

Town Hall
High Street
Lewes
East Sussex
BN7 2QS

☎ 01273 471469 Fax: 01273 480919

✉ info@lewes-tc.gov.uk
🌐 www.lewes-tc.gov.uk



**LEWES
TOWN
COUNCIL**

MINUTES

of the meeting of the **Finance Working Party**

held on **Wednesday 2nd December 2015**, in the **Yarrow Room, Town Hall, Lewes** at **7:00pm**.

PRESENT Cllrs F Addecott; M Chartier; S Murray; R O’Keeffe; A Rowell and (*not appointed to the Working Party*) Cllr I Makepeace

In attendance: S Brigden (*Town Clerk [TC]*)

FWP2015/01 ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN: Cllr Rowell was elected Chairman of the Working Party for the 2015/16 year. (*Note: Cllr Rowell has subsequently requested that he be referred-to as “Chair”*)

FWP2015/02 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE: It was discovered after the meeting that Cllr Cooper had belatedly left a message advising that she was unwell.

FWP2015/03 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST: There were none.

FWP2015/04 QUESTIONS: There were none (No public or press were present).

FWP2015/05 REMIT OF THE WORKING PARTY:

The working party was asked to consider the detail of estimated expenditure and income for the Council’s operations, and to agree a budget and level of Council Tax precept for the 2016/17 year, for recommendation to Council.

The Working Party was asked to ensure appropriate provision for items constituting the Council Plan for 2016/17.

FWP2015/06 BUSINESS OF THE MEETING:

1 In the year of introduction (2013/14) of the Government’s Council Tax Support Grant scheme, Lewes District Council had passed-on the whole amount which had been sufficient to maintain the Town Council’s “band ‘D’ equivalent” precept unchanged. However; this grant had reduced significantly each year since then and was to reduce from the current year amount by a further 15% for 2016/17, to £53,128. The Town Council (LTC) therefore faced an enforced increase to precept to simply maintain budgeted nett expenditure at the present level. Parish Councils again await a definitive statement from the Government as to their intended referendum/capping policy for 2016/17.

2 The Working Party considered the service budget estimates for 2016/17 (*copies in the minute book*). Alongside the Council’s financial system generally, the assumptions and basic principles and the process of compiling the recommended budget had again been commended by the Council’s independent Internal Auditor (IA) during a recent inspection, who made two observations in his interim report: “*I am pleased to report that overall the systems and procedures you have in place are entirely fit for purpose and I would go so far as to say are a model of good practice.*” and “*The very detailed working enables sound and robust decisions to be made...However.. current indications are that general reserves could be reduced by a further £150k in the 2017 year, this level of reduction would be considered putting the council’s general reserve into financial distress. Council needs to consider the RFO’s proposals seriously and discuss reserves provisioning in this regard.*”

3 The draft budgets presented took account of:

- Provision for known/anticipated increases in public Utility supplies, NNDR etc.
- Adjustments for completed and imminent (previously-approved) projects.
- Provision for elements identified in the Council’s forward plan.

- Establishment of appropriate reserves for agreed/anticipated projects.
- Provision for anticipated increases in insurance and other overhead costs etc.
- Provision for known increase in employers' pension and NI contribution.
- Refinements of overhead allocation to services and base service cost estimates.
- Recognition of anticipated adjustment to salaries.
- Provision for known and anticipated increases in cost of contracted services.
- Re-establishment of exhausted reserves and continuation of prudent contributions.
- Provision for costs of assets or services accepted through devolution by Lewes District Council, and for necessary transitional costs.
- Fees & charges tariff increase of 3%, rounded to an appropriate value for the service concerned.

It was acknowledged that there was a continuing need to address the proper maintenance of the Council's physical assets and adequately fund continuing services.

4 The draft budget as presented resulted in a 13.24% increase in precept (to £883,872) but this was attributable to various factors, some of which are flexible and may not be agreed, and also should be considered in context of a partial offset by reduction in the sum chargeable to Lewes taxpayers by the District Council. The actual cost to a Band 'D' household equated to an extra £17.36 per year; 33.9 pence per week.

