as this pay rise is now far above inflation. It should be noted that the % in the budget for salary increase was mirrored from the last two years at an average of 6.4%. Additionally a reduction of two hours in working week for full time staff (37 hours) would lose 28 hours a week productivity and may well put a strain on being able to meet current workloads. At this point it is the initial offer, but it is worth pointing out these immediate results should the unions demand be met.

Having queried the invoice for the 2023 elections received recently. We have been advised that we have not been previously invoiced for full staffing costs, that the ID requirement increased equipment costs and postal votes having increased have added to the overall costs. We have now authorised payment. The increases overall were 73% from 2019 at £24,689.94, meaning that we will be increasing the budget allocation next year to accommodate the 2027 bill (as the bi-election will have an effect on the amount put away to date).

Committee are aware of a number of FOI requests submitted over the past few weeks and the Council's decision to class the requester as vexatious. This has now been appealed to the Information Commissioner and the Council will prepare a reply to this appeal once the ICO have advised further as to their questions and requirements.

355. TO APPROVE THE LIST OF PAYMENTS

Chairman introduced the report questions as to the payment for MNC fencing was clarified as Mount Noddy Cemetery new fencing for the compound.

RESOLVED: To approve the payment lists for September, October and November

356. TOWN COUNCIL FINANCES - POSITION STATEMENT

The committee noted the position statement, Mr Chambers not being present tonight had briefed the Clerk who gave some extra information as to the changed bank balances and expected out turn

As detailed in the report the total cash in the Council's various accounts as at 28/02/23 was £1,306k this decreased to £1,085k as of 29/02/24. The total cash decrease therefore is £221k.

This vast majority of this decrease is a result of purchasing Sunnyside Barn. The purchase was £190k (in May 2023) and then there was the 1st year's PWLB repayment of £12k. Therefore before even allowing for any revenue expenditure at Sunnyside the

purchase of Sunnyside decreased our cash balance by £202k (the PWLB income of £95k was received on 20/02/23, which increased the cash figure as of 28/02/23).

With regards to the forecasted year end position, I would anticipate the general reserve balance being reduced by circa £42k at year end, as Sunnyside was agreed to be funded part by reserves and part by the loan, the expectation had been a reduction in reserves of £95k, so this lesser figure shows: 1) that some of the earmarked reserves have been used for the projects that they were intended for and 2) the council performed well against other areas in the budget to reduce this impact.

As of today the accounts are showing an overspend against budget of £214k we are anticipating another £38k of expenditure & £25k of income to still occur before the 31st March. The £38k of expenditure will be £20k street lighting charge from WSCC, £8k King St. WC cleaning bill from MSDC and another £10k from orders for various goods & services placed where we're still awaiting the invoice. The £25k of income is a combination of £18k playpark insurance money & £7k S106 money from MSDC. Once this £38k expenditure and £25k income have been allowed for, the £214k overspend will become an overspend of £227k.

£185k of our Earmarked Reserves will be used to cover the shortfall :
Earmarked Capital Reserves (£130k) Sunnyside £95k + Sustainable fleet fund £22k + QRC £7k + EC Driveway works £6k
Earmarked Revenue Reserves (£55k) Election costs £ 20k + Summer Programme £14k + EC Play Area £16k + Neighbourhood plan £2k + numerous smaller reserves totalling £3k

Therefore an overspend of £ 227k less our planned use of £185k of reserves leaves the General Fund Balance having to top up the shortfall of £42k.

It was asked if we have a reserve for play equipment - this was replied that yes, but having used some of it, this is a small reserve which will grow as we plan to replace more equipment.

It was asked how general reserves are increased, it was explained this is from in year budget savings, if we don't spend all that was anticipated and the amounts are not earmarked then it becomes a general reserve surplus.

There was some discussion as to TAD payments and S106 and making sure that the Council identifies the funds to invest in the local community infrastructure.

Cllr Barnett arrived at this point with apologies for lateness.

357. PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

The Committee noted the report on the current KPI's for invoices and absence

358. RECOMMENDATIONS FROM COMMITTEE

The recommendation from the Public Services Committee and the subsequent report regarding setting up a town council youth club was discussed. The Chair stated that she was happy to support the project but had some concerns as to the costs and would like the staff members initially employed on a fixed term (one year contract) with an evaluation at six months.

Cllr Whittaker expanded further on the report and spoke of the success of the Worth youth club who had done that exact thing, one year contracts and then later taken on permanent.

Their experience will help us to aim for the right age group, it was proposed from year 7, but there were other suggestions that year 6 may be more appropriate as that was the transition age and will help the youngsters start to make friends with those who will be at senior school when they arrive.

Officers are asked to consider applying for grants to help fund this as there are grants for youth work and youth club start up which could help to lessen the burden on the Council budgets.

