

Minutes of the FINANCE AND GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE of
Bridport Town Council held on Monday 13 November 2023 at 7.00pm.

PRESENT: Cllr: Sarah Williams (Chairman)

Cllrs: Rose Allwork Gill Massey
Sandra Brown (from 7.05pm) Anne Rickard
Karen Hunt Dave Rickard
Julian Jones

Also in attendance: Will Austin (Town Clerk), Paul Fuszard (Finance & Office Manager), Daryl Chambers (Town Surveyor) and two members of the public.

PUBLIC FORUM

There were no speakers in the Public Forum.

28. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Geoffrey Ackerman, Sandra Brown (for lateness), Maggie Ray and Martin Ray.

29. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllrs Karen Hunt and Sarah Williams declared interests as trustees of the Bridport Museum Trust.

30. MINUTES

RESOLVED: that the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 11 September 2023 be confirmed as a true and correct record and signed by the Chairman.

Cllr Sandra Brown arrived at this point, 7.05pm

31. MARKET AND BUSINESS LIAISON WORKING GROUP

RESOLVED: that the notes of the meeting of the Working Group held on 17 October 2023 be received and noted.

Members highlighted the need for attendance by the business community and on behalf of market traders.

32. FINANCIAL ESTIMATES 2023/2024 – 2nd REVISION

Consideration was given to a report of the Town Clerk, ENCL: 3845, setting out the income and expenditure for the financial year to date, up to 31 October 2023.

- The Finance and Office Manager provided some additional commentary to the figures beyond the notes provided. Members considered:
- Whether this year's actual income and expenditure might result in a surplus;
- The importance of maintaining an appropriate level of reserves;
- The as yet unspent grant for the George Biles project; and

- Funding for the community bus in 2023-24, which to date had been met from an almost exhausted earmarked reserve.

RECOMMENDED: that the 2nd revision of the estimates for the year 2023/2024 be approved.

33. ENVIRONMENT & SOCIAL WELLBEING COMMITTEE

The Town Clerk gave a report on one recommendation arising from the meeting of 8 November 2023. This referred to an approach from Dorset Council for Bridport to be Dorset's first Town of Culture. The Environment & Social Wellbeing Committee had considered the principle of applying to be Dorset Town of Culture, and approved this subject to some refinement of the wording of the submission to emphasise important rights respecting elements, such as the appropriate remuneration of artists. The funding decision, however, lay with the Finance & General Purposes Committee, and as such, the recommendation also needed the committee's support. Members were therefore asked to approve a sum of up to £15,000 as match funding for the Town of Culture submission.

Following discussion of the bid, including a draft submission circulated to councillors prior to the meeting, it was

RECOMMENDED: that a bid to establish Bridport as Dorset's First Town of Culture be supported, and a maximum match funding contribution of £15,000 be approved.

34. SERVICES ADMINISTERED BY THE TOWN SURVEYOR

The Town Surveyor updated members on the following items:

- Community events – staff were thanked for their work in support of Remembrance Sunday, in particular Claire Peters-Way. The Chairman thanked councillors for attending. Christmas Cheer was the next event, and the 2024 calendar was being developed. Discussions were ongoing to clarify support needed for the Food and Folk Festivals, as the level of support provided previously was unsustainable.
- Changing Places toilets – registration was awaited and an opening event would be organised, including showcasing the aerial photography used as interior decoration. The project had been delivered within budget and linked well with the play area and beach wheelchairs. Members thanked the Town Surveyor, Tourist Information Centre Manager and other staff involved, and highlighted the importance of signage and promotion.
- Bridport WI Hall – A measured survey would be carried out shortly, to inform improvement plans. These would include replacement windows, with help from Wessex Community Assets. User groups had been engaged and a key aim would be to improve accessibility of the courtyard area. The Town Clerk highlighted the ownership of the building by Bridport Communities Trust, and the Town Council's responsibility for operational management.
- Mountfield windows and signs – it was planned to carry out further window replacements and to update signage. A new tenant was expected shortly on the top floor.
- Environment Agency works – works were planned for Amsafe Weir, Pymore, and Plottingham, although these were too late to help defend against recent flooding events and no timetable had been provided. The working relationship with the Environment Agency was improving.

- A35 improvements – proposed improvements to Sea Road South were now at National Highways’ feasibility stage.
- West Bay highway enhancement scheme – this had been amended to remove a stepped kerb and highway markings would instead be used. The works were due to start imminently.
- Land to the rear of Waitrose, Rope Walk – a land transfer had been completed and works had started. A proposed taxi rank would be Town Council property and Dorset Council would be engaged to consider corresponding changes to taxi waiting in West Street.
- Highway verge contract 2023 to 2025 – a three-year contract extension had been agreed with Dorset Council, including a 10% fee increase. Bridport was the only Town Council in Dorset with responsibility for verge cutting and Dorset Council was pleased with the work. The grounds team was thanked for their efforts.
- Hand tools demonstration day – following a visit to the Saltex exhibition, a one-month trial of electric hand tools had been offered by a supplier. This would be a major change and part of the Council’s environmental commitment.

