

MINUTES of the Meeting of **BUDGET & POLICY COMMITTEE** held on **TUESDAY 24th OCTOBER, 2023** at **6.30pm** in **THE COUNCIL CHAMBER, DRAKE ROAD, TAVISTOCK**

PRESENT

Councillor U Mann (Vice-Chairman – in the Chair)

Councillors Ms M Ewings, A Hutton, Mrs A Johnson

Councillors B Smith & P Squire (Ward Members)

IN ATTENDANCE Town Clerk, General Manager, Assistant to the Town Clerk, Financial Administrator

204. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence had been received from Councillor P Ward (Chairman).

205. CONFIRMATION OF MINUTES

RESOLVED THAT the Minutes of the Meeting of the Budget & Policy Committee held on Tuesday 5th September, 2023 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman (Appendix 1).

206. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The following Declaration of Interest was made in respect of Agenda Item No. 6 'Neighbourhood Development Plan' (Minute No. 209 below refers): - Councillor U Mann, by virtue of serving as an office holder on the Neighbourhood Development Plan Steering Group.

ITEMS FOR RECOMMENDATION TO COUNCIL

207. BUDGET PREPARATION & PRECEPT SETTING 2024/25

The Committee considered the Report of the Town Clerk (Appendix 2 refers), together with the associated documentation, in connection with the above (and enclosed sub-appendices) showing

- Budget Detail by Combined Account Code for 2022/23, 2023/24 and proposed for 2024/25 (Sub-Appendix 1);
- Budget Detail by Cost Centre for 2022/23, 2023/24 and proposed for 2024/25 and Summary by Centre (Sub-Appendices 2-3);
- Rolling Capital Programme (RCP) (Sub-Appendix 4);
- Phased Budget Report to 30th September, 2022 (Sub-Appendix 5);

- A Schedule of proposed Fees and Charges 2024-25 (Sub-Appendix 6);

setting out the emerging draft Budget for the 2024/25 financial year.

During the ensuing discussion, particular reference was made to:

- Appreciation for the efforts of the Council's Accountant and Staff, both in preparation of the Budget documentation, and in monitoring income/spend over the financial year to date;
- The report and appendices, as submitted, represented a balanced Budget proposal accompanied by a reasonable expectation (unforeseen circumstances notwithstanding) that, if adopted, the 2024/25 financial year might represent the restoration of a more 'normal' financial cycle;
- The importance attached to:
 - substantial restoration of the General Reserve to recommended safe levels;
 - reinstatement of an annual contribution of £100,000 to the Rolling Capital Programme
 in conformity with Council policy, thereby providing a necessary measure of financial resilience;
- Outstanding/potential 'risk' areas were also reviewed which might include:
 - potential reduction in the Precept received by the Council arising from the policy of the Billing Authority to vary support for various categories of household (which could lead to a reduction of Precept income for the Town Council of up to £15,000 – clarification of the position had been sought);
 - energy prices. In particular, the difficulty of predicting consumption (2022-23 was a mild winter) and/or prices (the electricity contract came to term in July, 2024). Attention was therefore drawn, in particular, to the projections as included in the Budget and consensus sought.
- The Fixed Asset Register would be submitted to the next Meeting of the Committee;
- Uncertainty regarding the final Council Tax Base figures pending confirmation from the Billing Authority.

Notwithstanding the foregoing it was anticipated the Town Council's Precept increase would be appreciably less than that anticipated from Devon County Council – both as a percentage, and in real terms.

Arising from consideration of the Report reference was further made, in detail, to:-

- the absence of an additional allocation of funding to the Earmarked Reserve for a new Burial Ground, together with the importance attached to maintaining an annual contribution to this fund (currently £50,000 in total) to enable sufficient resources to acquire a new site should one become available. In response to a question the variables applicable in assessing forward need for burial ground extension were outlined, it being recognised that any projections very much represented 'best estimate' in all the circumstances;
- the potential that, as the Town grew, an allocation to Earmarked Reserves might need to also be made for allotment land in view of the extant site operating at capacity and statutory duties incumbent on the Council. The possibility that the Local Planning Authority might make provision via S106 monies was also mooted, together with reference to inclusion in the emerging Neighbourhood Development Plan;
- Market Tolls – the content of the report, background to the current position, past practice and recent discussions with the applicable Consultative Group - including around potential to increase tolls for spaces to £11 accompanied by (in Summer 2024) a consultation/engagement event open to all Market Traders to review matters of interest/concern to them were discussed. It was reported the Market Reeve had advised present occupancy met capacity and a temporary £1 table space discount would continue to be applied at the beginning of each calendar year in recognition of quiet trading periods.

