

MINUTES OF THE POLICY & FINANCE COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 22ND. JANUARY 2024

Present : Cllr. K Williams (Chair)

Cllrs. G Edwards Etheridge, R Mills, D Davies, K Etheridge & C Clark

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for Absence were received from Cllrs. C Erasmus & D Box

2. Declarations of Interest

No Declarations of Interest were made at this point

3. To Receive the Minutes of the Policy & Finance Committee Meeting held on 30th. October 2023

The Minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 30th. October 2023 were received and agreed as a true record

4. Matters arising

There were no specific matters arising not already covered on the agenda

5. To Receive Applications for Financial Assistance & Consider same

Having realised the application in respect of Bravehearts, identified the Moose as a potential beneficiary Cllr D Davies declared an Interest in this item and took no part in the discussion or decision making.

The Clerk presented his report on two applications received namely -

Bravehearts – No previous funding given

Formerly part of Welsh Assembly's Cardiac Rehabilitation Programme, with instruction and rent paid. Funding withdrawn and since working under the auspices of The Gwent Cardiac Rehabilitation Trust Fund but being responsible for all costs themselves. Originally classes twice a week at White Rose Centre, New Tredegar, but rent increases meant the Group re-located to Moose Hall Blackwood and now caters for those wanting to keep fit, lose weight or just companionship. Since Covid, membership has dropped and seeking £100 for flyers to be distributed locally in a bid to double membership and maintain 2 classes a week. Membership 15 of which 11 from Blackwood area

Blackwood Litter Community Action Group – Last Grant £260 February 2021

Town Council has supported this Group since its inception back in 2018. A constituted group run by volunteers and organise monthly litterpicks of green spaces in and around Blackwood collecting 164 bags of litter last year, and some 1,434 since it 2018. They work with local primary schools and last year received a Local places for Nature Award. The Group have recently undertaken training for Biodiversity/ Conservation eg. Habitat & Species monitoring & Invasive Species management along the Sirhowy River.

They are seeking funding to cover their Insurance Premium (via Keep Wales Tidy) £82.02 & pack of Litterpickers Gloves (£ 82.79)

Membership 25 of which 20 from Blackwood area

After some discussion it was ***agreed to recommend*** to Town Council that -
£100 be awarded to Bravehearts & £164.81 be awarded to Blackwood Litter Community Action Group.

The Clerk also reported on a request for funding from Kids Cancer Charity, which he had copied and forwarded to members prior to the meeting. The Charity is currently assisting 4 families in the Blackwood area

After some discussion it was ***agreed to recommend*** to Town Council that £250 be awarded to this worthwhile Charity

6. Budget Monitoring Report to 31st. December 2023 plus updated Medium Term Budget Strategy

The Clerk presented his Monitoring Report which indicated that after making provision for office lease payments and purchase & installation of Flag poles at the War Memorial, it is anticipated approximately £15,085 will be required from reserves to balance the accounts, fairly much as originally identified.

After a brief discussion it was agreed the report be accepted.

He then presented a proposed budget for 2024/2025 & future years based on current spending patterns, plus inflationary increases on some expenditure heads, but which also reflects the Council's previous decisions to continue the provision of hanging baskets, the GAVO Volunteer Awards Evening and ongoing Events Programme and Grants to Voluntary Organisations, including Turn the Town Pink in support of the planned Breast Cancer Unit at Ysbyty Ystrad Fawr (£250), whilst also including a budget of £1,000 to support the maintenance of the Remembrance Garden and provide assistance at the Remembrance Day Service which has improved so much over the past two years and now surely better reflects and honours the memory of our town's people that gave the ultimate sacrifice.

It also includes budgetary provision for the provision for a potential Civic Awards Evening in the sum of £2,000, and also £1,000 for the continued potential provision of Christmas Selection Boxes to Blackwood & Libanus Schools (in recognition of their continued support of Remembrance Services& Carol Concert)

Provision is again included 2024/25, and future years in respect of the potential Contributions to Members Expenses, and assumes some 50% of members will claim all entitlements (£156 plus additional £52).

£1,000 is included for next year in support of the Members Training Programme.

Furthermore, it will be for the Council to determine each year 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. (No provision is included at this point.

Obviously, two major additional provisions are included next year –

Office Accommodation and the associated costs – these costs apart from the lease costs £9,600 per annum & NNDR are pretty much unknown at present and a provisional budget of £20,000 has been included for next year but may well need adjustment as and when actual costs are known.

