

MINUTES OF THE FINANCE STRATEGY AND MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 26 NOVEMBER 2019

PRESENT

The Mayor - Councillor Davies
Councillor Hall
Councillor Harper
Councillor Hart
Councillor Hawley
Councillor Jackson
Councillor Sheldon

Councillor McLoughlin was also in attendance

32. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

a) Disclosable Pecuniary Interests and Dispensations:

Councillor Jackson had an interest in the Staffordshire Pension Fund.
Councillor Sheldon had an interest in Biddulph in Bloom.

b) Other Interests:

None.

33. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from:

Councillor Jones
Councillor Salt
Councillor Yates

34. MINUTES

- a) The Minutes of the meeting held on 24 September (signed at the Town Council meeting on 8 October 2019) were **confirmed**.
- b) The Minutes of the IT Working Group meeting held on 24 September 2019 were **confirmed**

35. TO RECEIVE THE MAZARS AUDIT RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACCOMPANYING LETTER- ATTACHED

The External Audit Report and associated paperwork were contained within the agenda packs. The Chief Officer reported that the external audit documentation had been sent in good time; the auditor had then taken annual leave. At this point she had handed over the audit to a colleague, but there was evidently a break-down in communication. The 'new' auditor believed that questions had been raised, which had not been asked.

The main issue had been around the review of the Asset Register, which this Committee had considered previously. This work had been done in good faith, in order to ensure that the information was accurate. This mistake by Mazars had resulted in a qualification on the final report. Had the questions been asked, the appropriate action would have been taken by Biddulph Town Council. The Chief Officer had complained about this process, but had been informed that the report could not be amended when the audit had been completed. Mazars had then sent an explanatory letter, which had been published with the report. This acknowledged their failings and noted that the Town Council had not been treated consistently throughout the process.

Councillor Jackson queried whether the external auditor could be changed. The Chief Officer noted that all town and parish councils in this area had the same external audit arrangements.

Councillor Hawley queried whether the Chief Officer was happy with Mazars' explanation. The Chief Officer felt that she had to accept this, but had been very frustrated by the process and had expressed her dissatisfaction.

Councillor Harper wondered why he had not been receiving emails; he believed the Events and Partnerships Officer had resolved this issue.

36. TO RECEIVE THE RECOMMENDATIONS HIGHLIGHTED IN THE ANNUAL FINANCE REPORT (SENT VIA EMAIL)

The Chief Officer talked through the report. Each year, this report highlighted actions that had been completed and proposed new areas for consideration in the coming year.

The Chief Officer felt it would be preferable for there to be more internal monitoring visits, to provide greater scrutiny. The work that Councillor Hawley had undertaken had proved to be very useful; it would be a positive step to have another Councillor that could share this role.

Councillor Hall recommended Councillor Perkin; seconded by Councillor Harper and agreed.

The Chief Officer noted that a format for receiving bank reconciliations had now been agreed. In addition, she was proposing that the Town Council look again at the CCLA provision. This was on the agenda later.

The Chief Officer would also undertake a review of the internal audit arrangements this year, however, there were no concerns with the current arrangements.

The report was received.

37. TO RECEIVE SEPTEMBER AND OCTOBER BANK RECONCILIATIONS - ATTACHED

The Chief Officer noted that the Officer had taken advice on removing 'unpresented cheques' from this report after a period of time; the reports were received.

38. TO APPROVE THE REVIEWED POLICIES ATTACHED:

a) Complaints Procedure

The Chief Officer noted that this policy had been reviewed and amended, as appropriate.

Councillor Harper queried what a Councillor would do if they had a complaint about an officer. The Chief Officer noted that she would deal with issues in relation to the staff, and the Mayor would consider complaints about the Chief Officer; this was contained in 3.2 within the Policy.

Councillor Hawley wondered whether the Mayor and two Councillors could deal with complaints about the Chief Officer. The Chief Officer queried how these Councillors would be chosen. There was a debate about transparency

and fairness. Within this discussion was consideration of the role of the Monitoring Officer at Staffordshire Moorlands District Council.

It was agreed that the Chief Officer would investigate how complaints about other Chief Officers are dealt with, at other Town Councils. She would make an appropriate amendment. The Policy was accepted.

b) Health and Safety at Work Policy

The Chief Officer noted that this policy had been reviewed and amended, as appropriate. At present, the Town Council only has three employees so it is not a legal requirement to have a policy.

4.1 should be amended to read '3 employees'.

Councillor Harper queried whether this would be reviewed with additional employees. The Chief Officer confirmed that it would be reviewed regularly.

Councillor Hart moved that this should be accepted; seconded by Councillor Perkin and agreed.

Councillor Jackson wondered whether there were many sick days. The Chief Officer confirmed that there were very few.

39. TO NOTE ONGOING WORK IN RELATION TO WEBSITE

ACCESSIBILITY COMPLIANCE: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/make-your-website-or-app-accessible-and-publish-an-accessibility-statement>

The Chief Officer reminded Members that there had been a new Biddulph.co.uk website in 2019. There were additional requirements around accessibility. The Chief Officer and Events and Partnerships Officer would be considering accessibility issues over the coming months; this involved sampling the content on a number of pages.