RECOMMENDED THAT the Town Council endorse, in principle (i.e. subject to final consideration in December or January, and to the availability of the Council Tax base figures), the submitted draft Council Budget 2024/25 and Rolling Capital Programme as prepared and enclosed and the draft Schedule of Fees and Charges 2024-25 as submitted subject to:-

- i) an uplift in Market Tolls by 50p per table space (to £11.00);
- ii) the allocation of £ 10,000 from reserves (if necessary the Rolling Capital Programme) to the new Burial Ground Earmarked Reserve;
- iii) delegation to the General Manager, in consultation with Councillor representatives serving on the the Guildhall Gateway Centre Advisory Forum, to set the Schedule of Fees and Charges for the Guildhall Gateway Centre;

as incorporating adjustments arising from previous deliberations of the Council; and providing for:

- a) the normalisation of the General Reserve at 12 months net expenditure in 2024–25, subject to availability of funding;
- b) the reinstatement of the programmed annual Rolling Capital Programme contribution, to £100,000 (subject to (ii) above);
- c) any surpluses (if available) as at Year End, and not otherwise identified, being carried forward into the Rolling Capital Programme (RCP) to support the minimum capital reserve previously agreed.

208. WEST DEVON BOROUGH COUNCIL – DOG CONTROL ORDER CONSULTATION

The Committee considered recent on-line correspondence from West Devon Borough Council in connection with a consultation exercise on renewal of a Borough-Wide Dog Control Order. In the ensuing discussion reference was made to concerns regarding the lack of active enforcement, and the extent to which the Borough Council was/was not looking at improving enforcement vis a vis education.

RECOMMENDED THAT Tavistock Town Council respond by way of support for the existing arrangement, but highlight the lack of enforcement, most especially in sensitive/prominent locations, including those used by children, thereby undermining the integrity and credibility of the Order, and representing a potential risk to Public Health.

209. NEIGHBOURHOOD DEVELOPMENT PLAN

a. Green Spaces Designation

The Committee considered a letter (Appendix 3) and associated schedule of Council owned/occupied sites proposed for designation as 'Green Spaces' (Appendix 4) as provided by the Neighbourhood Development Plan Steering Group.

In particular it was stressed that the Budget and Policy Committee was considering the identified sites on behalf of the Council solely in its capacity as landowner.

This was necessarily distinguished from the deliberations of the DML Committee which was considering the Schedule from the perspective of a planning consultee.

As such it was possible that different conclusions might be reached by the two bodies, and it would properly be a matter for Council to decide the final position in its role as de facto statutory 'sponsor' of the emerging Neighbourhood Development Plan.

Reference was made to:

- the list of proposed Green Spaces, as provided, which necessarily only referred to those located on Town Council-owned land. There was a separate list detailing land in other ownership within a wider document, as also drafted by the Steering Group;
- land owned by the Council on the northern side of the canal (i.e. the tennis courts, bowling green, Sensory Garden, BMX Track etc) had been inadvertently omitted from the Schedule and therefore should be treated as forming part of the listing;
- acknowledgement that the formal designation of an area of land as a 'Green Space' necessarily restricted a landowner's future ability to use the land for development, or for other purposes not consistent with the restrictive nature of the designation, with consequential impacts on financial and opportunity value.

In the ensuing discussion reference was made to a range of sites, current and prospective uses, marriage/hope values, fit with strategic priorities, and the extent of community use/benefit of sites as were, or as could be achieved, for the community over the longer term.

