



# *Battle Town Council*



## **MINUTES of the FINANCE & GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE held on TUESDAY, 28<sup>th</sup> SEPTEMBER 2021 at The Emmanuel Centre, Harrier Lane, Battle at 7.30pm**

**Present:** Cllrs G Favell (Chairman), V Cook, M Howell, M Kiloh and H Sharman.

**In Attendance:** Cllr A Russell, three members of the public, C Harris (Town Clerk)

### **Public Question Time**

A member of the public reminded the meeting that there had been previous requests for costs and benefits to be included in a Business Plan for the Almonry. He requested that a full record for the running costs be included in the Strategic Plan for the Almonry Use and, if no profit was anticipated, a reason for this as it contains commercially rented offices. He emphasised that no loss would be acceptable. He asked that a comparison forecast for income pre-contract and future be included.

A member of the public reminded Members that comments had been made at Full Council and these had been submitted as written questions for this meeting. He noted that a closure programme is now published on the website provoking further questions; particularly in relation to Council's lack of knowledge on dates prior to this publication. The Clerk confirmed that the programme had been issued to the Architect for approval prior to the Council's receipt.

The Clerk reported that responses to the resident's questions had been received from the Architect, Quantity Survey, Structural Engineer and Mechanical & Electrical Engineer. Further information had been added, where appropriate. Due to time constraints, responses to only some of the written questions could be read to the meeting. Questions and responses are attached to these Minutes.

- 1. Apologies for absence** – None.
- 2. Disclosure of interest** – None.
- 3. The minutes of the meeting held on 27<sup>th</sup> July 2021** were agreed and duly signed by Cllr Favell.
- 4. Clerk's report**
  - A meeting was held with the Chief Executive of RDC and Cllr Doug Oliver at which the aim for a 'one-stop shop' was discussed and will be a topic going forward.
  - Council is not able to have Premium Bonds and Government Bonds require a broker to arrange. An additional bank account is being investigated for rating. Hodge bank has confirmed additional funds may be deposited in the same account although they no longer allow new accounts for local authorities.
- 5. Correspondence and communications received post agenda publication**
  - A letter from **Martins Oak Surgery** confirming that: plans to expand the current building are being pursued to assist with the growing number of patients in the Battle area and; they will not consider splitting services across two sites due to the physical manpower and equipment required. It was suggested that a more regular bus service would allow Netherfield residents to access Battle more easily.
  - A report from **PKF Littlejohn LLP**, the external auditor, that section 3 confirms they are unable to complete their review work on the Annual Governance and Accountability Return and supporting documentation as a result of correspondence received in relation to a previous

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year's submission. This is published on the website and notice boards, as required. The fee for this year's audit will be paid but the cost for 2019/20 remains unknown.

## 6. Almonry Project

- The Clerk displayed photographs of the condition of various aspects of the Almonry, as attached, and reported:
  - as advised at Full Council, there has been extensive **additional works identified to chimneys** following the erection of roof scaffolding to undertake anticipated works;
  - significant concern was raised at the **chimney/roof** to the rear of the Town Clerk's office. It appears that there is no real support, as a result of rotting beams, to the roof at this point and this clearly needs to be rectified. This may need to be carried out at the end of the planned works due to investigation of repair methods being explored in conjunction with the Conservation Officer. It is anticipated that the building can be opened with this room and the associated external area being sectioned out of use. The Structural Engineer is meeting with the contractor onsite tomorrow to discuss;
  - the **programme of works** is attached. This does not include the newly identified chimney/roof above. It highlights that the return of Officers will not be until 1<sup>st</sup> November;
  - A justification of the extension to programme is awaited but it is clear that additional works identified has caused some delay;
  - The Architect and Contractor are working hard to limit the **inconvenience and time** of scheme;
  - UK Power Networks have indicated a 14 week delay in installation of the **higher grade electrical supply**. This could take us to March. The Contractor will provide the contact details to see if pressure can be applied to bring this forward. This will clearly have an impact on what areas can be occupied when Officers return;
  - Following discussions on the options for **removal of sections of scaffolding** it was confirmed that this would result in additional costs. It was also emphasised that roof works need to be completed in the correct sequence and this may not be in the order we would wish. The Contractor is aware of the concerns raised and will remove the scaffolding as soon as practicable;
  - Colours and designs of **kitchen**, wall tiles and flooring for the most of the **toilet facilities**, and flooring for the **first floor offices** had been agreed;
  - **Flooring to the kitchen/lobby/accessible toilet and external ambulant toilet** is to be confirmed;
  - A quote for the **painting of first floor offices** had been circulated. Members were reminded that this was removed from the tender to reduce cost. It is now apparent that all offices will need attention due to the removal of radiators and the disruption during installation of electrical wiring, dust etc. The Architect has suggested that some saving could be found by reducing the specification, eg number of paint applications. It was noted that only office one at the top of the staircase would be in use prior to the installation of the higher grade electrical supply. **Members agreed unanimously that office one should be decorated by the Contractor with grounds staff painting the other first floor offices over the winter period;**
  - Much of the damage to external stonework had been the result of vegetation. The wisteria has been removed and grounds staff will shortly remove roots to prevent any further destruction. They have also been asked to **remove the vegetation from the wall at the gate** by the Museum as it is anticipated that this could be in a very poor and potentially dangerous condition;