It was also commented that while there is no cost to the youth club to use Sunnyside Barn, this` is an opportunity loss to the Council as the hall is not available for hire at that time.

RESOLVED: To accept the costings as set out in the report and launch a youth club at Sunnyside Barn for youngsters from year 6
To recruit the two part time staff on fixed term contracts for one year with this to be reviewed after 6 months.

359. DELEGATED DECISIONS

It was noted that there had been no delegated decisions since the last cycle the one included in the report had actually been reported at the last cycle.

360. POLICIES REVIEW

The Chair introduced the report advised the Staff are reviewing all policies, some are new, some overhauled and more will be coming over coming meeting cycles.

She recommended the adoption of the policies but made reference to one particular amendment in the Communications and Publicity Policy to substitute 8.3 with "Councillors" should be mindful of using the prefix Councillor when writing to the press. They should be clear in their correspondence as to whether they are writing as to their view as a ward Councillor or stating Council Policy. It should also be made clear as to which Council they are writing on behalf (if the Councillor represents more than one Council).

Committee discussed the policies and suggested further amendments for the Lone Workers Policy and Computers, Email, Social Media and Internet policy.

RESOLVED: To approve the policies as shown in the appendices with the following amendments:

- Communications and Publicity Policy: to substitute 8.3 with "Councillors" should be mindful of using the prefix Councillor when writing to the press. They should be clear in their correspondence as to whether they are writing as to their view as a ward Councillor or stating Council Policy. It should also be made clear as to which Council they are writing on behalf (if the Councillor represents more than one Council).
- Lone Working Policy: point 6.1 to remove the words in the East Grinstead Town Council.
- Computers, Email, Social Media and Internet policy: point 7.1 at the second bullet point, the end the point after the word sites. (removing the words or provide a link to the Town Councils website).

361. PENSIONS DISCRETIONS

The chair introduced the report, this is a requirement of members of the Local Government Pension Scheme. The recommendations are shown in the report.

Committee asked what the actuarial review period is and how is the pool? The Clerk advised that she thought it was annual but wasn't sure (post meeting note it is tri-annual) and the last time that the review was carried out the East Grinstead pool had more than 100% in the pool to meet the needs of the members.

It was asked if the Council should have a special reserve for when discretions were used. The Clerk advised this would not be necessary, that implications should not be significant for most of the discretions.

It was asked if the Council would be in a worse position for adopting the discretions. The Clerk advised that almost every exercising of the discretions would come back to Council. Council would have the final say as to whether to exercise a discretion that had any financial implication to the Council as the vast majority are a case by case basis and even the 85 year rule would be subject to the Council agreeing that the employee could retire early.

RESOLVED: to adopt the pension discretions as laid out in the report.

362. PUBLICITY FOR COUNCIL SURGERIES

The Chair introduced the report but felt that the overall costs were more than needed, she felt that the overall budget should be £200 and that one fixed sign and banner to advertise the Councillors surgeries should be purchased. There was some discussion as to and an amendment was proposed:

RESOLVED: To amend the proposal to remove the words one fixed sign and banner and to add in whichever the most appropriate style of signage.

RESOLVED: That subject to an overall budget of £200, to purchase in whichever is the most appropriate style of signage to advertise the Councillors surgeries.

363. SHARED SURFACES WORKING GROUP

The Terms of reference and the proposed membership of the working group were circulated. Cllr Whittaker spoke to the item to support the setting up of the group. It was clarified that non councillors can sit on working groups and have voting status, staff do not, they are there to support the work of the group. It was also confirmed that any decisions have to be referred to the parent committee and that the budget is controlled by the committee. The committees budget has been increased this year for this particular group to start work. It was clarified that the working group would be subject to reconstitution each year.

There was reference to WSCC highways past work being fed into the group which was acknowledged by Cllr Whittaker who said this will indeed be paramount to the work of the group.

RESOLVED: To approve the Terms of Reference and Membership of the new working group as follows:

Shared Surfaces Working Group

Terms of Reference :

1 - Investigate the feasibility of pedestrianisation in the town centre to include:

- Purpose and goals of pedestrianisation
- Roads affected
- Business logistics
- Public transport access
- Paving and surfaces

2- Recommend studies as needed and commission them

3 - Form proposals and submit CHS or other proposal to WSCC

The members of the working group are to be:

- Cllr Whittaker
- Cllr Gibson
- Grahame Russell (EGBA CEO)
- Charlie Martell (EGBA)
- Ex officio will be the Chair and VC of Environmental and Sustainable Travel committee
- An officer will also be allocated to the group from The Clerk's Office.

There being no other business the Chair announced that the next meeting of the Committee will be held on **Thursday 20th June 2024** and ended the meeting at 8.25pm

SIGNED:

CHAIRMAN