

THESE MINUTES NOT YET CONFIRMED

LOUGHTON TOWN COUNCIL

RESOURCES AND GENERAL SERVICES COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the Meeting held on Wednesday 5 October 2016 at 7.45pm at 1 Buckingham Court.

Present:

Councillors: S Pewsey (in the Chair)
J Angold-Stephens M Dalton J Jennings
J Mahoney S Murray (from Min no RG5.3)
A Omer

Also in attendance:

Councillors: P Beales D Wixley

Officers: E K Walsh (Town Clerk)
S Haynes (Deputy Town Clerk)

RG10 Apologies for absence

No apologies for absence were received.

RG11 Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were received.

RG12 Confirmation of Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 6 July 2016 were CONFIRMED as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

RG13 Public Representations

None were received.

RG14 Matters for Report

14.1 Insurance – Annual Review – Min no RG5.4

The Committee NOTED that, further to the decision taken at the last meeting, the revised valuations had been applied to the Council's properties and a refund of £401.48 received from WPS Insurance Brokers. A low claims bonus rebate of £108.84 had also been received for the financial year 2015/16.

14.2 Salary Payments – Min no RG7.5

The Committee NOTED that, in view of the £200 fee to be levied by NatWest Bank in order to provide the specific account reference number for the transfer of the autopay, no further action had been taken.

Cllr Murray joined the meeting.

14.3 Annual Town Meeting

The Committee NOTED that the 2017 Annual Town Meeting was scheduled for Wednesday 15 March 2017 commencing at 8pm in the Murray Hall. Whilst this was not a council meeting, all town councillors were expected to attend.

The Committee AGREED to continue with the usual format for the meeting by inviting local organisations and voluntary groups, particularly those in receipt of Financial Assistance from the Council, to mount displays at the event to attract more public interest. The organisations successful in their grant applications for 2017/18 would also be presented with a certificate by the Town Mayor.

The Committee AGREED to invite the principal from Epping Forest College as the guest speaker and to provide Epping Forest Museum with the opportunity to mount a display to promote its service to local residents.

14.4 Remembrance Service

The Committee AGREED to make a donation of £100 to the Royal British Legion in support of the Poppy Appeal and towards the cost of the wreath to be laid by the Town Mayor at the Remembrance Service on 13 November 2016. Payment was approved under Section 137 of the Local Government Act 1972.

14.5 Binding of Minutes

The Committee NOTED that arrangements were in hand for the binding of the 2012-16 council and committee minutes at a net cost of £480. The volumes would be bound in burgundy leather with gold embossed details, the same style as that used previously.

14.6 Christmas & New Year Opening Times

The Committee NOTED that the Town Council offices would close on Friday 23 December at 12 noon, reopening as normal from 9am on Wednesday 28 December until Friday 30 December at 4pm; then close on Monday 2 January 2017 with normal opening hours resumed on Tuesday 3 January 2017.

RG15 Financial Assistance

It was NOTED that a balance of £548 remained in the 2016/17 Financial Assistance budget.

The Committee RESOLVED to make the following contributions from the scheme by granting financial assistance to:

Organisation	Amount requested £	Item	Power
Broadway Town Centre Partnership	170.00	Brochure printing	LGA 1972, S144
Spark*	296.40	Signage	LGA 1972, S137

*Noting that the accounts provided by Spark were for the national charity, Worth, the Committee AGREED that, in future, non-local specific accounts would only be acceptable under exceptional circumstances.

RG16 Finance and Audit

16.1 Accounts and Audit 2015/16 – Min no 285 (Council, 21 April 2016)

The Committee NOTED that confirmation has been received from PKF Littlejohn, the Council's external auditors, that they had completed the audit of the Annual Return for Loughton Town Council for the year ended

31 March 2016. Under the regulations this would, however, need to be reported to full Council at its meeting on 19 October 2016.

It was reported that the notice of conclusion of audit and the audited accounts were available to view on the Council's website. The notice had also been displayed on the noticeboards around the town as required by the legislation.

The audit certificate confirmed that, in their opinion, *"the information in the annual return is in accordance with proper practices and no matters had come to their attention giving cause for concern that relevant legislation and regulatory requirements had not been met"*.

However, members' attention was drawn to a comment made by the external auditor which read:

Other matters not affecting our opinion which we draw to the attention of the smaller authority:

- As a result of incorrect information supplied to the Council by the precepting authority, Section 1, Box 2, the annual precept, does not agree to the figure notified to us by the precepting authority. The figures in Boxes 2 and 3 should read £586,599 and £200,102 respectively. Please ensure that the correct figures are used in next year's Annual Return when completing the comparatives. (NB: As notified in our letter of 14 March 2016, all the precept figures published by the precepting authorities each year are available for checking on our website prior to completion of the Annual Return).

There was no doubt that the full amount of precept demanded by and paid to the Town Council by the District Council was £587,100, as stated on the Annual Return. However, following a late change in the tax base, the District Council had chosen to finance the shortfall in the precept through an internal grant from the District Development Fund. Unfortunately, it had not taken the necessary steps to notify the Town Council and the ten other affected parish and town councils in the district of that decision resulting in a comment on the audit certificate. This matter was likely to be raised at the next Local Councils' Liaison Committee meeting on 14 November 2016.

16.2 Internal Audit

The Committee NOTED that the next visit by the internal auditor was booked for Monday 17 October 2016.

16.3 Internal Financial Check

The Committee thanked Cllr Omer for undertaking a financial check on 20 September 2016.

