

DRAFT

**MINUTES OF THE POLICY & FINANCE COMMITTEE MEETING
HELD ON 24TH. JANUARY 2022**

Present : Councillors R Mills, D Davies, M Gwynne, A Short, Z Hammond & P Cook

Also present Cllr. G Edwards as an observer

The Clerk apologised and requested Item 4 be dealt with first, and this was unanimously **agreed**

1. To Appoint a Chair for the Meeting.

It was proposed, seconded and **agreed** by all present that Cllr. R Mills Chair the meeting

2. Minutes Silence

The Chair having stated this was the first meeting of members since the sad death of our friend and colleague Jim Edwards, asked all present to observe a Minutes Silence in his memory

3. Apologies for Absence

The Clerk reported that no apologies had been received

4. Declarations of Interest

There were no Declarations of Interest made at this point

5. Receive the Minutes of the Policy & Finance Committee Meeting held on 25th. January 2021

It was resolved the minutes be **agreed** as a true record

6. Matters Arising

The Clerk reported there were no matters arising

7. To Consider any Applications for Financial Assistance

The Clerk presented his report on Applications for Financial Assistance

Blackwood Town Walking Football Club - First ever application

Copy of application for purchase of various equipment – foldable goals, kit, balls, bibs, first aid kit & courses etc. totalling in excess of £2,000 – details forwarded under separate e mail

Mayors Charity (Cllr. G James) - Custom & Practice to support Mayors Charity for £250

During his second term of Office his nominated Charity was Breast Cancer Unit Ysbyty Ystrad Fawr

Blackwood A.T.C. - Previous grant of £250 given April 2019

Copy of application for purchase of equipment for helping to teach electronics to their members in the sum of £219.84 - forwarded under separate e mail

After some discussion, it was agreed to recommend to Town Council that the following grants be awarded -

Blackwood Town Walking Football Club	£250
Mayors Charity (Breast Cancer Unit Ysbyty Ystrad Fawr)	£250
Blackwood A.T.C.	£220

The Clerk also reported that a request had also been received from **Inspector Andrew Boucher** for Town Council to consider subsidising or providing Store net radios for some of the more affected stores in town to assist in tackling shop lifting and general anti social behaviour in town. The cost is £7 per week per radio, and possibly becomes more of a medium/long term commitment – £364 per annum per radio unless Town Council maybe pays for first year as an inducement. Police are currently visiting businesses to assess interest in the scheme.

Whilst supportive in principle it was agreed this be deferred until the outcome of the consultation with businesses is completed, and further information received.

He also reported that a request had been received from Blackwood British Legion for assistance in the purchase of coffin drapes. Over recent months they had received numerous requests to provide standard/ coffin drapes/ bugle etc. for funerals at Sirhowy Crematorium and stated this will ensure a respectful/ ceremonial funeral.

The Clerk reported that he had requested costings, and it was agreed this be deferred until these costs are received

Cllr. Delwyn Davies Declared an Interest, as Vice Chair of Blackwood Branch British Legion, and took no part in the discussion or decision

8. Medium Term Budget Strategy/ Budget Requirements 2022/2023 & Precept Setting

The Clerk presented his report which reflected an updated likely out turn position for the current year, having now received the invoice from Elsbury's for Christmas lighting and given we are now almost 10 months through the year, a revised position on the likely level of financial assistance and office furniture/other equipment.

He also presented a proposed budget for 2022/2023 based on current spending patterns, plus inflationary increases on some expenditure heads, but which also reflected the Council's decision to continue the provision of hanging baskets, continued sponsorship of the Blackwood RFC Firework Display, an ongoing Events Programme and Grants to Voluntary Organisations. A contribution of £2,000 is also included towards Replacement fund for Christmas Lighting.

He highlighted that based on recent discussions that he had now included a budget for Turn the Town Pink, in support of the planned Breast Cancer Unit at Ysbyty Ystrad Fawr (£250), whilst also including a budget of £1,350 to support the maintenance of the Remembrance Garden and provide assistance at the Remembrance Day Service which received such criticism last November.

Furthermore, given the above, and based on past experiences the Grants to Voluntary Organisations budget had been reduced by £500 to £4,000. This could of course be revisited if significant worthy applications were received during the year.

He also reported that he had increased the Newsletter budget to £3,000 for the coming year, recognising the decision to consult with each resident regarding the Strategic Plan and their thoughts

on priorities.

The Clerk took the opportunity to highlight additional issues that could affect our budget requirements for 2022/23(and the Medium Term Budget Strategy previously presented) namely -

Cost of Upcoming Election -With regard the upcoming elections, which will be run in tandem with the C.C.B.C. elections, the costs, based on the By Election earlier this year, could equate to approx £8,000 if all are contested, but could presumably, with the agreement of C.C.B.C. financed over a five year period

Members - Contributions towards Expenses - As has been discussed previously all Community Town Councils must make available a payment to each of their members of £150 per year as a contribution to costs and expenses, and a community or town council member wishing to decline payments must themselves write to the Clerk/ Proper Officer. This is obviously not an ideal scenario when preparing a budget strategy, especially given a new Council in May 2022.

Training Programme - Town Council will next year be expected to produce a training plan for members, and it is therefore incumbent for us to provide a sufficient budget to finance this plan.