Additional hours/ staffing to man the offices – similarly whilst no firm decision has yet been made with regard actual opening hours of the offices and, therefore, likely additional staffing requirements a provisional budget of £13,500 has been included for next year, which currently assumes 14 hours per week at SCP 18, which includes anticipated employers N.I. / pension contributions (based on recent advertisement for Bargoed Town Council). Again adjustment may well be needed once a firm decision is made.

No provision has been included in the figures regarding any potential income streams in respect of letting rooms at this point, given the uncertainty, and adjustments will need to be made as and when available.

At Policy & Finance Committee it was unanimously agreed last year to recommend to Town Council the budget as presented and that the Precept for 2023/2024 remain at £20 per Band D Property, which necessitated utilising £12,830 from balances – Actual precept based on Budget would have meant an increase of £3.38.

It should come as no surprise to members, therefore, that with an additional £33,500 included in the budget to cover the Office & Staffing that the Precept requirement for 2024/25 to cover all budgeted costs would need to increase by approximately an additional £11.40 resulting in a total of some £35.00

This would mean an increase of £15 (75%) totally unacceptable to members, especially given the level of non earmarked balances at present. The Clerk, therefore, presented an option that gets us to a self balancing budget in 5 years time but conceded various other options could be explored, but realistically we will sooner or later need to eventually levy a precept of £35

N.B. Crude assumptions have been made regarding potential additional income in respect of planned developments for future years in the Medium Term Strategy but will obviously need to be revisited each year

The Caerphilly C.B.C. 2024/25 Budget proposals, now out for consultation identify an increase of 6.9% for Council Tax resulting in a charge of £1,446.37 at Band D, an increase of £93.36 per annum (£1.80 per week)

To put things into perspective a Town Council increase of £5 per annum would equate to less than 10p per week at Band D, and from figures provided regarding households in each Tax Band, some 2,600 households (70%) would pay between 7p & 9p per week.

This does not take into account that 612 households in our area are in receipt of Council Tax deductions at various levels.

Much discussion ensued regarding whether the initially proposed additional 14 hours staffing time would be sufficient and at what level the Precept should be set for 2024/25 and future years to ensure a balanced budget in the short/ medium term.

Various options on additional hours were voiced, ranging from the 14 hours provisionally included through to possibly 30 hours, whilst some members also expressed a view that we should look to raise the Precept by between £7 - £10 per annum.

The Clerk was thanked for his comprehensive report, especially that part identifying the likely increases on the various households in the different Tax Bands A to I.

It was ***unanimously agreed*** we meet again next week Monday 29th. January at 6.00pm, and the Clerk was tasked with preparing calculations on the various scenarios on staffing and Precept levels so that this Committee can make the necessary recommendations to Town Council the following week Monday 5th. February on the budget and level of Precept for 2024/25

7. Update Town Council Offices in Blackwood

The Clerk & Mayor gave a brief update, identifying two productive meetings with Barclays Bank regarding possible use of the Offices as their hub in the town, initially for between maybe 27.5 hours and 40 hours per week (Monday to Friday). Whilst they have a fairly extensive check list, we are confident we meet the majority of their requirements, with possibly the width of disabled access into their proposed office being a small issue. The Mayor stated he had been in touch with a local builder regarding possible remedial works, and given a verbal quote of approx £1,200. It is hoped that if Barclays do agree our Office is their preferred option (Blackwood Miners Institute and a Prefabricated Pod in the Market Place also being considered) they might pay or contribute to these costs.

Given the urgency and importance of this issue, it was ***unanimously agreed*** to recommend the sum of £1,500 be allocated from the earmarked £30,000 to facilitate these works.

Other local groups/ charities have already expressed an interest in providing some outreach sessions from the Offices, and the Clerk has also made contact with CAB who whilst admitting they see a need for their services in the former Islwyn Area are currently constrained by lack of resources but have promised to keep in touch once the outcome of their funding meeting with Caerphilly C.B.C. is concluded.

The Mayor reported he had received 2 quotations in respect of Office Furniture and one in respect of small kitchen provision and would report back to Committee when the others had been received. He also informed members the owners had tried to include building insurance as Town Council responsibility in the terms of the lease but had insisted this was an owners responsibility, whilst Town Council would be responsible for Contents insurance.

Members also noted the various correspondence/ advice from Cllr. A Farina-Childs regarding our potential responsibilities re. Health & Safety etc.. Having checked with Health & Safety it appears some of the items of concern raised do not/ will not affect Town Council due to the size of the organisation and/or premises.

Cllr. R Mills stated he would be in a position to assist on many of these matters having responsibility for a Community Centre, and the Mayor stated he had made contact with CCBC who would be willing to share what should be required based on some of their satellite offices