Cllr Omer reported that everything was satisfactory with all audited items correct and that the staff were very helpful.

16.4 Investments

The Committee NOTED the changes in interest rates. As the funds in the Santander 180-Day Notice Account would be available for reinvestment on 8 December 2016, a report on alternative options would be presented to the Committee at its next meeting.

16.5 Reserves Policy Review

The Committee considered the report and the impact of the proposed amendment. It was AGREED to amend the Council's reserves policy to read as follows:

1. The amount of money held in General and Earmarked Reserves shall be identified at the end of each financial year and reported to Resources and General Services Committee at the same time as the statutory Statements of Accounts. Where Earmarked Reserves include Capital Reserves and Unspent Loans, they will be specifically identified.
2. Earmarked Reserves
The Council will keep such sums in earmarked reserves as shall be considered necessary to support future expenditure on specific projects or as funds built up towards significant future revenue expenditure or to meet anticipated liabilities.
3. General Reserves
 - 3.1 The Council shall maintain a prudent level of general reserves sufficient to ensure it can meet its on-going commitments, respond to any need for emergency or unplanned expenditure, and overcome any cash flow difficulty which might arise.
 - 3.2 The Council will normally aim to maintain general reserves at around 65%, within the range 60 to 70%, of net budgeted annual running costs, excluding growth items and items on which expenditure will be met by use of earmarked reserves.

“Net budgeted annual running costs” means the expenditure which each committee has estimated it will spend on its on-going services in the following year, less the income it expects to receive, after any adjustments to the budgets have been made by the Resources and General Services Committee for any reason.

“Growth items” are additional discretionary items specifically identified by spending committees.

16.6 Local Government Finance Settlement Consultation 2017/18

The Government's proposals to introduce capping to some or all parish and town councils were discussed.

The Committee OBJECTED to the proposals and AGREED to make the following response:

- This Council urges the Department for Communities and Local Government to reconsider its proposals to cap the revenue raising ability of local councils as this could significantly damage local service provision and undermine the role of local councils and councillors.
- Noting that local councils receive no government funding and are accountable to their residents, not least through the ballot box, under the Localism agenda the level of precept should continue to be decided at parish level and not by the Government.
- If capping was introduced, even where the local community had been fully consulted and supported an increase to improve services, residents would be forced to pay for the additional costs of an automatic referendum. The cost of such a referendum in Epping

Forest District would be approximately £5,000 per ward; £35,000 in Loughton. This would be an added and unnecessary burden on local tax payers.

- Should the Government enforce its proposals, the Committee AGREED:
 - i. it would be more appropriate to base the referendum threshold on a three-year average of no more than 2% and £5 rises. This would then exempt local councils requiring a one-off increase to meet service innovations but prevent councils from repeatedly applying larger increases.
 - ii. the approach should also take account of the transfer of responsibilities (assets and services) to town and parish councils.

16.7 Financial Position

The Committee's financial position as at 29 September 2016 was NOTED together with details of the Committee's earmarked reserves. Confirmation was received that the second instalment of the 2016/17 precept, £297,300, had been paid by Epping Forest District Council on 30 September 2016.

A note of the Council's current bank balances and most recent reconciliations was circulated at the meeting.

16.8 Accounts Paid

It was NOTED that payments totalling £252,397.66, as detailed on payments schedules nos 214 – 222, had been made since the report to the meeting on 6 July 2016. The schedules and accompanying invoices were available at the meeting for inspection.

RG17 Staffing

17.1 CiLCA

The Committee congratulated the Planning Clerk, Vivienne Messenger, on achieving a Certificate in Local Council Administration. The Town Mayor had presented the certificate to Vivienne at the Planning and Licensing Committee meeting on Monday 3 October 2016.

17.2 Jury Service

The Committee NOTED that the Town Clerk had refunded to the Council the loss of earnings payment received from the Court Service for the period of her jury service in July 2016 in the sum of £584.55.

RG18 Office Accommodation

The Committee NOTED the report regarding progress on the lease with Essex County Council and that the appointment of a contractor would be delayed until the lease had been signed.

Once the lease had been signed, it was AGREED to engage the Architect in a project management role to oversee the necessary building works at a cost of £1,950 plus VAT and travelling expenses.

RG19 Legal Matters

19.1 Illegal Encampment on Hillyfields

The Town Clerk reported that a possession order had been served on the travellers late on Friday 30 September and that they had vacated the site on Sunday 2 October 2016, moving to Jessel Green, land owned by Epping Forest District Council. Arrangements were in hand to ensure the prompt removal of the associated fly tipping from Hillyfields.

The Committee NOTED that the legal costs associated with obtaining a possession order from the Court were likely to be in the region of £5,000 and were to be met from General Reserves.

The District Council had been asked to consider whether a Public Spaces Protection Order for the wider district would be appropriate and achievable.

The Town Clerk recorded her thanks to Richard Gardiner, Environment & Neighbourhood Manager at the District Council, who had provided advice and support on handling the legal process.

19.2 Insurance Claim

19.2.1 Exclusion of the Press and Public

The Committee RESOLVED to exclude the press and public from the next item only under the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960, as it contained confidential information relating to legal proceedings.

19.2.2 Defence Statement

The Committee AUTHORISED the Town Clerk to sign the Council's defence statement regarding an incident alleged to have occurred on Jessel Green on 31 July 2013.

RG20 Future Work of the Committee

No items were raised

Signed.....
Date: 7 December 2016