Furthermore, it will be for the new Council to determine whether or not Special Allowances will be paid in respect of Chairs of Committees, Level of Payments to Mayor/ Deputy Mayor and whether Attendance Allowances are introduced.

The effects on the proposed budget strategy are as follows -

£1,600 has been included for potential election costs each next and future years – we will be in a better position once the outcome of the upcoming Council elections are known

£1,200 has been included for potential Members contributions each year, assuming only 50% of members claim– again will become clearer once outcome of May Council elections are known

£1,600 has been included to support the Training Plan, based on each member attending 3 (as yet to be identified courses) based on current £30 cost quoted by One Voice Wales, as members uplifted by possible inflationary increases.

N.B. If membership were relinquished , additional costs of approx. £1,000 could be expected

Assumed no change in respect of Special Allowance payments/ level of payment to Mayor and no Attendance Allowances

After some discussion it was ***unanimously agreed to recommend*** to Town Council the budget as presented and that the Precept for 2022/2023 remain at £20 per Band D Property.

Furthermore, that the Medium Term Budget Strategy be accepted in principle, and obviously updated as and when more certain issues become clearer.

9. *To discuss Reserves Position*

The Clerk presented his report that reminded members that it is a requirement that Town Council determine and review the level of reserves and how they are to be used. Local Government Legislation requires Town/Community Councils to have regard to the level of reserves needed for meeting estimated future expenditure, when calculating their budget. However, there is no specified minimum or maximum level of reserves that an authority should hold, and it is the responsibility of the Responsible Financial Officer to advise the Council about the level of reserves, and to ensure that there are key protocols for their establishment and use.

Reserves can be categorised as General (held to cushion the impact of uneven cash flows or unexpected events) and Earmarked (held for specific purpose)

General reserves as mentioned is a sum of money not earmarked for a specific purpose, but rather set aside to deal with unexpected events or emergencies, and to provide a working capital cushion to deal with cash flow problems.

Whilst there is no amount specified, it is considered an amount equivalent to approx 25% of the Precept to be acceptable ie. approx £15,000, and this has been previously accepted by Town Council.

Due to the ongoing Pandemic an additional £17,994 (this excludes the agreed £5,000 contribution to Bi Centenary Celebrations & £2000 agreed contribution to Christmas Lighting) reflecting the non spend on the Carnival, Xmas Parade & Market, Sponsorship of Firework Display, Civic Awards Evening and other minor variations has been added to the Reserves resulting in an estimated total reserves position of £117,350 at 31st. March 2022.

It is for members to decide how these reserves are best allocated -

*whether some is allocated to enable a reduction in the precept (currently set at £20 per Band D property) N.B. Every £1 reduction in precept would require £2,972.91 from balances/reserves

*whether some is allocated to enable additional services to be provided / meet potential additional commitments of the newly elected Council/ finance the cost of elections and/or support the medium term budget strategy to keep the precept at £20 over the net few years

*allocate to fund potential improvements/projects as part of our Strategic Plan

Earmarked reserves are those held for specific purposes, or to meet known or projected liabilities.

As at 31st. March 2021, Town Council had identified a sum of £10,000 in respect of Coed Duon , £28,346 in respect of improvements/projects to support our Strategic Plan.

Furthermore, Town Council have also over the past few years identified and invested approx £25,000 in respect of Renewal of Christmas lighting. Members thought it prudent to budget an amount of £2,000 per annum to ensure a reasonable sum is available to replace/renew in the future, and this currently (after this years planned contribution) amounts to £20,547

With the now postponed Bi-Centenary of the town (unfortunately delayed due to the ongoing Pandemic) and the significant celebrations being planned it was thought prudent to set aside reserves to assist the funding of same - with £25,160 currently being available (after this years planned contribution). A meeting of the Bi Centenary Committee will be arranged to ascertain their views on how to proceed.

Additional Reserves will be accrued via the Community Infrastructure Levy, with £303 being received and unallocated to date .There are restrictions on the use of these funds, and further discussions with C.C.B.C. officers will be required to ensure any plans meet the required criteria.

As members are aware it was intended to forward a copy of our Strategic Plan to all residents and stakeholders for consultation/ information, whilst also looking to ascertain their views on how our reserves should be utilised to best benefit the town and its residents.

Unfortunately, as time has passed, and the upcoming elections get closer it would seem more beneficial and equitable to leave any major decisions on priorities for spending/investing these reserves until the newly elected Council is in place, and the results of this consultation are quantified .

After some lengthy discussions, it was ***agreed to recommend to Town Council*** that based on the updated figures provided by the Clerk, and assuming their agreement to set the Precept at £20 per Band D property, the Reserves position is considered reasonable, given the upcoming Consultation with our residents to identify their priorities for the use of reserves –

General Reserves	15,000
Coed Duon	10,000
Other Projects – Strategic Plan	46,340
Xmas Lights	20,547
Bi- Centenary	25,160
CIL	303
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	£117,350

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Several members suggested that Town Council take the opportunity of the increased reserves position to undertake further improvements to the Remembrance garden to ensure it is a lasting and fitting tribute to those that gave the ultimate sacrifice, and this was ***agreed***.

As soon as the discussion started, Cllr. D Davies declared an Interest in this matter as Vice Chair of the Blackwood Branch British Legion, and took no part in the discussion or decision

Furthermore, it was also ***agreed*** that no further major decisions on allocation of reserves be made until the results of the consultation exercise is quantified, and the new Council have chance to digest same.