5 The draft budget combined specific amounts for known costs and committed project items, with prudent allowances for reserves, and provided for a flexible response to unforeseen issues. The Council's forward plan was considered, and it was understood that this involved significant burden on the Council's existing staff and resources, and was as expansive as could be practically undertaken. Members recognized that some projects could exceed original "informed guess" estimates of cost, and earmarked reserves could be insufficient. Building and engineering works were of particular concern in this regard, as the Council's assets had all been taken-on with considerable historic dilapidation, and contexts such as heritage listing status. Projects could be "topped-up" by drawing from the General Fund which; although adequate, would then need to be restored in future years to the levels recommended by government auditors. This was the prospect that had triggered the exhortation of the IA in his interim report, as it was possible that the Council's General Fund could drop below an acceptable minimum in the next two years.

6 With these issues in mind, Councillors considered the forward plan; proposed contributions to reserves and operational service requirements, in detail. Two Members had submitted a number of questions late the previous evening, and these were addressed as the presentation unfolded. At the end of this process Members of the Working Party were equally divided (*Cllr O'Keeffe had left the meeting [at 10:15pm] before this point*) as to their preferred course of action: whether to promote the budget to Council on 17th December and deal with any suggestions for amendments at that meeting, or to hold a further meeting and defer recommendations until the Council meeting scheduled for 21st January 2016.

FWP2015/07

CONCLUSIONS:

After some debate it was agreed to defer a final decision on recommendations pending a further meeting. Council will then be asked to consider these at its meeting on 21st January 2016.

FWP2015/08

The Chair declared the meeting closed.

The meeting ended at 10:45pm

Signed:

Date:



Lewes Town Council proposes to initiate and complete (where possible and practical), or continue, the following major areas of work in the year 1st April 2016 to 31st March 2017. These are in addition to various projects and initiatives itemised in the Council's budgets and accounts, and represent larger-scale activities deserving special attention.

*The plan will be updated in course of time, to show key elements and progress towards completion, as appropriate.

1 Town Hall repairs & conservation

Major roof repairs/replacement to Assembly Room and Corn Exchange

Works required for safety and integrity of building.

2 Pells Lake ecology project

Improvements to water quality } *partially completed – specialist report obtained*

Introduction of aquatic plants } *W/Party remit to consider structural integrity of lake perimeter.*

pending commencement of 3rd-party works in locality to achieve best VFM – links to item 3

3 Pells Recreation Ground and kiosk/café development (with Santon Group and others)

Engagement with Santon Group and others to improve the “urban realm” in the area as an integral component of necessary flood-defence works; taking the opportunity to replace children’s play equipment and introduce equipment for a wider age-range, and to provide an enhanced café facility for the swimming pool, recreation ground, and surrounding parkland.

NSQ planning application due for C'ttee decision Dec 2015 (works planning to follow)

4 Malling (Bridgeview) Community Centre refurbishment

To carry out a comprehensive refurbishment of the community centre, with modern heating and lighting, with improved facilities for community use, including more flexible interior spaces and better integration of the sports changing-rooms with the adjoining sports pitches and recreation ground.

Invitation to submit design ideas early 2016

5 Commemorations:

To engage with, and inspire, appropriate community recognition of

National commemoration of the Centenary of the outbreak of the first World War (2014) *ongoing 2014-18*

Research commission re additional names for War memorial – ongoing; end date 2018

Centenary of the signing of the Treaty of Versailles (2019)

pending

Programme to be developed to 2019, as Council resolution 12th November 2015 (ref pending)

6 Neighbourhood Plan (with Community partners)

Development of a Neighbourhood Plan for Lewes under provisions of the Localism Act 2011

Reg14 consultation on draft Plan by April 2016

7 Continuing programme of environmental enhancements and specific site improvements

Engage with appropriate projects arising from third-party initiatives (*eg* highway safety/traffic management).

Continuing improvements to own assets (*eg* allotment sites)

Currently agreed: pursuing highway crossing, Church Lane, Malling

8 Devolution of assets & services

Provide for transfer of ownership of various assets/services from Lewes District Council. (currently subject to ongoing negotiation)

Malling Rec and Landport Bottom agreed for first tranche 2015/16 – legal transfer process delayed by LDC. Decisions pending re further sites (next tranche originally identified Southover Grange Gdns)