More specifically, following a wide ranging discussion, that whilst:

- notwithstanding potential long-term opportunity cost, the historic nature of the Allotment site, related assessment of community benefit, and potential for the Council to fund future additional provision to serve increasing demand through the Precept or by other means might mitigate toward retention on the list;
- the level area to the rear of the Molly Owen Centre was self-contained, without public access and (as a mown/managed area) of limited biodiversity. It did however have hope/marriage potential, which had been reflected in premium at acquisition. Accordingly, it was not appropriate to include same in the schedule of Green Spaces and it should be removed.

RECOMMENDED THAT subject to the following site being removed from the schedule as amended - *land behind The Molly Owen Centre*, that Tavistock Town Council endorse the indicative Schedule of Council owned land as designated Green Space.

Noted That both the sites at Abbotsfield were accessible to the public, and the background to suggested inclusion of the Molly Owen Centre by the Steering Group was outlined.

b. Neighbourhood Development Plan – Financial Forecast

The Committee considered a letter from the Chairman of the Neighbourhood Development Plan Steering Group by way of Project Plan Update and Timeline (Appendix 5), together with an updated projected Budget 2022–2025 (Appendix 6) and High-Level Project Plan Update (Appendix 7).

The request, as contained within the letter, for support/assistance from colleagues was reiterated. It was also reported that there was no overspend against overall allocated budget. If any activities, which could be grant-funded, came forward then funding would be applied for by the Steering Group. Reference was further made to upcoming activities/stages.

The correspondence was noted and received.

ITEMS CIRCULATED FOR INFORMATION ONLY

210. TAVISTOCK TO PLYMOUTH RAIL LINK

The Committee received and considered the update Report (Appendix 8), as provided by the Council's representative on the Tavi Rail Forum.

A dual hatted Member confirmed that they had requested a meeting with the Leader of Plymouth City Council in order to ascertain its view on the proposed rail link and how best those authorities could work together.

The Council's Tavi Rail Forum representative, whilst confirming that the news received thus far was positive, noted that much remained to do and that Devon County Council had been in negotiation with landowners along the proposed Tavistock to Bere Alston railway route.

211. PROPOSED CHARGING FOR ON-STREET PARKING

The Committee received, for information, copies of three of the letters previously sent to representatives of Devon County Council (Appendices 9-11), detailing the views of Tavistock Town Council.

They included one letter representing views of both the Town and five other settlements referencing collective concerns in respect of the lack of probity associated with the proposal to implement on-street parking charges in Tavistock and elsewhere.

The Committee noted, with deep disappointment and concern, that to date, no acknowledgement or other responses had been received to the letters sent and the associated invitation to DCC to work together in the interests of the community.

During the ensuing discussion, reference was made to;

- Disappointment at West Devon Borough Council's most recent (having previously opposed the DCC proposals with Tavistock and Okehampton Town Councils, the BID Co and Chamber of Commerce) revised '*neutral view*' on the proposal - despite both towns being the largest in the Borough Council's area serving extensive rural hinterlands, and the depth of community opposition;
- that when this matter was discussed at the next Town Council Meeting there would be an opportunity to update/review the position and, if unchanged, reiterate the Council's disappointment at the lack of democratic engagement and probity as displayed by the County Council, and determine next steps;
- that the other towns involved in the proposals had also been affected by a lack of communication from the County Council. This was inconsistent with the assurance provided at the recent Devon Association of Local Councils Conference (DALC), when both the Leader and Chief Executive Officer at the County Council had stated that they were committed to engagement with Town and Parish Councils across the County.

Noted That the Leader of West Devon Borough Council undertook, following liaison with the Town Clerk, to approach both the Leader and Chief Executive of Devon County Council to enquire why, despite that previous undertaking, DCC was still not communicating on this matter.

212. GOOSE FAIR 2023

The Committee received an oral update from the General Manager in connection with the operation and delivery of Goose Fair 2023.

It was reported that:

- there had been a lack of stakeholder engagement in some areas, which had caused some difficulties;
- notwithstanding challenges attracting traders all pitches were eventually allocated, including 70ft of trading space on Market Road;
- there had been an issue with a trader trying to leave the event early contrary to event rules which would be dealt with accordingly;
- there had been issues with residents' parking in Chapel Street, which were progressing with Devon County Council, as the Highways Authority.