RESOLVED: that the report of the Town Surveyor be noted.

35. BUDGET WORKING GROUP

The Town Clerk reported that two meetings of the Working Group had taken place, with a reflection on 2022/23, the current position for 2023/24 and the initial thoughts regarding the setting of the budget for 2024/25. A draft budget had been considered, taking account of discussions and including budgetary information from the three parishes to be absorbed by the expansion of Bridport in 2024, for consideration at the next Working Group meeting on 17 November 2023. The next formal consideration would be at the Best Value and Scrutiny Sub Committee on 5 December 2023.

RESOLVED: that the update be noted.

36. INTERNAL AUDIT

Consideration was given to a report of the Internal Audit, ENL: 3846. The Finance and Office Manager reported that the first visit for 2023/24 had taken place, covering April to September 2023, and the auditor’s report had concluded with a satisfactory assessment of the Council’s internal control procedures and recommendations relating to the community governance review, receipting of cash, and signing of minutes.

RESOLVED: that the report of the internal auditor be noted and approved.

37. TOWN COUNCIL GRANTS TO LARGER BODIES

Consideration was given to a report of the Town Clerk, ENCL: 3847. The Town Clerk reported that he and the Leader had met with each of the SLA-supported bodies and agreed revisions to Service Level Agreements. All of the current funding contributions had been maintained at their previous levels, with a one-year extension to cover the first year of the new council term in 2024-25.

A meeting, requested by the committee, had been held with the Lyric Theatre to consider their request for SLA-supported funding of £5,000 per annum. Based on a submission by the theatre, the Council Leader had concluded from the meeting that

he could recommend a one-year agreement for 2024-25, with any renewal to be considered alongside the other existing SLAs. Members were asked to consider approving the Leader's recommendation.

RESOLVED: that an SLA-supported grant of £5,000 be agreed for the Lyric Theatre, for the financial year 2024-25.

RESOLVED: that the report of the Town Clerk be noted.

38. COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE REVIEW

Consideration was given to a summary of responses report to a recent survey, ENCL: 3848, and a verbal progress report by the Town Clerk. Work to put in place arrangements for services, assets, governance, staffing, and community engagement was progressing satisfactorily, albeit that delays to discussions with parish councils had condensed the time available.

The principle being adopted was one of 'steady as she goes' in planning for the first year of the new council, so that people would not see dramatic change from the way the councils currently operate. This gives time for the new structures to bed in, and for the newly elected councillors to make informed judgements for future years.

Work was progressing on an assumed governance and staffing structure. Whilst these would both need formal approval by the new council, members were invited to give support for the governance structure at this point in the meeting, and this was tabled for consideration. The staffing structure would be considered under a later agenda item.

A public survey had provided a relatively small number of responses and members were advised to be cautious about drawing confirmed conclusions. However, from the responses there was evidently some positivity towards the council's work, and also a need for greater community engagement and awareness of what the council did, and why. The council would also need to continue to inform residents about the different responsibilities of the town and unitary councils.

RESOLVED: that the update be noted.

RECOMMENDED: that the draft governance structure be considered at Full Council.

39. BANKING ARRANGEMENTS

The Town Clerk reported that access to all accounts prior to the elections next year needed some housekeeping and it was

RESOLVED: that Cllrs Rose Allwork and Anne Rickard be added to the existing list of signatories, and that Cllr Sarah Williams be added to the signatories for the Council's account with Santander.

40. DEVOLUTION/ASSET TRANSFERS

The Chairman reported that recent meetings had taken place in conjunction with Lyme Regis Town Council and it was

RESOLVED: that the report be noted and that any major changes prior to the elections in 2024 were unlikely to be completed.

41. TOWN CENTRE HEALTH CHECK

The Chairman drew three winning numbers 47, 65 and 66, from the entrants, for whom prizes of Bridport-themed merchandise from the Tourist Information Centre would be provided.

RESOLVED: that the results of the draw be approved and the winners notified.

42. COMMUNICATIONS

No matters were reported for information.

43. PAYMENT OF ACCOUNTS

The Town Clerk presented List 3 of the 2023/24 accounts, in the sum of £413,251.74, which had been authorised for payment since the last meeting.

RESOLVED: that accounts list number 3 for 2023/2024 be approved and signed by the Chairman.

44. PUBLIC BODIES (ADMISSION TO MEETINGS) ACT 1960

RESOLVED: that in view of the confidential nature of the business about to be transacted, it is advisable in the public interest that the public be temporarily excluded and they are instructed to withdraw.

45. STAFFING MATTERS

The Town Clerk reported a proposed staffing structure for the new council that was a working assumption during the development of detailed staffing and administrative arrangements.

RESOLVED: that the proposed staffing structure be approved.

46. PROPERTY MATTERS

The Town Surveyor reported on one matter relating to a tenancy. Notice had been served and there had been discussions with potential new tenants.

RESOLVED: that the actions of the Town Surveyor be agreed and supported.

The meeting closed at **9:12pm**

The next meeting of the Committee will be held on 15 January 2024