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- A **sample of the sockets** to be provided: black for the panelled areas; white on walls was presented to the meeting;
- A proposal for the new **electric meter/supply cupboard** had been circulated. The size was dictated by the equipment required. The doors will be in keeping with the historic building;
- At present the **costs known are**: agreed contract sum £541,460.84; projected total project cost at report 2 £593,266.68. Members were reminded that the cost of the upgrade to electrical supply at £13,754.37 and additional roof repairs of £14,481.50 (total £28,235.87) had been agreed from Ear Marked Reserves. It was noted that these costs do not include the major chimney repairs as reported above or the extension to contract period which is currently being negotiated.

It was agreed that a **grant application to Historic England for the additional chimney repairs** to the Clerk's Office, as a separate project, should be made once costs are known.

In response to concern that **work to chimneys** had not been identified prior to tender, the Clerk confirmed that it had been reported that the roof survey was carried out from a ladder, without safe access to the whole roof area and that a drone would have been unlikely to have identified this work.

It was clear that at least a further £65,000 will be required cover the cost of the Almonry works. Given the increasing possibility of interest rates rises, **Members agreed unanimously to recommend to Full Council that the remaining £100,000 available from the Public Works Loan Board is drawn down to cover the projected costs.**

- **Almonry Working Group**

The **notes from the meeting** on 17<sup>th</sup> August 2021 were received as attached. The **initial draft of a Three Year Strategic plan** for the Almonry use had been circulated. It was noted that this document will be completed with projected income and expenditure. Discussion was invited on the use of the building to either produce a profit or to be cost neutral. It was agreed that tenants should pay a competitive rate. The Clerk highlighted her concern at retaining an excess of office space for Council use. Members agreed the cost of maintenance of the building must be included in calculations to achieve a cost neutral result. Figures will be presented to the next meeting for further discussion.

An indication of appropriate furniture was included within the draft Plan and it was **agreed that some items should be purchased from Ear Marked Reserves, possibly 315 and 320, subject to Council approval.** It was suggested that a spreadsheet of all costs should be produced to avoid cost escalating. Members noted that cost of equipment and furniture would be discussed at budget setting by F&GP and External Relations & Town Development; the latter in relation to the Tourist Information Point which has an Ear Marked Reserve.

- **Reinstatement of the Almonry Garden**

The Beautiful Battle Committee had produced a draft proposal for the rear garden which included: installing a paved or gravel area on the upper section to give views across the whole rear garden. Clarification of the condition of the box balls should be undertaken prior to any removal; the lower garden herb bed to be an Apothecary bed with explanatory signs; a new compost container built; the pond area cleared and made more wildlife friendly with a rockery at one end.

*One member of the public left the meeting.*

Members noted that grounds staff undertake the grass cutting and any heavy work required.

*One member of the public left the meeting.*

## **7. Personnel sub Committee**

The **draft Minutes** from the meeting on **21 September 2021** were received.

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*Cllr Russell left the meeting.*

**Members agreed unanimously the staff salary increase recommended by the National Joint Council from April 2021.**

## 8. New van

Members noted that the existing van is due for replacement in April 2022; following a three year agreement. The proposed replacement is also petrol and would include all servicing. **Members agreed unanimously to replace the van with a new three year contract at an overall cost of £8,094.38.** The Clerk was asked to research the feasibility of an electric vehicle for the next contract period.

## 9. Allotment plot rent

As requested by the Environment Committee, the Asst to Town Clerk had produced a spreadsheet for scale of increases from October 2022. **Members agreed unanimously that fees for Cherry Gardens, Virgins Croft and Watch Oak should increase from 26p to 30p per square metre and Netherfield Hill from 21p to 24p per square metre.** This would be not be reviewed for two years.