Noted That: appreciation was expressed to the Works Manager, and the wider staff/partner team for their efforts in delivering the event, and for the active officer representation by West Devon Borough Council.

URGENT BUSINESS BROUGHT FORWARD AT THE DISCRETION OF THE CHAIRMAN

The following Item of Business was brought forward at the discretion of the Chairman in view of the timescales involved.

213. BANKING IN THE TOWN

It was reported that a meeting had been arranged with the Town Clerk, Mayor and partner organisation to meet with a representative from NatWest Bank to discuss the recent closure of the Tavistock Branch and the ongoing services which might be provided to the community to ensure they could still access banking services from it.

EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

214. PUBLIC BODIES (ADMISSION TO MEETINGS) ACT 1960

Pursuant to Section 1(2) of the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960 and having regard to the confidential nature of the business to be transacted it was: -

RESOLVED THAT the Press and Public be excluded from the Meeting for the following items of business

CONFIDENTIAL ITEMS CIRCULATED FOR INFORMATION ONLY

215. GUILDHALL GATEWAY CENTRE – OPERATING ARRANGEMENTS

(CONFIDENTIAL – by virtue of relating to matters of a legal, financial, staffing or contractual nature affecting persons other than the Council)

The Committee received an oral update from the General Manager with regard to the interim operating arrangements for the Guildhall, which had been in place since 6th October, 2023.

It was reported that:

- there had initially been some teething difficulties but these were settling down now that clarification of various roles, and the Council's operating plans, had been provided to all parties concerned;
- the Town Council now had access to the website, and social media accounts, for the Guildhall. The website was being edited to provide clarity to the public with regard to activities/access to the venue;

- linkages between the Town Council and heritage partners (i.e. the Museum, World Heritage Site) were being actively set up to extend prior arrangements;
- a meeting had taken place with a representative of the WHS Office, which had been positive regarding progress and direction of travel;
- a meeting had also taken place with Tavistock Heritage Trust with regard to signage, external bookings and the joint advertising required for both the Guildhall and Visitor Information Centre (VIC). This would ensure that members of the Public were aware of the facilities and activities the venue could offer;
- consideration was being given to a shorter closure period in the New Year, rather than the January – March closure period as previously undertaken. If adopted this would both enhance public access and contribute to a free flow of air throughout the building, reducing the seasonal build-up of damp/condensation during inclement weather;
- an overview of the current and proposed staffing arrangements in The Guildhall was provided.

216. CAPITAL WORKS UPDATE

(**CONFIDENTIAL** – by virtue of relating to matters of a legal, financial, staffing or contractual nature affecting persons other than the Council)

The General Manager provided an oral update on the following matters:-
Market Road;

- the instability works would finish within the week;
- the new line marking and re-surfacing of the Road had been completed.

Noted That appreciation was conveyed to AD Williams (Contractors) for their flexible and professional approach to the project.

Museum:

- the works were progressing well;
- plastering works had been completed, and the 4-week drying phase had commenced;
- re-decorating works would commence in December, following the completion of the drying period.

Town Hall:

- Phase 1 of the works had been completed;
- scaffolding on $\frac{3}{4}$ of the front elevation had been removed;
- the Tower was now fully scaffolded, and sheeted, which would allow for the works to commence - which it was anticipated would be

completed by the 3rd week in December. These works would include repairs to the roof of The Mayor's Parlour.

Abbey Remains Project

- Tavistock Town Council was applying for a grant of £25,000 from Historic England facilitated through THT, which was primarily for works to Betsy Grimal's Tower, including the removal of vegetation, and the stabilisation of the wall closest to The Bedford Hotel following prior inspections;
- a future project would look at works to the Abbey Ruins, and to The Still Tower which it was hoped would remove these structures from the 'Buildings at Risk Register'. This would also require a grant from the National Heritage Lottery Fund (NHLF), which would need to be submitted by the end of October 2023.

Noted That it was reported by a Member that damage may have been caused to the entrance door to Betsy Grimal's Tower, the General Manager undertook to review the position.

The Meeting closed at 8.07pm.

Signed:

Dated:
CHAIRMAN