40. TO APPROVE THAT MOBILE PHONE CONTRACTS ARE ENTERED INTO FOR THE CHIEF OFFICER AND EVENTS AND PARTNERSHIPS OFFICER- PREFERRED OPTION ATTACHED

The Chief Officer informed Members that she and the Events and Partnerships Officer were increasingly having to use their personal mobile phones for work calls, social media, photographs and messages. This was not appropriate as it provided no work/ life balance, and had the potential to increase personal costs.

Councillor Hall felt it was not acceptable for the two staff to have to use their own devices. Councillor Hall asked Members to accept the principle that the Officers should have work mobile phones. The Chief Officer had identified a possible contract with EE, which would be £26 per month for two years (each phone).

Councillor Harper felt there were implications with regard to health and safety if devices were not provided; this Council would be negligent.

Councillor Jackson noted that Officers should make sure that these phones were switched off outside work.

It was agreed that the Chief Officer and Events and Partnerships Officer should enter into contracts with mobile phone providers, similar to the product that had been presented.

41. TO RECEIVE THE PUBLIC SECTOR DEPOSIT FUND OCTOBER 2019 FACTSHEET (FOR CONSIDERATION IN ADVANCE OF BUDGET DISCUSSIONS IN JANUARY 2020) - ATTACHED

Councillor Jackson felt it was a difficult time to be considering investments, with the 'Brexit' arrangements providing uncertainty with the markets.

The Chief Officer noted that there was very low risk attached to the CCLA Public Sector Deposit Fund product.

This information had been provided to update Councillors on the performance of the scheme. A representative from CCLA would be invited to a future meeting.

This information was received.

42. TO RECEIVE THE STAFFORDSHIRE PENSION FUND - 2019 VALUATION RESULTS AND FUNDING STRATEGY STATEMENT CONSULTATION - LGPS (MINOR EMPLOYERS)- ATTACHED

Proposed by Councillor Perkin; seconded by Councillor Harper and received.

43. TO RECEIVE AN UPDATE IN RELATION TO THE PROVISION OF WIFI IN THE TOWN HALL

The Chief Officer noted that SMDC had asked the Town Council to revisit their costs around the installation of WIFI in the Town Hall; the Town Council had originally looked at this 18 months ago. Councillor Hall confirmed that the SMDC provider could not compete with these costs.

The Chief Officer believed that the initial conversations had been around the Town Council paying the ongoing cost of the WIFI, with SMDC paying for the installation. When costs were available, the Chief Officer would make this information available, for further discussion.

Councillor Rogers wondered whether the provider could offer mobile phone contracts, as per the previous item.

This information was received.

44. TO NOTE PROGRESS IN RELATION TO A CENTRALISED GRASS CUTTING CONTRACT FOR THE TOWN

The Chief Officer had received an email from David Greatbatch at Staffordshire County Highways in relation to the Town Council taking over responsibility for the grass cutting contracts in the town.

Key points were that a major piece of work was being undertaken in relation to verge areas as a result of a re-tendering process, due to be concluded in April 2020. David was unsure whether there would be an opportunity to remove the Biddulph areas in time, before the new contract was due to commence, which may impact the contract price. He had provided assurances that he would continue to offer updates regarding this piece of work.

Councillor Hart felt there was great potential with this scheme; the Chief Officer should continue to pursue the possibility.

Councillor Sheldon thought it was essential to have accurate areas of responsibility with regard to grass cutting. The County contractors usually did a good job of the bypass, but had completely missed other areas. Councillor Sheldon would like a clearer idea of what cuts can be expected.

Councillor Hawley felt this was the same for District Council grass cutting. Biddulph Moor did not appear to have been cut at all.

Councillor Sheldon noted that there was cross-over; the District Council do some areas for the County Council.

Councillor Jackson felt the Town Council should aspire to do all grass cutting. 'Your Housing' had new contracts in place, but it would be helpful to know when these would be renewed. The more grass the Town Council is responsible for, the more cost effective this would be.

It was agreed that the Chief Officer should continue to pursue this issue.

Exclusion of the Press and Public

The Chair to move: -

"That, pursuant to Section 100A(2) and (4) of the Local Government Act, 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting in view of the nature of the business to be transacted or the nature of the proceedings whereby it is likely that confidential information as defined in Section 100A (3) of the Act would be disclosed to the public in breach of the obligation of confidence or exempt information as defined in Section 10 I (1) of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act would be disclosed to the public by virtue of the Paragraphs indicated."

CONFIDENTIAL ITEMS

45. TO APPROVE AN INCREASE IN HOURS FROM 22 TO 28 PER WEEK FOR THE EVENTS AND PARTNERSHIPS OFFICER, TO COMMENCE IN JANUARY 2020- FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS TO BE TABLED

Agreed.

The meeting closed at 6.40pm

Signature

Date