## 10. Beautiful Battle

Members noted that the current Service Level Agreement was for a three-year period from April 2018 to April 2021. Subject to the addition at point 7 that “...Beautiful Battle to source and supply plants and planting material in accordance with any agreed strategy, **locally where possible**, and to make all planting arrangements.....” it was agreed to suggest a further 3 year Agreement on the same terms.

## 11. Action plans

- *Review staffing against Council business requirements* There is no recommendation for additional staff at present, but this will be monitored for the next 12 months in relation to additional tasks undertaken by grounds staff.
- *Ensure necessary policies are in place and retire policies that are superseded or no longer applicable* A list of current policies had been circulated. The following policies will be reviewed at the next meeting: Bullying & Harassment; Freedom of Information; Investment Policy; Safeguarding; Sickness & Absence; Staff Expenses; Staff Training – plus the Statement of Intent as to Community Engagement.
- *Review IT systems to ensure they meet Council needs* The Clerk suggested that these are adequate but recommends a budget is maintained for any failure or if an upgrade is required.
- *Liaise with External Relations & Town Development Committee regarding Tourist Information Point* Postponed to next meeting

## 12. Financial matters

- The **budget report to 31<sup>st</sup> August 2021** was noted, as attached. The Clerk highlighted:

### Admin

- 1800 Other grants received – Battle Festival - outgoing at 4900
- 1900 Misc income – sale of minor items during Almonry move
- 4000 Staff salaries – currently underspent due to resignation of staff member and awaiting backdated salary increase
- 4005 NI & Pension – this is lower than anticipated; will be increased next year due to Government NI increase.
- 4030 Town grass cutting – this will need to be adjusted for costs of equipment etc.

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- 4045 Telephone, Broadband and IT £2200: this now includes IT support and Zoom
- 4055 Stationery - cost of photocopier hire has increased
- 4205 Gen Maint - grass cutting contribution to Netherfield PCC
- 4515 Neighbourhood Plan – note that the cost has been taken from the EMR
- 4900 Misc expenditure – Battle Festival – incoming at 1800

## Almonry

- 1100 Rental Income – only income from RDC. This is unlikely to change prior to year end
- 1110 Room hire - a prepayment has been returned. It is hoped that hire will be possible from November/December
- 1120 Beautiful Battle – repays an overspend of budget; mostly from the previous year
- 1600 PWLB receipt – Almonry project £500k less the admin fee
- 1900 Misc income – sale of radiators
- 4180 Beautiful Battle – some adjustment to Almonry garden will be required
- 4190 Water – offices not in use/no garden watering
- 4195/
- 4200 Electricity/Gas need the budget reallocated. Gas will be disconnected mid-October. Usage due to offices being vacant since 26 April
- 4205 Gen maint – hire of skip prior to office move. Fence repair to rear boundary
- 4210 Cleaning materials – not in offices
- 4215 Garden – confirmation of split between 4180 awaited
- 4800 Projects – cost of Almonry project to end August

- The **budget report for all Council Committees to 31<sup>st</sup> August 2021** was noted as attached.
- **F&GP budget requirements for 2022-23 including:**
  - **Review project and general reserves prior to budget setting** The Clerk confirmed that the current level of General Reserves is approximately 52%, although this does not allow for payment agreed for the wall at George Meadow, Churchyard pathway and Covid Recovery grants.

### Far Marked Reserves:

- |                            |   |
|----------------------------|---|
| 315 Covid Recovery         | suggest use for Almonry furniture                           |
| 320 Asset Replacement      | suggest use some to replace Council chamber tables & chairs |
| 335 Memorial Seat Maint'ce | amend description to indicate "trust deposits"              |
| 385 Additional staff hours | move to budget 4000 2022/23 salaries                        |
| 390 Rates                  | close as no longer required                                 |

- **Consider recommendations from Town Clerk**

Members agreed that the Clerk adjust items as highlighted in this year's budget and increase general income and expenditure items by 3%.

**Members agreed that new signage will be required at the Almonry at a proposed budget of £5,000.**

## **14. Matters for information and future agenda items**

Members were reminded that RDC will discuss the formal 'making' of the Battle CP Neighbourhood Plan on 18<sup>th</sup> October. The Clerk was asked to provide financial information on grants received and expenditure.

## **15. Date of next meeting: 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2021**

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There being no further business, the meeting closed at 9.16pm.

CLLR G FAVELL  
CHAIRMAN

DRAFT